

#### FOUR

## Negative Visualization

### *What's the Worst That Can Happen?*

ANY THOUGHTFUL PERSON will periodically contemplate the bad things that can happen to him. The obvious reason for doing this is to prevent those things from happening. Someone might, for example, spend time thinking about ways people could break into his home so he can prevent them from doing so. Or he might spend time thinking about the diseases that might afflict him so he can take preventive measures.

But no matter how hard we try to prevent bad things from happening to us, some will happen anyway. Seneca therefore points to a second reason for contemplating the bad things that can happen to us. If we think about these things, we will lessen their impact on us when, despite our efforts at prevention, they happen: "He robs present ills of their power who has perceived their coming beforehand."<sup>1</sup> Misfortune weighs most heavily, he says, on those who "expect nothing but good fortune."<sup>2</sup> Epictetus echoes this advice: We should keep in mind that "all things everywhere are perishable." If we fail to recognize this and instead go around assuming that we will always be able to enjoy the things we value, we will likely find ourselves subject to considerable distress when the things we value are taken from us.<sup>3</sup>

Besides these reasons for contemplating the bad things that can happen to us, there is a third and arguably much more important reason. We humans are unhappy in large part because we are insatiable; after working hard to get what we want, we routinely lose interest in the object of our desire. Rather than feeling satisfied, we feel a bit bored, and in response to this boredom, we go on to form new, even grander desires.

The psychologists Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein have studied this phenomenon and given it a name: *hedonic adaptation*. To illustrate the adaptation process, they point to studies of lottery winners. Winning a lottery typically allows someone to live the life of his dreams. It turns out, though, that after an initial period of exhilaration, lottery winners end up about as happy as they previously were.<sup>4</sup> They start taking their new Ferrari and mansion for granted, the way they previously took their rusted-out pickup and cramped apartment for granted.

Another, less dramatic form of hedonic adaptation takes place when we make consumer purchases. Initially, we delight in the wide-screen television or fine leather handbag we bought. After a time, though, we come to despise them and find ourselves longing for an even wider-screen television or an even more extravagant handbag. Likewise, we experience hedonic adaptation in our career. We might once have dreamed of getting a certain job. We might consequently have worked hard in college and maybe graduate school as well to get on the proper career path, and on that path, we might have spent years making slow but steady progress toward our career goal. On finally landing the job of our dreams, we will

be delighted, but before long we are likely to grow dissatisfied. We will grumble about our pay, our coworkers, and the failure of our boss to recognize our talents.

We also experience hedonic adaptation in our relationships. We meet the man or woman of our dreams, and after a tumultuous courtship succeed in marrying this person. We start out in a state of wedded bliss, but before long we find ourselves contemplating our spouse's flaws and, not long after that, fantasizing about starting a relationship with someone new.

As a result of the adaptation process, people find themselves on a satisfaction treadmill. They are unhappy when they detect an unfulfilled desire within them. They work hard to fulfill this desire, in the belief that on fulfilling it, they will gain satisfaction. The problem, though, is that once they fulfill a desire for something, they adapt to its presence in their life and as a result stop desiring it—or at any rate, don't find it as desirable as they once did. They end up just as dissatisfied as they were before fulfilling the desire.

One key to happiness, then, is to forestall the adaptation process: We need to take steps to prevent ourselves from taking for granted, once we get them, the things we worked so hard to get. And because we have probably failed to take such steps in the past, there are doubtless many things in our life to which we have adapted, things that we once dreamed of having but that we now take for granted, including, perhaps, our spouse, our children, our house, our car, and our job.

This means that besides finding a way to forestall the adaptation process, we need to find a way to reverse it. In other words, we need a technique for creating in ourselves a desire for the



things we already have. Around the world and throughout the millennia, those who have thought carefully about the workings of desire have recognized this—that the easiest way for us to gain happiness is to learn how to want the things we already have. This advice is easy to state and is doubtless true; the trick is in putting it into practice in our life. How, after all, can we convince ourselves to want the things we already have?

THE STOICS THOUGHT they had an answer to this question. They recommended that we spend time imagining that we have lost the things we value—that our wife has left us, our car was stolen, or we lost our job. Doing this, the Stoics thought, will make us value our wife, our car, and our job more than we otherwise would. This technique—let us refer to it as *negative visualization*—was employed by the Stoics at least as far back as Chrysippus.<sup>5</sup> It is, I think, the single most valuable technique in the Stoics' psychological tool kit.

Seneca describes the negative visualization technique in the consolation he wrote to Marcia, a woman who, three years after the death of her son, was as grief-stricken as on the day she buried him. In this consolation, besides telling Marcia how to overcome her current grief, Seneca offers advice on how she can avoid falling victim to such grief in the future: What she needs to do is anticipate the events that can cause her to grieve. In particular, he says, she should remember that all we have is "on loan" from Fortune, which can reclaim it without our permission—indeed, without even advance notice. Thus, "we should love all of our dear ones . . . , but always with the thought that we have no promise that we may keep them

forever—nay, no promise even that we may keep them for long."<sup>6</sup> While enjoying the companionship of loved ones, then, we should periodically stop to reflect on the possibility that this enjoyment will come to an end. If nothing else, our own death will end it.

