The Socratic Handbook: 
The *Enchiridion* as a Guide for Emulating Socrates¹

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that the works of Epictetus are best understood as a guide for living like Socrates. On my view, we can think of the *Enchiridion* as a Socratic handbook, meaning it is less about the philosophy of Epictetus himself than it is about Epictetus’s prescription for achieving a Socratic disposition. In other words, Epictetus tells us how to live our lives as Socrates did. He believes doing so will lead us to the Good Life and the tranquility that accompanies it. I begin by discussing Socratic ethics and Socrates’s influence on Stoicism, then I suggest that the content and structure of Epictetus’s work points to Socrates as the prime focus for Epictetus’s teachings. Socrates is not just an example of sagacity—he is the subject of study. After offering the reasoning for my view, I address what I believe to be the most likely objections to my interpretation and conclude with final thoughts about Stoicism as a Socratic philosophy of life.

I. Introduction

In recent years Stoicism has reemerged as an attractive philosophy of life. It has also become a tool for self-help and cognitive behavioral therapy. Founded over 2000 years ago, Stoicism has touched the lives of countless people. The Stoics taught a philosophy based on building the right mental state to deal with life’s challenges and to achieve contentment regardless of circumstances. It is a philosophy based on well-being. Most of the surviving Stoic texts come from the Roman Stoics and include works from men like Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca. Stoicism, however, traces back to the Hellenistic Period in ancient Greece.² It was a direct attempt to revive the philosophy of Socrates.

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¹ The original draft of this paper (October 19, 2019) served as my term paper for PHI 420: Stoicism at Arizona State University.

² The Hellenistic Period is generally considered to take place between 323 BC and 31 BC. It is characterized by a split in Alexander the Great’s empire after his death and ends with the Roman conquest of the last Hellenistic kingdom. See Antoine Simonin, “Hellenistic Period,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, (28 April 2011), [https://www.ancient.eu/Hellenistic_Period/](https://www.ancient.eu/Hellenistic_Period/).
In this paper I argue that the works of Epictetus, namely the *Enchiridion*, are best understood as a guide for emulating Socrates. According to my view we can think of the *Enchiridion* as a Socratic handbook, meaning it is less about the philosophy of Epictetus himself than it is about Epictetus’s prescription for achieving a Socratic disposition. In other words, Epictetus tells us how to live our lives like Socrates did. He believes doing so will lead us to the Good Life and the tranquility that accompanies it.

The Socratic influence on Epictetus is obvious and wholly uncontroversial. My suggestion, however, may be contentious, as I understand even the dichotomy of control as grounded in the life of Socrates. To demonstrate my case, I begin with a discussion of Socratic ethics. I then explain Socrates’s influence on early Stoicism and later on Epictetus. I suggest that the content and structure of Epictetus’s work points to Socrates as the foundation for his teachings. Socrates is not just an exemplary role model—he is the actual subject of study. I present evidence for my claim using both primary and secondary literature and address what I believe to be the most likely objections to my view. I conclude with final thoughts about Stoicism as a Socratic philosophy of life.

II. Socrates

Socrates lived in Athens between 469-399 B.C.E. Although he never wrote anything and claimed to know nothing, Socrates is arguably the most influential philosopher in all of Western philosophy. What we know about the life of Socrates comes from two main sources, Plato’s

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dialogues and Xenophon’s writings. Both authors present Socrates as a man concerned with how to live properly. As William Irvine explains,

Before Socrates, philosophers were primarily interested in explaining the world around them and the phenomena of that world—in doing what we would now call science. Although Socrates studied science as a young man, he abandoned it to focus his attention on the human condition.

In other words, Socrates discarded theory for ethics. For Socrates, “the most important thing is not life, but the good life.” Socrates held a view of the good life based on *eudaimonia*, meaning human flourishing or well-being. According to Socrates, everyone—without exception—wants to acquire what is good, to do well, and to attain *eudaimonia*. Socrates thought wisdom was the key to unlocking this goal. He presented a “prototype” of virtue ethics in which wisdom is the chief good because wisdom alone is *always* good. Wisdom is also necessary for the proper use of everything else; furthermore, nature has provided humans with the capacity for reason to guide

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4 A third source is the comedy, *Clouds*, by Aristophanes, which portrayed Socrates as a dishonest sophist and corrupting influence. In Plato’s *Apology* (passages 18a-b, 19c), Socrates says *Clouds* did more damage than the men who brought charges against him.

