

CALM VERITAS

NO FLUFF. JUST TRUTH.

THE DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL

A Practical Worksheet for Applying Epictetus's Core Distinction

“Some things are up to us, and some are not.”

— Epictetus, Enchiridion, Chapter 1

This is the opening line of the Enchiridion, and it is the single most repeated idea in Stoic philosophy for a reason: nearly every avoidable form of distress comes from confusing what belongs to us with what does not. This guide breaks the distinction into a usable filter, shows exactly what falls on each side of the line, and gives you a worksheet format for applying it to a real situation you're facing right now.

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Epictetus opens the *Enchiridion* with a claim he considered the foundation of a workable life: of all the things that exist, some are up to us and some are not. Up to us are our opinions, impulses, desires, aversions — in short, whatever is our own doing. Not up to us are our body, property, reputation, public office — in short, whatever is not our own doing.

He goes further: the things up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded. The things not up to us are weak, dependent on others, and can be hindered. Confuse the two categories, he warns, and you will be “impeded, will grieve, will be disturbed, will blame both gods and men.” Keep them straight, and “no one will ever compel you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, you will not do anything unwillingly, no one will hurt you, you will have no enemy, for you will not suffer any harm.”

UP TO US

- Our judgments
- Our intentions
- Our desires & aversions
- Our effort & attention
- Our response to events
- Our values in action

NOT UP TO US

- Other people's opinions
- Our reputation
- Our body & health outcomes
- Property & possessions
- Outcomes of our effort
- Past events, other people

When a situation is causing you distress, run it through these three questions in order. Most of the relief comes from question two — separating the single controllable thread out of an otherwise uncontrollable situation.

QUESTION 1

Is this, as a whole, up to me?

Be honest. Most situations that provoke anxiety — another person's behavior, an outcome already in motion, a diagnosis, a decision someone else made — are not, as a whole, up to you. Naming this plainly is the first relief.

QUESTION 2

What part of this, if any, is up to me?

Almost every situation contains a controllable fragment even when the whole is not controllable: your preparation, your tone, your next action, your attention. Find that fragment specifically.

QUESTION 3

What is the appropriate action for that part, right now?

Direct all effort at the fragment identified in question two. Let the rest — the outcome, the other person's reaction, the verdict of history — proceed without your grip on it.

MORNING (2 MINUTES)

1. Name one thing today likely to test your composure — a meeting, a message, a result.
2. State plainly which parts of it are not up to you.
3. State the one part that is: your preparation, your attitude, your effort.

EVENING (3 MINUTES)

1. Recall a moment today you felt disturbed, frustrated, or anxious.
2. Identify which part of that moment was actually not up to you.
3. Identify what was up to you in that moment, and how you responded to it.
4. Note — without self-judgment — what a better-aimed response would have looked like next time.

This practice is deliberately short. Epictetus taught that the distinction becomes reflexive only through repetition, not through a single long session of reflection. Two minutes each morning and evening, done consistently for a few weeks, does more than one long philosophical read-through.

Use this table for one real situation you are currently facing. Fill it in by hand.

THE SITUATION
NOT UP TO ME (NAME IT PLAINLY)
UP TO ME (THE ONE CONTROLLABLE THREAD)
MY APPROPRIATE NEXT ACTION
FOLLOW-UP — ONE WEEK FROM NOW