Epictetus also advocates negative visualization. He counsels us, for example, when we kiss our child, to remember that she is mortal and not something we own—that she has been given to us "for the present, not inseparably nor for ever." His advice: In the very act of kissing the child, we should silently reflect on the possibility that she will die tomorrow.<sup>7</sup> In his *Meditations*, by the way, Marcus Aurelius approvingly quotes this advice.<sup>8</sup>

To see how imagining the death of a child can make us appreciate her, consider two fathers. The first takes Epictetus's advice to heart and periodically reflects on his child's mortality. The second refuses to entertain such gloomy thoughts. He instead assumes that his child will outlive him and that she will always be around for him to enjoy. The first father will almost certainly be more attentive and loving than the second. When he sees his daughter first thing in the morning, he will be glad that she is still a part of his life, and during the day he will take full advantage of opportunities to interact with her. The second father, in contrast, will be unlikely to experience a rush of delight on encountering his child in the morning. Indeed, he might not even look up from the newspaper to acknowledge her presence in the room. During the day, he will fail to take advantage of opportunities to interact with her in the belief that such interactions can be postponed until tomorrow. And when he finally does get around to interacting with her, the

delight he derives from her company will not be as profound, one supposes, as the delight the first father experiences from such interactions.

Besides contemplating the death of relatives, the Stoics think we should spend time contemplating the loss of friends, to death, perhaps, or to a falling-out. Thus, Epictetus counsels that when we say good-bye to a friend, we should silently remind ourselves that this might be our final parting.<sup>9</sup> If we do this, we will be less likely to take our friends for granted, and as a result, we will probably derive far more pleasure from friendships than we otherwise would.

AMONG THE DEATHS we should contemplate, says Epictetus, is our own.<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, Seneca advises his friend Lucilius to live each day as if it were his last. Indeed, Seneca takes things even further than this: We should live as if *this very moment* were our last.<sup>11</sup>

What does it mean to live each day as if it were our last? Some people assume that it means living wildly and engaging in all sorts of hedonistic excess. After all, if this day is our last, we will not pay any price for our riotous living. We can use drugs without fear of becoming addicted. We can likewise spend money with reckless abandon without having to worry about how we will pay the bills that will come to us tomorrow.

This, however, is not what the Stoics had in mind when they advise us to live as if today were our last day. To them, living as if each day were our last is simply an extension of the negative visualization technique: As we go about our day,

we should periodically pause to reflect on the fact that we will not live forever and therefore that this day could be our last. Such reflection, rather than converting us into hedonists, will make us appreciate how wonderful it is that we are alive and have the opportunity to fill this day with activity. This in turn will make it less likely that we will squander our days. In other words, when the Stoics counsel us to live each day as if it were our last, their goal is not to change our activities but to change our state of mind as we carry out those activities. In particular, they don't want us to stop thinking about or planning for tomorrow; instead they want us, as we think about and plan for tomorrow, to remember to appreciate today.

Why, then, do the Stoics want us to contemplate our own death? Because doing so can dramatically enhance our enjoyment of life.

And besides contemplating the loss of our life, say the Stoics, we should contemplate the loss of our possessions. Most of us spend our idle moments thinking about the things we want but don't have. We would be much better off, Marcus says, to spend this time thinking of all the things we have and reflecting on how much we would miss them if they were not ours.<sup>12</sup> Along these lines, we should think about how we would feel if we lost our material possessions, including our house, car, clothing, pets, and bank balance; how we would feel if we lost our abilities, including our ability to speak, hear, walk, breathe, and swallow; and how we would feel if we lost our freedom.

Most of us are "living the dream"—living, that is, the dream we once had for ourselves. We might be married to the person

we once dreamed of marrying, have the children and job we once dreamed of having, and own the car we once dreamed of buying. But thanks to hedonic adaptation, as soon as we find ourselves living the life of our dreams, we start taking that life for granted. Instead of spending our days enjoying our good fortune, we spend them forming and pursuing new, grander dreams for ourselves. As a result, we are never satisfied with our life. Negative visualization can help us avoid this fate.

BUT WHAT ABOUT those individuals who clearly aren't living the dream? What about a homeless person, for example? The important thing to realize is that Stoicism is by no means a rich person's philosophy. Those who enjoy a comfortable and affluent life can benefit from the practice of Stoicism, but so can those who are impoverished. In particular, although their poverty will prevent them from doing many things, it will not preclude them from practicing negative visualization.

Consider the person who has been reduced to possession of only a loincloth. His circumstances could be worse: He could lose the loincloth. He would do well, say the Stoics, to reflect on this possibility. Suppose, then, that he loses his loincloth. As long as he retains his health, his circumstances could again be worse—a point worth considering. And if his health deteriorates? He can be thankful that he is still alive.

It is hard to imagine a person who could not somehow be worse off. It is therefore hard to imagine a person who could not benefit from the practice of negative visualization. The claim is not that practicing it will make life as enjoyable for those who have nothing as it is for those who have much. The

claim is merely that the practice of negative visualization—and more generally, the adoption of Stoicism—can take some of the sting out of having nothing and thereby make those who have nothing less miserable than they would otherwise be.

Along these lines, consider the plight of James Stockdale. (If the name rings a bell, it is probably because he was Ross Perot's running mate in the 1992 campaign for president of the United States.) A navy pilot, Stockdale was shot down over Vietnam in 1965 and held as a prisoner of war until 1973. During that time, he experienced poor health, primitive living conditions, and the brutality of his jailers. And yet he not only survived but emerged an unbroken man. How did he manage it? In large part, he says, by practicing Stoicism.<sup>13</sup>

One other thing to realize: Although they offer down-trodden people advice on how to make their existence more tolerable, the Stoics are by no means in favor of keeping these people in their state of subjugation. The Stoics would work to improve their external circumstances, but at the same time, the Stoics would suggest things they could do to alleviate their misery until those circumstances are improved.

ONE MIGHT IMAGINE that the Stoics, because they go around contemplating worst-case scenarios, would tend toward pessimism. What we find, though, is that the regular practice of negative visualization has the effect of transforming Stoics into full-blown optimists. Allow me to explain.