5 Diogenes Laertius called Socrates “a man of great independence and dignity of character” (Donald J. Robertson, *The Life and Opinions of Socrates: Excerpts from Diogenes Laertius*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks [Feb 2018], 7, [https://learn.donaldrobertson.name/p/the-life-and-opinions-of-socrates](https://learn.donaldrobertson.name/p/the-life-and-opinions-of-socrates)). Scott-Kakures et al. describes the three portraits of Socrates: Aristophanes’s sophistical Socrates teaches for payment, Xenophon’s Socrates is a moral instructor, and Plato’s Socrates does not teach yet espouses non-traditional views such as “no one ever does wrong willingly,” “it is wrong to harm one’s enemies,” and “knowledge is virtue” (Scott-Kakures et al., *History of Philosophy* [New York: HarperCollins, 1993], 15).


us toward the wisdom we require to live properly. In other words, “wisdom is, above all, a disposition of a very special nature, which enables the sage to do well everything he does.”

After visiting the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, Socrates believed he had been given the divine mission to improve the souls of his fellow Athenians. To accomplish this task, Socrates developed the Socratic elenchus, or method of question and answer, which he used to inquire about “what matters most, e.g., courage, love, reverence, moderation, and the state of [people’s] souls generally.” According to Peter Adamson, Socrates had good reason for using the Socratic method of questioning because he claimed to be searching for wisdom, believing himself to have none. Socrates wanted to discover the proper way to live, and he needed to grasp what virtue is in order to do so. Socrates sought to understand virtue because he believed that “Virtue is knowledge [and] to know the good is to do it.” Virtue is also equivalent to wisdom, as Socrates believed wisdom to be the unity of the virtues. In other words, all of the virtues, e.g. justice and courage, were manifestations of wisdom. Such being the case, Socrates thought good comes only from virtuous action. All bad actions are a result of ignorance. Thus, if a person possessed

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11 Nails, “Socrates.”

12 Nails, “Socrates.”


14 Adamson, Classical Philosophy, 14.

15 Jordan, 66, emphasis added.

16 Jordan, 69.

17 Adamson, Classical Philosophy, 99.
wisdom via the knowledge of virtue, then she would not only know how to live correctly, but she would also actually do so.\(^{18}\)

Although he claimed to know nothing, Socrates thought he was put on Earth by the gods to show men that they are ignorant.\(^{19}\) Socrates explicitly opposed the sophists, who suggested that the good life is about getting what one wants. Socrates disagreed, adding that getting what one wants might not be good.\(^{20}\) Instead, Socrates thought that “knowledge is the most valuable thing in life,” but it is important to “be conscious of [our] own ignorance.”\(^{21}\) For Socrates, we should discuss virtue every day in order to ensure that our beliefs are correct.\(^{22}\) The unexamined life is simply not worth living.\(^{23}\) For this reason, Socrates told Xenophon that people should train through self-discipline to acquire wisdom.\(^{24}\) He believed *eudaimonia* comes from acting correctly.\(^{25}\) As Socrates states in the *Crito*,

> We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me.\(^{26}\)

\(^{18}\) This is called the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism, which is the view that people form their beliefs about how to act based on what they believe is right. In other words, if people understand what is right, then they will do what is right (Thomas A. Blackson, *Ancient Greek Philosophy: From the Presocratics to the Hellenistic Philosophers* [Wiley-Blackwell, 2011], 59-64).

\(^{19}\) Anam Lodhi, “Socrates on Wisdom,” *Medium* (June 2, 2018), [https://medium.com/indian-thoughts/the-only-true-wisdom-is-in-knowing-you-know-nothing-5789c8994cc6](https://medium.com/indian-thoughts/the-only-true-wisdom-is-in-knowing-you-know-nothing-5789c8994cc6).

\(^{20}\) Blackson, 70.

\(^{21}\) Lodhi.


\(^{24}\) Donald Robertson, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 30.

\(^{25}\) Pigliucci, 236.

