

On the nature of our possessions

Never say about anything, “I’ve lost it,” but rather, “I’ve given it back.” ...

What does it matter to you through what person the one who gave it to you demanded it back? So long as he entrusts it to you, take care of it as something that isn’t your own, as travelers treat an inn.

Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 11

Our desire to possess things

One of the hallmarks of human life is our desire to possess things, to feel that we own them outright and forever. And one of the many revolutionary aspects of Stoic thinking is the advice given by Epictetus to recall that we don’t actually “own” anything.

We are just temporary keepers

In fact, we are just temporary keepers of everything that we think belongs to us.

That applies just as much to the people around us as to the objects in our home and the home or land itself. Everything we use may help us out for now, as an inn helps those going from point A to point B; everyone we encounter or come into relationship with may give us joy, or pain, but they will eventually be gone from this planet.

It’s a meaningful reminder of the impermanence of our lives and the transience of all that surrounds us.

Source of grief and conflict

But it’s also practical advice. Much of the grief that people feel and many of the conflicts we have with others are due to this sense of ownership, control, or territoriality. Holding onto things (or people) gives us a sense of power and a sense of

permanence: a sense of control that we wish we could have.

If we could remember that this kind of control or ownership is just a feeling we have, one that is not in sync with the reality of our world, we could prevent suffering. This is not just true about the enormous losses that humans experience when loved ones die. I am thinking also about the smaller issues of everyday life where fights over possession of things and people are common.

As we become more evolved in our Stoic journey, we realize how much this behavior harms people, and how many unnecessary battles it provokes. We don’t

own our jobs—we work to create products and services to help other people. We don’t own our family—we love and share with them, we cooperate and collaborate with them, but only for a time. We don’t possess our children, or our spouses or significant others.

Appreciating what we have

It is a tough realization for average humans like me, since we are not yet Stoic sages, but it’s one we can try to take to heart. It’s not all bad: For my part, this knowledge of impermanence makes me appreciate the things around me so much more and helps me feel a sense of personal strength to fully live today. In the words of the song “Immortals” by Fall Out Boy, “we could be immortals—just not for long.” This is the core of the Stoic admonition to live *now*, in the present: to savor the banquet in this amazing moment, knowing that before long, it too will pass.

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