We normally characterize an optimist as someone who sees his glass as being half full rather than half empty. For a Stoic, though, this degree of optimism would only be a starting



point. After expressing his appreciation that his glass is half full rather than being completely empty, he will go on to express his delight in even having a glass: It could, after all, have been broken or stolen. And if he is atop his Stoic game, he might go on to comment about what an astonishing thing glass vessels are: They are cheap and fairly durable, impart no taste to what we put in them, and—miracle of miracles!—allow us to see what they contain. This might sound a bit silly, but to someone who has not lost his capacity for joy, the world is a wonderful place. To such a person, glasses are amazing; to everyone else, a glass is just a glass, and it is half empty to boot.

Hedonic adaptation has the power to extinguish our enjoyment of the world. Because of adaptation, we take our life and what we have for granted rather than delighting in them. Negative visualization, though, is a powerful antidote to hedonic adaptation. By consciously thinking about the loss of what we have, we can regain our appreciation of it, and with this regained appreciation we can revitalize our capacity for joy.

One reason children are capable of joy is because they take almost nothing for granted. To them, the world is wonderfully new and surprising. Not only that, but they aren't yet sure how the world works: Perhaps the things they have today will mysteriously vanish tomorrow. It is hard for them to take something for granted when they can't even count on its continued existence.

But as children grow older, they grow jaded. By the time they are teenagers, they are likely to take almost everything and everyone around them for granted. They might grumble about having to live the life they are living, in the home they

happen to inhabit, with the parents and siblings they happen to have. And in a frightening number of cases, these children grow up to be adults who are not only unable to take delight in the world around them but seem proud of this inability. They will, at the drop of a hat, provide you with a long list of things about themselves and their life that they dislike and wish they could change, were it possible to do so, including their spouse, their children, their house, their job, their car, their age, their bank balance, their weight, the color of their hair, and the shape of their navel. Ask them what they appreciate about the world—ask them what, if anything, they are satisfied with—and they might, after some thought, reluctantly name a thing or two.

SOMETIMES A CATASTROPHE blasts these people out of their jadedness. Suppose, for example, a tornado destroys their home. Such events are tragic, of course, but at the same time they potentially have a silver lining: Those who survive them might come to appreciate whatever they still possess. More generally, war, disease, and natural disasters are tragic, inasmuch as they take from us the things we value, but they also have the power to transform those who experience them. Before, these individuals might have been sleepwalking through life; now they are joyously, thankfully alive—as alive as they have felt in decades. Before, they might have been indifferent to the world around them; now they are alert to the world's beauty.

Catastrophe-induced personal transformations have drawbacks, though. The first is that you can't count on being struck by a catastrophe. Indeed, many people have a catastrophe-free—and as a consequence, joyless—life. (Ironically, it is

these people's misfortune to have a life that is blessedly free of misfortune.) A second drawback is that catastrophes that have the power to transform someone can also take his life. Consider, for example, a passenger on an airliner, the engines of which have just burst into flames. This turn of events is likely to cause the passenger to reassess his life, and as a result, he might finally gain some insight into what things in life are truly valuable and what things are not. Unfortunately, moments after this epiphany he might be dead.

The third drawback to catastrophe-induced transformations is that the states of joy they trigger tend to wear off. Those who come close to dying but subsequently revive typically regain their zest for living. They might, for example, feel motivated to contemplate the sunsets they had previously ignored or to engage in heartfelt conversations with the spouse they had previously taken for granted. They do this for a time, but then, in all too many cases, apathy returns: They might ignore the gorgeous sunset that is blazing outside their window in order to complain bitterly to their spouse that there is nothing worth watching on television.

Negative visualization does not have these drawbacks. We don't have to wait to engage in negative visualization the way we have to wait to be struck by a catastrophe. Being struck by a catastrophe can easily kill us; engaging in negative visualization can't. And because negative visualization can be done repeatedly, its beneficial effects, unlike those of a catastrophe, can last indefinitely. Negative visualization is therefore a wonderful way to regain our appreciation of life and with it our capacity for joy.

THE STOICS ARE NOT alone in harnessing the power of negative visualization. Consider, for example, those individuals who say grace before a meal. Some presumably say it because they are simply in the habit of doing so. Others might say it because they fear that God will punish them if they don't. But understood properly, saying grace—and for that matter, offering any prayer of thanks—is a form of negative visualization. Before eating a meal, those saying grace pause for a moment to reflect on the fact that this food might not have been available to them, in which case they would have gone hungry. And even if the food were available, they might not have been able to share it with the people now at their dinner table. Said with these thoughts in mind, grace has the ability to transform an ordinary meal into a cause for celebration.

Some people don't need the Stoics or a priest to tell them that the key to a cheerful disposition is periodically to entertain negative thoughts; they figured it out on their own. In the course of my life, I have met many such people. They analyze their circumstances not in terms of what they are lacking but in terms of how much they have and how much they would miss it were they to lose it. Many of them have been quite unlucky, objectively speaking, in their life; nevertheless, they will tell you at length how lucky they are—to be alive, to be able to walk, to be living where they live, and so forth. It is instructive to compare these people with those who, objectively speaking, "have it all," but who, because they appreciate none of what they have, are utterly miserable.

Earlier I mentioned that there are people who seem proud of their inability to take delight in the world around them.

They have somehow gotten the idea that by refusing to take delight in the world, they are demonstrating their emotional maturity: To take delight in things, they think, is childish. Or maybe they have decided that it is fashionable to refuse to take delight in the world, the way it is fashionable to refuse to wear white after Labor Day, and they feel compelled to obey the dictates of fashion. To refuse to take delight in the world, in other words, is evidence of sophistication.