\(^{26}\) Plato, *Crito*, 48 (passage 46b).
Socrates, therefore, concluded that our eudaimonia depends on using our gifts and our reason correctly, which is a matter of wisdom, and wisdom is the only good; ignorance is the only evil.\textsuperscript{27} His followers sought to emulate his life by placing “more importance on wisdom and virtue than anything else.”\textsuperscript{28} In the Socratic sense, philosophers are those who live according to virtue; they are literally lovers of wisdom, remaining true to the original meaning of the term.\textsuperscript{29}

The main problem with Socrates’s philosophy is that he obsessed about the love of wisdom, but he did not specifically teach anything. We are left to interpret his views through the accounts of those who interacted with him. His philosophy was a philosophy of life, grounded in certain principles, that he claimed to not completely understand. He did, however, try to demonstrate what he thought was correct behavior through his dialogues and actions. Because he never finished his quest for wisdom and did not record any of his thoughts in his own words, Socrates failed to articulate how we can learn from him. A century after his death, the Hellenistic philosophers would take up that charge.

\section*{III. The Hellenistic Period and the Beginning of Stoicism}

In 399 B.C.E, Socrates was tried and convicted of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens.\textsuperscript{30} His punishment was death by taking poison. After Socrates died, Plato carried on his tradition but focused more on philosophical theories. As Irvine puts it, the practical side of philosophy

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] Jordan, 68.
\item[28] Robertson, \textit{How to Think}, 6.
\item[29] Robertson, \textit{How to Think}, 6.
\item[30] Robert Audi (ed.), \textit{The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy}, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 859. Audi suggests that it is unlikely that the charges “were entirely without foundation” since both Xenophon and Plato “say that Socrates aroused suspicion because he thought a certain divine sign or voice appeared to him and gave him useful instruction about how to act. By claiming a unique and private source of divine inspiration, Socrates may have been thought to challenge the city’s exclusive control over religious matters.”
\end{footnotes}
began to wither away.\textsuperscript{31} Both Plato and Aristotle developed theories of human motivation and desire based on how they understood the physics of the world and the construction of the human soul. Plato’s theory of forms proposed an answer to Socrates’s search for definitions.\textsuperscript{32} Aristotle’s \textit{eudaimonia} became a matter of human function or contemplating reason to become like the “unmoved first mover.”\textsuperscript{33} Theorizing about such higher order conceptions of why things are good seemed to trump the Socratic focus on proper behavior grounded in the intrinsic goodness of wisdom.

Nearly a century after the death of Socrates, the Hellenistic period marked a deliberate return to the pragmatic, ethics-based philosophy of Socrates in which desire comes from a type of belief and action is a matter of reason.\textsuperscript{34} Four main schools arose, each competing to be “the true heirs of Socrates” and adopting a “Socratic stance on the fundamental purpose of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{35} In the words of Massimo Pigliucci, “[I]t all began with Socrates,”\textsuperscript{36} but, as Adamson points out, “Socratic” meant different things to different people; there was disagreement about how to follow Socrates’s path to \textit{eudaimonia}.\textsuperscript{37} For the Stoics, that path became a matter of living in accordance with nature and virtue. They believed that “virtue is taught best by particular concrete examples, rather than learning universal rules or decision

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Irvine, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Scott-Kakures et al., 33.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Scott-Kakures et al., 59; Blackson, 212.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Blackson, 243.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Peter Adamson, \textit{Philosophy in the Hellenistic & Roman Worlds: a history of philosophy without any gaps volume 2} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9. The four main Hellenistic schools were the Cynics, Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans (Adamson, \textit{Hellenistic & Roman Worlds}, 5).
\item \textsuperscript{36} Pigliucci, 234.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Adamson, \textit{Hellenistic & Roman Worlds}, 3.
\end{itemize}
procedures.\textsuperscript{38} The prime example for the Stoics was none other than the “heroic ethical exemplar,” Socrates.\textsuperscript{39}