If you ask these malcontents for their opinion of the cheerful people just described—or even worse, of those Stoic optimists who go on at length about what a wonderful thing glass is—they are likely to respond with disparaging remarks: “Such people are clearly fools. They shouldn’t be satisfied with so little. They should want more and not rest content until they get it.” I would argue, though, that what is really foolish is to spend your life in a state of self-induced dissatisfaction when satisfaction lies within your grasp, if only you will change your mental outlook. To be able to be satisfied with little is not a failing, it is a blessing—if, at any rate, what you seek is satisfaction. And if you seek something other than satisfaction, I would inquire (with astonishment) into what it is that you find more desirable than satisfaction. What, I would ask, could possibly be worth sacrificing satisfaction in order to obtain?

IF WE HAVE an active imagination, it will be easy for us to engage in negative visualization; it will be easy for us to imagine, for example, that our house has burned to the ground, our boss has fired us, or we have gone blind. If we have trouble

imagining such things, though, we can practice negative visualization by paying attention to the bad things that happen to other people and reflecting on the fact that these things might instead have happened to us.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, we can do some historical research to see how our ancestors lived. We will quickly discover that we are living in what to them would have been a dream world—that we tend to take for granted things that our ancestors had to live without, including antibiotics, air conditioning, toilet paper(!), cell phones, television, windows, eyeglasses, and fresh fruit in January. Upon coming to this realization, we can breathe a sigh of relief that we aren’t our ancestors, the way our descendants will presumably someday breathe a sigh of relief that they aren’t us!

The negative visualization technique, by the way, can also be used in reverse: Besides imagining that the bad things that happened to others happen to us, we can imagine that the bad things that happen to us happened instead to others. In his *Handbook*, Epictetus advocates this sort of “projective visualization.” Suppose, he says, that our servant breaks a cup.<sup>15</sup> We are likely to get angry and have our tranquility disrupted by the incident. One way to avert this anger is to think about how we would feel if the incident had happened to someone else instead. If we were at someone’s house and his servant broke a cup, we would be unlikely to get angry; indeed, we might try to calm our host by saying “It’s just a cup; these things happen.” Engaging in projective visualization, Epictetus believes, will make us appreciate the relative insignificance of the bad things that happen to us and will therefore prevent them from disrupting our tranquility.



AT THIS POINT, a non-Stoic might raise the following objection. The Stoics, as we have seen, advise us to pursue tranquility, and as part of their strategy for attaining it they advise us to engage in negative visualization. But isn't this contradictory advice? Suppose, for example, that a Stoic is invited to a picnic. While the other picnickers are enjoying themselves, the Stoic will sit there, quietly contemplating ways the picnic could be ruined: "Maybe the potato salad is spoiled, and people will get food poisoning. Maybe someone will break an ankle playing softball. Maybe there will be a violent thunderstorm that will scatter the picnickers. Maybe I will be struck by lightning and die." This sounds like no fun at all. But more to the point, it seems unlikely that a Stoic will gain tranquility as a result of entertaining such thoughts. To the contrary, he is likely to end up glum and anxiety-ridden.

In response to this objection, let me point out that it is a mistake to think Stoics will spend *all* their time contemplating potential catastrophes. It is instead something they will do periodically: A few times each day or a few times each week a Stoic will pause in his enjoyment of life to think about how all this, all these things he enjoys, could be taken from him.

Furthermore, there is a difference between *contemplating* something bad happening and *worrying about* it. Contemplation is an intellectual exercise, and it is possible for us to conduct such exercises without its affecting our emotions. It is possible, for example, for a meteorologist to spend her days contemplating tornadoes without subsequently living in dread of being killed by one. In similar fashion, it is possible for a Stoic to contemplate bad things that can happen without becoming anxiety-ridden as a result.

Finally, negative visualization, rather than making people glum, will increase the extent to which they enjoy the world around them, inasmuch as it will prevent them from taking that world for granted. Despite—or rather, because of—his (occasional) gloomy thoughts, the Stoic will likely enjoy the picnic far more than the other picnickers who refuse to entertain similarly gloomy thoughts; he will take delight in being part of an event that, he fully realizes, might not have taken place.

THE CRITIC OF STOICISM might now raise another concern. If you don't appreciate something, you won't mind losing it. But thanks to their ongoing practice of negative visualization, the Stoics will be remarkably appreciative of the people and things around them. Haven't they thereby set themselves up for heartache? Won't they be deeply pained when life snatches these people and things away, as it sometimes surely will?

Consider, by way of illustration, the two fathers mentioned earlier. The first father periodically contemplates the loss of his child and therefore does not take her for granted; to the contrary, he appreciates her very much. The second father assumes that his child will always be there for him and therefore takes her for granted. It might be suggested that because the second father does not appreciate his child, he will respond to her death with a shrug of his shoulders, whereas the first father, because he deeply appreciates his child, has set himself up for heartache if she dies.

Stoics, I think, would respond to this criticism by pointing out that the second father almost certainly will grieve the loss of his child: He will be full of regret for having taken her for granted.

In particular, he is likely to be racked with “if only” thoughts: “If only I had spent more time playing with her! If only I had told her more bedtime stories! If only I had gone to her violin recitals instead of going golfing!” The first father, however, will not have similar regrets; because he appreciated his daughter he will have taken full advantage of opportunities to interact with her.

Make no mistake: The first father *will* grieve the death of his child. As we shall see, the Stoics think periodic episodes of grief are part of the human condition. But at least this father can take consolation in the knowledge that he spent well what little time he had with his child. The second father will have no such consolation and as a result might find that his feelings of grief are compounded by feelings of guilt. It is the second father, I think, who has set himself up for heartache.

The Stoics would also respond to the above criticism by observing that at the same time as the practice of negative visualization is helping us appreciate the world, it is preparing us for changes in that world. To practice negative visualization, after all, is to contemplate the impermanence of the world around us. Thus, a father who practices negative visualization, if he does it correctly, will come away with two conclusions: He is lucky to have a child, and because he cannot be certain of her continued presence in his life, he should be prepared to lose her.

This is why Marcus, immediately after advising readers to spend time thinking about how much they would miss their possessions if these possessions were lost, warns them to “beware lest delight in them leads you to cherish them so dearly that their loss would destroy your peace of mind.”<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines, Seneca, after advising us to enjoy life,

cautions us not to develop “over-much love” for the things we enjoy. To the contrary, we must take care to be “the user, but not the slave, of the gifts of Fortune.”<sup>17</sup>

Negative visualization, in other words, teaches us to embrace whatever life we happen to be living and to extract every bit of delight we can from it. But it simultaneously teaches us to prepare ourselves for changes that will deprive us of the things that delight us. It teaches us, in other words, to enjoy what we have without clinging to it. This in turn means that by practicing negative visualization, we can not only increase our chances of experiencing joy but increase the chance that the joy we experience will be durable, that it will survive changes in our circumstances. Thus, by practicing negative visualization, we can hope to gain what Seneca took to be a primary benefit of Stoicism, namely, “a boundless joy that is firm and unalterable.”<sup>18</sup>

I MENTIONED IN THE INTRODUCTION that some of the things that attracted me to Buddhism could also be found in Stoicism. Like Buddhists, Stoics advise us to contemplate the world’s impermanence. “All things human,” Seneca reminds us, “are short-lived and perishable.”<sup>19</sup> Marcus likewise reminds us that the things we treasure are like the leaves on a tree, ready to drop when a breeze blows. He also argues that the “flux and change” of the world around us are not an accident but an essential part of our universe.<sup>20</sup>

We need to keep firmly in mind that everything we value and the people we love will someday be lost to us. If nothing else, our own death will deprive us of them. More generally, we should keep in mind that any human activity that cannot

be carried on indefinitely must have a final occurrence. There will be—or already has been!—a last time in your life that you brush your teeth, cut your hair, drive a car, mow the lawn, or play hopscotch. There will be a last time you hear the sound of snow falling, watch the moon rise, smell popcorn, feel the warmth of a child falling asleep in your arms, or make love. You will someday eat your last meal, and soon thereafter you will take your last breath.

Sometimes the world gives us advance notice that we are about to do something for the last time. We might, for example, eat at a favorite restaurant the night before it is scheduled to close, or we might kiss a lover who is forced by circumstances to move to a distant part of the globe, presumably forever. Previously, when we thought we could repeat them at will, a meal at this restaurant or a kiss shared with our lover might have been unremarkable. But now that we know they cannot be repeated, they will likely become extraordinary events: The meal will be the best we ever had at the restaurant, and the parting kiss will be one of the most intensely bitter-sweet experiences life has to offer.

By contemplating the impermanence of everything in the world, we are forced to recognize that every time we do something could be the last time we do it, and this recognition can invest the things we do with a significance and intensity that would otherwise be absent. We will no longer sleepwalk through our life. Some people, I realize, will find it depressing or even morbid to contemplate impermanence. I am nevertheless convinced that the only way we can be truly alive is if we make it our business periodically to entertain such thoughts.

## FIVE

## The Dichotomy of Control

### *On Becoming Invincible*

OUR MOST IMPORTANT CHOICE in life, according to Epictetus, is whether to concern ourselves with things external to us or things internal. Most people choose the former because they think harms and benefits come from outside themselves. According to Epictetus, though, a philosopher—by which he means someone who has an understanding of Stoic philosophy—will do just the opposite. He will look “for all benefit and harm to come from himself.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, he will give up the rewards the external world has to offer in order to gain “tranquility, freedom, and calm.”<sup>2</sup>

In offering this advice, Epictetus is turning the normal logic of desire fulfillment on its head. If you ask most people how to gain contentment, they will tell you that you must work to get it: You must devise strategies by which to fulfill your desires and then implement those strategies. But as Epictetus points out, “It is impossible that happiness, and yearning for what is not present, should ever be united.”<sup>3</sup> A better strategy for getting what you want, he says, is to make it your goal to want only those things that are easy to obtain—and ideally to want only those things that you can be certain of obtaining.



While most people seek to gain contentment by changing the world around them, Epictetus advises us to gain contentment by changing ourselves—more precisely, by changing our desires. And he is not alone in giving this advice; indeed, it is the advice offered by virtually every philosopher and religious thinker who has reflected on human desire and the causes of human dissatisfaction.<sup>4</sup> They agree that if what you seek is contentment, it is better and easier to change yourself and what you want than it is to change the world around you.

Your primary desire, says Epictetus, should be your desire not to be frustrated by forming desires you won't be able to fulfill. Your other desires should conform to this desire, and if they don't, you should do your best to extinguish them. If you succeed in doing this, you will no longer experience anxiety about whether or not you will get what you want; nor will you experience disappointment on not getting what you want. Indeed, says Epictetus, you will become invincible: If you refuse to enter contests that you are capable of losing, you will never lose a contest.<sup>5</sup>

EPICETUS'S *HANDBOOK* OPENS, somewhat famously, with the following assertion: "Some things are up to us and some are not up to us." He offers our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions as examples of things that are up to us, and our possessions and reputation as examples of things that aren't.<sup>6</sup> From this assertion it follows that we are faced with a choice in the desires we form: We can want things that are up to us, or we can want things that are not up to us.

If we want things that are not up to us, though, we will sometimes fail to get what we want, and when this happens, we will "meet misfortune" and feel "thwarted, miserable, and upset."<sup>7</sup> In particular, Epictetus says, it is foolish for us to want friends and relatives to live forever, since these are things that aren't up to us.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose we get lucky, and after wanting something that is not up to us, we succeed in getting it. In this case, we will not end up feeling "thwarted, miserable, and upset," but during the time we wanted the thing that is not up to us, we probably experienced a degree of anxiety: Since the thing is not up to us, there was a chance that we wouldn't get it, and this probably worried us. Thus, wanting things that are not up to us will disrupt our tranquility, even if we end up getting them. In conclusion, whenever we desire something that is not up to us, our tranquility will likely be disturbed: If we don't get what we want, we will be upset, and if we do get what we want, we will experience anxiety in the process of getting it.