Zeno of Citium founded Stoicism after losing everything he owned in a shipwreck. He began his journey as a Cynic by inquiring about where to learn from men like Socrates.\textsuperscript{40} Like the other founders of the Hellenistic schools, Zeno disagreed with Plato but greatly admired Socrates, and he studied with a number of philosophers during his search for a worthy successor to Socrates.\textsuperscript{41} Zeno eventually discarded the ascetic lifestyle of the Cynics and hoped to combine theory and way of life in the manner of Socrates. His new philosophy of life included ethics, logic, and physics.\textsuperscript{42} Zeno’s philosophy became known as Stoicism because of the painted porch, \textit{Stoa Poikile}, where Zeno taught.\textsuperscript{43} Zeno’s Stoicism carried over the Cynic teachings of detachment from external circumstances and living in harmony with nature.\textsuperscript{44} He presented Socrates as a sage to be emulated.\textsuperscript{45} In fact, the early Stoics admired Socrates so much that they were “willing to be called Socratikoi.”\textsuperscript{46} Like Socrates, the Stoics thought \textit{eudaimonia} depended on acquiring wisdom, which came from the knowledge of what is good and what is bad. For the Stoics, virtue was both necessary and sufficient for achieving \textit{eudaimonia}.\textsuperscript{47} They followed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} Sharpe, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Irvine, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Brouwer, 141-142.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Irvine, 33.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Jordan, 195.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Arthur F. Holmes, “A History of Philosophy Lecture #16: Stoicism,” lecture at Wheaton College, uploaded April 14, 2015, Wheatoncollege, YouTube video, 63:31, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLJNaLGK5Aw&t=1134s}.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Lodhi; Brouwer, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Brouwer, 143. According to Philodemus, the early Stoics wanted to be called \textit{Socratikoi} (Sharpe, 30).
\item \textsuperscript{47} Pigliucci, 238.
\end{itemize}
Socrates by thinking that being wise “is just a matter of knowing those things one needs to know to live well.”\textsuperscript{48} They also agreed with Socrates’s understanding that all virtues are different aspects of wisdom,\textsuperscript{49} however, the Stoics believed that we cannot live well without a basic theoretical understanding of our place in the world.\textsuperscript{50} The early Stoics differed from other Hellenistic philosophers by teaching that we should enjoy good things in life but refrain from clinging to them and that we should occasionally interrupt our enjoyment by contemplating loss.\textsuperscript{51} Though virtue was the only intrinsic good, external goods provided “material for virtue,” allowing our actions in the world to produce relative value.\textsuperscript{52}

Stoicism found its way to Rome via Panaetius of Rhodes.\textsuperscript{53} Roman Stoics retained the focus on ethics but added a second pursuit—tranquility, “which was a psychological state marked by the absence of negative emotions, such as grief, anger, and anxiety, and the presence of positive emotions, such as joy.”\textsuperscript{54} The late Roman Stoics offered a stripped-down Stoicism that focused almost exclusively on ethics.\textsuperscript{55} Emulation of Socrates was central.\textsuperscript{56} As John Sellars explains, “Stoic philosophy literally began with Zeno’s admiration for the life of Socrates … In

\textsuperscript{48} Michael Frede, \textit{Essays in Ancient Philosophy} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 322.
\textsuperscript{49} Pigliucci, 98.
\textsuperscript{50} Sharpe, 29.
\textsuperscript{51} Irvine, 27.
\textsuperscript{52} Sharpe, 32.
\textsuperscript{53} Irvine, 38.
\textsuperscript{54} Irvine, 38-39. Irvine suggests that the Romans might have emphasized tranquility over reason because they had less confidence in the persuasive power of reason to motivate people (40).
the works of a later Stoic such as Epictetus, Socrates forms an authoritative paradigm for the ideal philosophical life.”

IV. Epictetus

Epictetus was born a slave sometime around 50 C.E in the Greek city of Hierapolis in Phrygia, present-day Turkey. At some point he moved to Rome and studied under the Roman Stoic, Musonius Rufus, who many scholars call the “Roman Socrates.” Epictetus eventually gained his freedom and founded a Stoic school in the Greek city of Nicopolis after the emperor Domitian banned philosophers from Rome in 89 C.E. Like Socrates, Epictetus’s teacher, Musonius, taught that philosophy is “the practice of noble behavior.” It is virtue that prevents the mistakes that ruin life, and philosophy “corrects the errors in thinking that lead to errors in acting.” Epictetus followed Musonius by emphasizing “the value of practice over theory.”

Like Socrates, Epictetus said we should focus our attention on virtue, which is the only good; furthermore, virtue is praiseworthy because it is the only thing within our control.