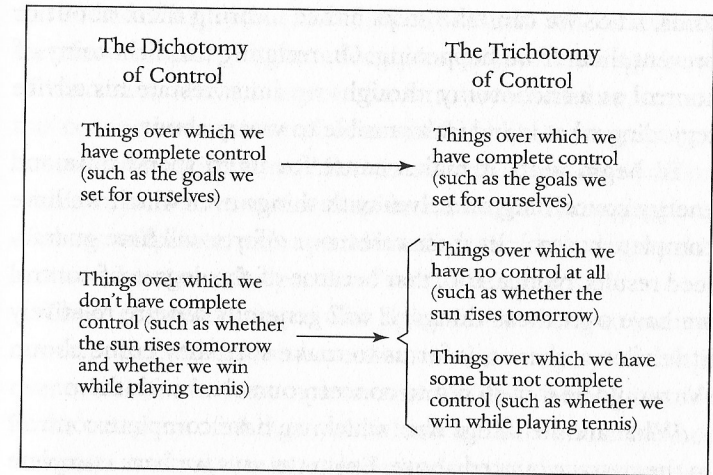
CONSIDER AGAIN Epictetus's "dichotomy of control": He says that some things are up to us and some things aren't up to us. The problem with this statement of the dichotomy is that the phrase "some things aren't up to us" is ambiguous: It can be understood to mean either "There are things over which we have *no control at all*" or to mean "There are things over which we *don't have complete* control." If we understand it in the first way, we can restate Epictetus's dichotomy as follows: There are things over which we have complete control and things over which we have no control at all. But stated in this

way, the dichotomy is a false dichotomy, since it ignores the existence of things over which we have some but not complete control.

Consider, for example, my winning a tennis match. This is not something over which I have complete control: No matter how much I practice and how hard I try, I might nevertheless lose a match. Nor is it something over which I have no control at all: Practicing a lot and trying hard may not guarantee that I will win, but they will certainly affect my chances of winning. My winning at tennis is therefore an example of something over which I have some control but not complete control.

This suggests that we should understand the phrase “some things aren’t up to us” in the second way: We should take it to mean that there are things over which we don’t have complete control. If we accept this interpretation, we will want to restate Epictetus’s dichotomy of control as follows: There are things over which we have complete control and things over which we don’t have complete control. Stated in this way, the dichotomy is a genuine dichotomy. Let us therefore assume that this is what Epictetus meant in saying that “some things are up to us and some things are not up to us.”

Now let us turn our attention to the second branch of this dichotomy, to things over which we don’t have complete control. There are two ways we can fail to have complete control over something: We might have no control at all over it, or we might have some but not complete control. This means that we can divide the category of things over which we don’t have complete control into two subcategories: things over which we have no control at all (such as whether the sun will



Turning the dichotomy of control into a trichotomy.

rise tomorrow) and things over which we have some but not complete control (such as whether we win at tennis). This in turn suggests the possibility of restating Epictetus’s dichotomy of control as a trichotomy: There are things over which we have complete control, things over which we have no control at all, and things over which we have some but not complete control. Each of the “things” we encounter in life will fall into one and only one of these three categories.

IN HIS STATEMENT of the dichotomy of control, Epictetus suggests, quite sensibly, that we are behaving foolishly if we spend time worrying about things that are not up to us; because they are not up to us, worrying about them is futile. We should instead concern ourselves with things that are up

to us, since we can take steps either to bring them about or prevent them from happening. On restating the dichotomy of control as a trichotomy, though, we must restate his advice regarding what is and isn't sensible to worry about.

To begin with, it makes sense for us to spend time and energy concerning ourselves with things over which we have complete control. In these cases, our efforts will have guaranteed results. Notice, too, that because of the degree of control we have over these things, it will generally require relatively little time and energy for us to make sure they come about. We would be foolish not to concern ourselves with them.

What are the things over which we have complete control? In the passage quoted above, Epictetus says we have complete control over our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions. I agree with Epictetus that we have complete control over our opinions, as long as we properly construe the meaning of *opinion*—more on this in a moment. I have qualms, though, about including our impulses, desires, and aversions in the category of things over which we have complete control. I would instead place them into the category of things over which we have some but not complete control, or, in some cases, into the category of things over which we have no control at all. Allow me to explain why.

Suppose I am walking through a casino and, on passing a roulette table, detect within me an impulse to place a bet that the number 17 will come up on the next spin of the wheel. I have a degree of control over whether I act on this impulse but no control over whether it arises in me. (If something is truly an impulse, we can't preclude experiencing it.) The same

can be said of many (but not all) of my desires. When I am on a diet, for example, I might suddenly find myself craving a bowl of ice cream. I have a degree of control over whether I act on this craving but no control over whether this craving spontaneously arises within me. Likewise, I can't help it that I detect within myself an aversion to spiders. I might, through an act of sheer willpower, pick up and handle a tarantula despite this aversion, but I can't help it that I don't like spiders.

These examples suggest that Epictetus is wrong to include our impulses, desires, and aversions in the category of things over which we have complete control. They belong instead in the category of things over which we have some but not complete control, or, in some instances, in the category of things over which we have no control at all. But having said this, I should add that it is possible that something important has been lost in translation—that in speaking of impulses, desires, and aversions, Epictetus had in mind something different than we do.

WHAT, THEN, ARE the things over which we have complete control? To begin with, I think we have complete control over the goals we set for ourselves. I have complete control, for example, over whether my goal is to become the next pope, a millionaire, or a monk in a Trappist monastery. Having said this, I should add that although I have complete control over which of these goals I set for myself, I obviously don't have complete control over whether I achieve any of them; my achieving the goals I set for myself instead typically falls into the category of things over which I have some but not complete control. Another thing



I think we have complete control over is our values. We have complete control, for example, over whether we value fame and fortune, pleasure, or tranquility. Whether or not we live in accordance with our values is, of course, a different question: It is something over which we have some but not complete control.

Epictetus, as we have seen, thinks we have complete control over our opinions. If by *opinions* he has in mind our opinions on what goals we should set for ourselves or our opinions on the value of things, then I agree with him that our opinions are “up to us.”

It will clearly make sense for us to spend time and energy setting goals for ourselves and determining our values. Doing this will take relatively little time and energy. Furthermore, the reward for choosing our goals and values properly can be enormous. Indeed, Marcus thinks the key to having a good life is to value things that are genuinely valuable and be indifferent to things that lack value. He adds that because we have it in our power to assign value to things, we have it in our power to live a good life. More generally, Marcus thinks that by forming opinions properly—by assigning things their correct value—we can avoid much suffering, grief, and anxiety and can thereby achieve the tranquility the Stoics seek.<sup>9</sup>

Besides having complete control over our goals and values, Marcus points out that we have complete control over our character. We are, he says, the only ones who can stop ourselves from attaining goodness and integrity. We have it entirely within our power, for example, to prevent viciousness and cupidity from finding a home in our soul. If we are slow-witted, it might not be in our power to become a scholar,

but there is nothing to stop us from cultivating a number of other qualities, including sincerity, dignity, industriousness, and sobriety; nor is there anything to stop us from taking steps to curb our arrogance, to rise above pleasures and pains, to stop lusting after popularity, and to control our temper. Furthermore, we have it in our power to stop grumbling, to be considerate and frank, to be temperate in manner and speech, and to carry ourselves “with authority.” These qualities, Marcus observes, can be ours at this very moment—if we choose for them to be.<sup>10</sup>

NOW LET US TURN our attention back to the second branch of the trichotomy of control, to things over which we have no control at all, such as whether the sun will rise tomorrow. It is obviously foolish for us to spend time and energy concerning ourselves with such things. Because we have no control at all over the things in question, any time and energy we spend will have no effect on the outcome of events and will therefore be wasted time and energy, and, as Marcus observes, “Nothing is worth doing pointlessly.”<sup>11</sup>

This brings us to the third branch of the trichotomy of control: those things over which we have some but not complete control. Consider, for example, winning a tennis match. As we have seen, although we can’t be certain of winning a match, we can hope, through our actions, to affect the outcome; we therefore have some but not complete control. Given that this is so, will a practicing Stoic wish to concern himself with tennis? In particular, should he spend time and energy trying to win matches?

We might think he shouldn't. Because the Stoic doesn't have complete control over the outcome of a tennis match, there is always a chance that he will lose, but if he loses, he will likely be upset, and his tranquility will be disturbed. A safer course of action for a Stoic, then, would seem to be to refrain from playing tennis. By similar reasoning, if he values his tranquility, it seems as though he should not want his wife to love him; there is a chance that, regardless of what he does, she won't, and he will be heartbroken. Likewise, he shouldn't want his boss to give him a raise; there is again a chance that, regardless of what he does, she won't, and he will be disappointed. Indeed, taking this line of thought a step further, the Stoic shouldn't even have asked his wife to marry him or his boss to hire him, since they might have turned him down.

One might conclude, in other words, that Stoics will refuse to concern themselves with things over which they have some but not complete control. But because most of the things that come up in daily living are things over which we have some but not complete control, it would follow that Stoics will not concern themselves with many aspects of everyday life. They will instead be passive, withdrawn under-achievers. Indeed, they will resemble depressed individuals who might not even be able to rouse themselves from bed in the morning.

Before we succumb to this line of argument, though, we should recall that the Stoics weren't passive and withdrawn. To the contrary, they were fully engaged in daily life. From this, one of two conclusions follows: Either the Stoics were hypocrites who did not act in accordance with their principles,

or we have, in the above argument, somehow misinterpreted Stoic principles. I shall now argue for this second alternative.

REMEMBER THAT AMONG the things over which we have complete control are the goals we set for ourselves. I think that when a Stoic concerns himself with things over which he has some but not complete control, such as winning a tennis match, he will be very careful about the goals he sets for himself. In particular, he will be careful to set *internal* rather than *external* goals. Thus, his goal in playing tennis will not be to win a match (something external, over which he has only partial control) but to play to the best of his ability in the match (something internal, over which he has complete control). By choosing this goal, he will spare himself frustration or disappointment should he lose the match: Since it was not his goal to win the match, he will not have failed to attain his goal, as long as he played his best. His tranquility will not be disrupted.

It is worth noting at this point that playing to the best of your ability in a tennis match and winning that match are causally connected. In particular, what better way is there to win a tennis match than by playing to the best of your ability? The Stoics realized that our internal goals will affect our external performance, but they also realized that the goals we consciously set for ourselves can have a dramatic impact on our subsequent emotional state. In particular, if we consciously set winning a tennis match as our goal, we arguably don't increase our chances of winning that match. In fact, we might even hurt our chances: If it starts looking,

early on, as though we are going to lose the match, we might become flustered, and this might negatively affect our playing in the remainder of the game, thereby hurting our chances of winning. Furthermore, by having winning the match as our goal, we dramatically increase our chances of being upset by the outcome of the match. If, on the other hand, we set playing our best in a match as our goal, we arguably don't lessen our chances of winning the match, but we do lessen our chances of being upset by the outcome of the match. Thus, internalizing our goals with respect to tennis would appear to be a no-brainer: To set as our goal playing to the best of our ability has an upside—reduced emotional anguish in the future—with little or no downside.