As Brandon Mulvey explains, “Epictetus did not simply quote from his influences, but rather, he drew upon them, taking their ideas and melding them with his own unique

57 John Sellars, Stoicism (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006), 40.
58 Sellars, 15.
61 Stephens.
62 Sellars, 45.
63 Sellars, 114.
64 Sharpe, 36.
arguments.”65 His key contribution is the dichotomy of control, which teaches that virtue comes from choice: “it is really our power of choice, and only our power of choice, that is up to us.”66 Epictetus rejects the idea that circumstances and internal forces impose emotions upon us; instead our feelings and behaviors are expressions of “what seems right to us, conditioned by our judgments of value … If we correct our judgments, our feelings will be corrected as well.”67 A true Stoic philosopher is one with “complete self-control, who values what is really valuable, who chooses in accordance with reason and nothing else.”68

Epictetus shared the early Stoics’ views about what Socrates got right, i.e. that eudaimonia comes from living correctly according to the virtues, which are expressions of wisdom. Epictetus offered his own arguments on how we can achieve this goal, using the words and deeds of Socrates as his example. He also modeled his teaching style on the Socratic method.69 As Sellars points out, Epictetus’s admiration for Socrates as “the ultimate role model” immediately stands out in the surviving texts of his teachings.70 Tad Brennan calls the parallels between the two philosophers “striking” and suggests that “Epictetus shows us what it meant to be Socratic.”71

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66 Adamson, Hellenistic & Roman Worlds, 89 (emphasis Adamson’s).
67 Graver.
68 Adamson, Hellenistic & Roman Worlds, 89.
69 Adamson, Hellenistic & Roman Worlds, 88; Robertson, How to Think, 150.
70 Sellars, 16.
That said, there is a major difference between the two men. Socrates expressly denied being a teacher.\textsuperscript{72} Epictetus, on the other hand, had dedicated students. As Brennan explains,

\begin{quote}
[Epictetus] wants to teach them, and takes his role as teacher seriously … it is fundamentally different from the Socratic stance of being in principle incapable of teaching, of having nothing to teach. Epictetus knows that he can teach, and knows that he has a body of doctrine to convey, namely orthodox Chrysippean Stoicism.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Epictetus was a teacher, and he knew it. His standard was Socrates, a man “who expresses his philosophy in deeds rather than words.”\textsuperscript{74} Epictetus and the Stoics did not share Socrates’s claim about his own ignorance.\textsuperscript{75} Although Socrates was wholly committed to his search for wisdom, the Stoics believed that he had already found it.\textsuperscript{76} In my view, Epictetus expressly meant to impart to others the wisdom we find from examining the life of Socrates. His goal was to offer us a guide for how to actually “be a Socrates.”\textsuperscript{77}

V. The Socratic Handbook

Our two sources for Epictetus’s teachings are the \textit{Discourses} and the much shorter \textit{Enchiridion}, which roughly translates to \textit{Handbook} or \textit{Manual} and is sometimes called an abridgment of the


\textsuperscript{73} Brennan, 291.

\textsuperscript{74} Sellars, 28.

\textsuperscript{75} Lodhi.

\textsuperscript{76} Brouwer, 80. Brouwer argues that a sage does not need to be aware of being a sage.

\textsuperscript{77} Epictetus, \textit{Enchiridion}, translated by George Long (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 21 (L); emphasis added. According to Sellars (2006, 41) “While it may be impossible to become perfect to the point of infallibility, it is conceivable, in the words of Epictetus, ‘to become like Socrates’, no matter how difficult that task may be, and even if the ‘Socrates’ in mind is no longer identical to the historical figure. … the fundamental philosophical task for Stoicism is to transform one’s way of life into the life of a sage.”
larger work. Following the Socratic style, Epictetus seems to have not actually written anything, at least not for publication. It is widely accepted that Epictetus’s pupil, Arrian of Nicomedia, ghostwrote both the Discourses and the Enchiridion, but Arrian tells us that he deliberated stayed true to Epictetus’s words, and both works differ greatly in language and style from Arrian’s other writings.

When reading Epictetus, his admiration for Socrates is readily apparent. In the Discourses, Epictetus refers to Socrates 75 times and repeatedly uses him as an example of a sage-like character. According to Brennan, “Epictetus seems to have invoked Socrates’ name and fate on a daily basis; he quotes or refers to Socrates more than any other figure … and clearly models his own life and ways on the ways and life of Socrates.” Epictetus also refers to the Socrates of both Xenophon and Plato, emulating a synthesis of the two. As Mulvey puts it, “Epictetus’ contributions to philosophy are the product of influence of all of his predecessors to some degree or another. … [but] the uniqueness of Epictetus’ approach is that it is Socratic.” I argue that Epictetus’s approach is not just Socratic—it is a deliberate attempt at teaching us how to emulate Socrates.

Epictetus’s Enchiridion is a distillation of his teachings in the Discourses. As such, it serves as a handbook for Epictetus’s philosophy of life. Epictetus begins his handbook with the famous dichotomy of control and closes by quoting Socrates in the Crito:

[I] Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion (turning from a thing); and in a word,

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78 Graver.
79 Graver; Sellars, 16. Some scholars argue that Epictetus actually wrote the books himself (see Graver and Sellars). 80 For examples of Socrates as a sage in the Discourses, see book 1: chapters 2 and 9, and book 4: chapters 7 and 9. 81 Brennan, 286. 82 Mulvey, 4; Robertson, “The Stoic Socrates.” 83 Mulvey, 5.
whatever are our own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts. …

[LII] O Crito, if so it pleases the Gods, so let it be; Anytus and Melitus are able indeed to kill me, but they cannot harm me.84

In a footnote to the final passage of the *Enchiridion*, George Long quotes Simplicius as saying “Epictetus connects the end with the beginning,” reminding us to place “good and evil among the things which are in our power.”85 This idea forms the foundation of late Roman Stoicism.

Throughout his works, Epictetus continually returns to the trial and death of Socrates to drive home his points. Socrates’s actions at the end of his life solidified his status as a Stoic sage. Epictetus seemed to translate that event into a practical philosophy we can all understand and follow. Epictetus also mimics the Socratic *elenchus* in his teachings, but the style is different. Whereas Socrates’s method aims at “concessions [from earlier junctures] that jointly demolish the interlocutor’s views” and to construct arguments through refutations, the Epictetan *elenchus* offers only a few premises aimed at gaining a quick assent.86 According to Brennan, the Socratic dialogues keep us guessing as if we are working through an important discovery, but with Epictetus, “What is needed is more training, more habituation, more repetition of precepts.”87 The results of Socratic questions are “typically negative,” showing that “the examined person did not have a consistent set of commitments.”88 In contrast, the results of Epictetus’s questions are more prescriptive. This is because, for Epictetus, Socrates already showed us how to think and act. Epictetus is not looking for answers. He is telling us how to live as Socrates did.

84 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 1 (I); 22 (LII).
85 Epictetus, 22.
86 Brennan, 287; 288.
87 Brennan, 290.
In both the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus provides references to Socrates as foundational support for his teachings. We can also find a direct source for the dichotomy of control in the trial of Socrates. According to the *Apology*, Socrates responds to a rhetorical question about whether he is ashamed of getting himself into such a predicament by saying:

> You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong. ... are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul? ... For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively. ... a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death.

Later, Socrates tells Crito that the question of escape is not about money or reputation; it is about doing what is right and not doing what is wrong. “If it appears that we shall be acting unjustly, then we have no need at all to take into account whether we shall have to die if we stay here and keep quiet, or suffer in another way, rather than do wrong.” In other words, Socrates fully realized that the situation was out of his control, but he took solace in knowing that he lived by doing what he thought was right and in accordance with the mission he had been given. He would continue to choose his actions according to virtue even under the threat of certain death.

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89 Socrates as proper character: *Discourses* 1.2, 2.16, 4.5, 4.8, *Enchiridion* XXII; Socrates on proper conduct: *Discourses* 1.9, 2.5, 3.16, 4.1, *Enchiridion* XXXIII; Socrates on proper attitude: *Discourses* 1.12, 2.13, 3.24, 4.4, *Enchiridion* V, XLVI, LII; Socrates displaying greater principles: *Discourses* 1.29; Socrates’s life as philosophy: *Discourses* 2.1, 3.5, 3.12; Socrates as an example of tranquility: *Discourses* 2.2; Socrates as the example of indifference toward externals: *Discourses* 2.6, 4.1, *Enchiridion* II; Socrates on how to deal with temptations: *Discourses* 2.18; Socrates on understanding reason: *Discourses* 2.26.


93 Plato, *Apology*, 44 (passages 41c-d).

94 Plato, *Crito*, 51 (passage 48d).
As he states before addressing the accusations against him, “let the matter proceed as the god may wish, but I must obey the law and make my defense.”