When it comes to other, more significant aspects of his life, a Stoic will likewise be careful in the goals he sets for himself. Stoics would recommend, for example, that I concern myself with whether my wife loves me, even though this is something over which I have some but not complete control. But when I do concern myself with this, my goal should not be the external goal of making her love me; no matter how hard I try, I could fail to achieve this goal and would as a result be quite upset. Instead, my goal should be an internal goal: to behave, to the best of my ability, in a lovable manner. Similarly, my goal with respect to my boss should be to do my job to the best of my ability. These are goals I can achieve no matter how my wife and my boss subsequently react to my efforts. By internalizing his goals in daily life, the Stoic is able to preserve his tranquility while dealing with things over which he has only partial control.

Categories of Things	Example	Epictetus's Advice
Things over which we have complete control	The goals we set for ourselves, the values we form	We should concern ourselves with these things.
Things over which we have no control at all	Whether the sun will rise tomorrow	We should not concern ourselves with these things.
Things over which we have some but not complete control	Whether we win while playing tennis	We should concern ourselves with these things, but we should be careful to internalize the goals we form with respect to them.

The trichotomy of control.

IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT, I think, for us to internalize our goals if we are in a profession in which "external failure" is commonplace. Think, for example, about an aspiring novelist. To succeed in her chosen profession, she must fight and win two battles: She must master her craft, and she must deal with rejection of her work—most novelists hear "No" many, many times before hearing "Yes." Of these two battles, the second is, for most people, the hardest. How many would-be novelists, one wonders, don't submit the manuscript they have written because they dread hearing the word "No"? And how many would-be novelists, on hearing "No" once, are crushed by the experience and never resubmit the manuscript?



How can the aspiring novelist reduce the psychological cost of rejection and thereby increase her chances of success? By internalizing her goals with respect to novel writing. She should have as her goal not something external over which she has little control, such as getting her novel published, but something internal over which she has considerable control, such as how hard she works on the manuscript or how many times she submits it in a given period of time. I don't claim that by internalizing her goals in this manner she can eliminate altogether the sting when she gets a rejection letter (or, as often happens, when she fails to get any response at all to the work she has submitted). It can, however, substantially reduce this sting. Instead of moping for a year before resubmitting her manuscript, she might get her moping period down to a week or even a day, and this change will dramatically increase her chance of getting the manuscript published.

Readers might complain that the process of internalizing our goals is really little more than a mind game. The would-be novelist's *real* goal is obviously to get her novel published—something she knows full well—and in advising her to internalize her goals with respect to the novel, I am doing little more than advising her to pretend as if getting published weren't her goal.

In response to this complaint, I would point out, to begin with, that it might be possible for someone, by spending enough time practicing goal internalization, to develop the ability not to look beyond her internalized goals—in which case they would become her “real” goals. Furthermore, even if the internalization process is a mind game, it is a useful mind

game. Fear of failure is a psychological trait, so it is hardly surprising that by altering our psychological attitude toward “failure” (by carefully choosing our goals), we can affect the degree to which we fear it.

The Stoics, as I have explained, were very much interested in human psychology and were not at all averse to using psychological “tricks” to overcome certain aspects of human psychology, such as the presence in us of negative emotions. Indeed, the negative visualization technique described in the previous chapter is really little more than a psychological trick: By thinking about how things could be worse, we forestall or reverse the hedonic adaptation process. It is nevertheless a singularly effective trick, if our goal is to appreciate what we have rather than taking it for granted, and if our goal is to experience joy rather than becoming jaded with respect to the life we happen to be living and the world we happen to inhabit.

Having said all this about the internalization of goals, let me pause here to offer a confession. In my studies of Epictetus and the other Stoics, I found little evidence that they advocate internalizing goals in the manner I have described, which raises questions about whether the Stoics in fact made use of the internalization technique. Nevertheless, I have attributed the technique to them, inasmuch as internalizing one's goals is the obvious thing to do if one wishes, as the Stoics did, to concern oneself only with those things over which one has control and if one wishes to retain one's tranquility while undertaking endeavors that might fail (in the external sense of the word). In talking about the internalization of goals, then, I might be

guilty of tampering with or improving on Stoicism. As I shall explain in chapter 20, I have no qualms about doing this.

NOW THAT WE UNDERSTAND the technique of internalizing our goals, we are in a position to explain what would otherwise seem like paradoxical behavior on the part of Stoics. Although they value tranquility, they feel duty-bound to be active participants in the society in which they live. But such participation clearly puts their tranquility in jeopardy. One suspects, for example, that Cato would have enjoyed a far more tranquil life if he did not feel compelled to fight the rise to power of Julius Caesar—if he instead had spent his days, say, in a library, reading the Stoics.

I would like to suggest, though, that Cato and the other Stoics found a way to retain their tranquility despite their involvement with the world around them: They internalized their goals. Their goal was not to change the world, but to do their best to bring about certain changes. Even if their efforts proved to be ineffectual, they could nevertheless rest easy knowing that they had accomplished their goal: They had done what they could do.

A practicing Stoic will keep the trichotomy of control firmly in mind as he goes about his daily affairs. He will perform a kind of triage in which he sorts the elements of his life into three categories: those over which he has complete control, those over which he has no control at all, and those over which he has some but not complete control. The things in the second category—those over which he has no control at all—he will set aside as not worth worrying about. In doing

this, he will spare himself a great deal of needless anxiety. He will instead concern himself with things over which he has complete control and things over which he has some but not complete control. And when he concerns himself with things in this last category, he will be careful to set internal rather than external goals for himself and will thereby avoid a considerable amount of frustration and disappointment.