In the *Discourses*, when recalling how Socrates accepted his situation and conducted himself virtuously at his trial, Epictetus says “Here you see a man who is a kinsman of the gods in very truth.” Epictetus tells us that Socrates was not actually in “prison” because he went there willingly. Epictetus says we should follow Socrates’s lead by choosing to judge our experiences as an opportunity to act appropriately. We can learn to deal with anxiety and negative emotions by thinking as Socrates did. Socrates understood what was not under his control, and he chose to be happy regardless of circumstance. It was his attitude that displayed the mark of wisdom. As Epictetus puts it, “These are the things which Socrates knew, and yet he never said that he knew or taught anything.”

Epictetus captured these lessons and passed them down to us via Arrian’s Socratic handbook, which tells us that we should only concern ourselves with the things in our power; attempting to avoid disease, death, or poverty will make us unhappy. “Death is nothing terrible, for if it were, it would have seemed so to Socrates; for the opinion about death, that it is terrible, is the terrible thing.” It is our attitude that matters, because our choices are what lead

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96 Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.9.
97 Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.
98 Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.2.
100 Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.
101 Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.
102 Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.5.
104 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 3 (V).
to virtue. “Socrates in this way became perfect, in all things improving himself, attending to
nothing except reason.” For Epictetus, we who “are not yet a Socrates, ought to live as one
who wishes to be a Socrates.” To assist us with that journey, Epictetus offers us a guide filled
with advice, perspective, and a number of techniques to understand and emulate the Socratic way
of life. In other words, Socrates is not simply an example of the ideal Stoic—he is the subject of
our studies and the standard we should strive to achieve.

VI. Likely Objections to My Interpretation

The Socratic influence on Epictetus and the Stoics in general is quite obvious and
uncontroversial. One might argue, however, that I have taken my interpretation a step too far.
Socrates is most definitely an example, but is becoming like Socrates really the overall goal of
Epictetus’s work? Counterarguments may come in the form of (i) denying my claim that the
account of Socrates’s death forms the basis for the dichotomy of control, (ii) suggesting that
Epictetus adds too much philosophy not found in the Socratic dialogues for his work to be
considered purely Socratic, and (iii) that Epictetus’s emphasis on tranquility sets him apart from
Socrates.

I find (i) to be the objection most likely to be true. The Socratic dialogues are indeed open
to different interpretations, and it is possible that a post-Epictetan reading of Socrates introduces
perspectives not held by Socrates or the authors of his accounts. It is also possible that I am
overlooking key historical influences that led Epictetus to develop his maxim. That said,
Epictetus’s continuous references to how Socrates approached his trial and execution lend

credence to my interpretation. The structure of Epictetus’s teaching, with Socrates inserted regularly to reinforce key points, also supports my view. Furthermore, Diogenes Laertius claims that an unbroken chain of teachers and pupils links Socrates to the earliest Stoics, so this understanding of the dichotomy of control may have been common.\textsuperscript{107} Even if the trial of Socrates did not directly inspire Epictetus’s dichotomy of control, it still serves as an excellent example of the principle in action. Accepting the argument at (i) would not defeat my interpretation.

I do not believe (ii) is persuasive because we can reasonably assume that Epictetus would naturally introduce additional ideas as a result of developing a practical explanation and teaching method. As Graver points out, Socrates was self-taught with an “unshakeable comprehension of ethical issues.” Epictetus developed a “rigorous application of methods anyone might use,” but “the learner must also undertake an extensive program of self-examination and correction of views.”\textsuperscript{108} Brennan explains that it is easy to copy Socrates’s exterior but not his “divine internal essence.”\textsuperscript{109} Epictetus realized this and thought the true value was in Socrates’s disposition. Epictetus taught that philosophy was like a magic wand, transforming misfortune into something good,\textsuperscript{110} but the philosopher had to know how to use it. Though Socrates did not offer theories to be accepted or rejected,\textsuperscript{111} he did teach us with his actions. Epictetus developed a philosophy of life that offered practical applications of what Socrates demonstrated through his words and

\textsuperscript{107} Brown, 275.
\textsuperscript{108} Graver.
\textsuperscript{109} Brennen, 286.
\textsuperscript{110} Robertson, \textit{How to Think}, 190.
\textsuperscript{111} Brown, 277.
deeds. We should expect Epictetus to add some additional material since his goal is to teach us to apply lessons Socrates did not directly explain.

The argument at (iii) seems to fail. Epictetus clearly took Socrates as a role model for tranquility. Epictetus describes tranquility as a state in which a person is content with nature by removing fear and anxiety. Epictetus explicitly cites Socrates at trial as the example of a person whose mind is free despite unfortunate circumstances and the loss of externals. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Epictetus taught that tranquility was the result of the Socratic way of thinking.

VII. Conclusion

In the Apology, Socrates wonders if he should prefer to be as he is, without wisdom nor ignorance; he decides it is best to be as he is. In the Discourses, Epictetus says “The great, heroic style … belongs to others, to Socrates and men like him.” Epictetus admits to not being better than Socrates and says he is content “if only he is as good as Socrates.” After all, a central theme in Epictetus’s works seems to be what would Socrates do? I think Epictetus often asked himself this very question.

In my view, we can interpret Epictetus’s philosophy not as the philosophy of Epictetus but, rather, as Epictetus’s interpretation of Socratic philosophy. If this is correct, then we can understand the Enchiridion as a guide to the Socratic way of life. At first glance, my

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112 Sharpe, 30.
113 Epictetus, Discourses, 2.2.
114 Plato, Apology, 27 (passage 22e).
115 Epictetus, Discourses, 1.2; emphasis added.
116 “[P]lace before yourself what Socrates or Zeno would have done in such circumstances, and you will have no difficulty in making a proper use of the occasion” (Epictetus, Enchiridion, 16 [XXXIII])
interpretation might sound uninteresting and largely uncontroversial because Socrates was such a prominent figure for the Stoics, and especially for Epictetus. Upon further consideration, however, scholars might reject my view as a bit too Socratic because I equate the hugely influential philosophy of Epictetus to his interpretation of Socrates’s example. This in no way detracts from Epictetus’s work; it simply offers an alternative understanding of his overall purpose.

As I have demonstrated, Epictetus and Socrates agree on their understanding of eudaimonia, wisdom, virtue, and the dichotomy of control. I claim that they differ only in that Socrates did not consider himself a teacher and did not claim to possess knowledge, but Epictetus embraced teaching and taught how to acquire the wisdom he saw in Socrates. Yes, Epictetus refers to other key figures and builds on the philosophy of his Stoic predecessors, such as Zeno and Musonius Rufus, but the most prominent and reoccurring figure throughout his work is definitely Socrates. A Socratic sect, the Stoics were founded on the assumption that Socrates’s ethics were correct. As Charles Brittain explains, “The Stoic theory of knowledge represented a radical shift in post-Socratic epistemology, since it offered an empirically-based route to the kind of wisdom Socrates and his immediate followers had sought.”117 Epictetus stripped away what he thought had been unnecessarily added to that foundation and gave us a no-nonsense way to follow the Socratic path. Socrates did not consider himself wise, but his words and actions demonstrated the contrary. Socrates seemed to think the transformation to a Sage came from knowledge he didn’t possess. The Stoics thought it came from a certain disposition, the one Socrates actually displayed.118

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118 Brouwer, 86.
The problem with Socrates’s philosophy is that it is not clear. Socrates asks questions but never delivers the correct answers. We must study his words and actions to come to our own conclusions. In the \textit{Enchiridion}, Epictetus does the work for us. He explains how and why Socrates was right. Accepting this interpretation may not be necessary for practicing Stoics but viewing Socrates from such a lens definitely adds insight to the works of Plato, Epictetus, and even Marcus Aurelius. It presents a fuller picture of Stoic philosophy. Socrates admonishes us to examine ourselves and our ethics. Stoicism gives us the tools to follow his advice. Epictetus’s Socratic handbook explains how and why following in the footsteps of Socrates leads to tranquility. It shows us where we are ignorant and how to deal with our ignorance. It suggests that developing the right attitude leads to the Good Life.

According to Epictetus, Socrates lived the Good Life during his search for wisdom without realizing his own sagacity, but the Good Life did not result from acquiring any specific piece of knowledge. Instead, the virtuous choices and correct judgements Socrates made during his search reflected that Socrates had indeed already become wise. Epictetus encourages us to follow the Socratic way of thinking and to become a Socrates ourselves — “to prepare [ourselves] to be as good as possible.”\footnote{Plato, \textit{Crito}, 43 (39d)}

\textbf{Bibliography}


