

# The Stoic struggle: The moral self caring for others

**MEREDITH KUNZ**



*Meredith Kunz is a Silicon Valley based writer. You can read her blogs at [thestoicmom.com](http://thestoicmom.com) and her tweets at [@meredithkunz](https://twitter.com/meredithkunz)*

*“What are tragic stories except descriptions of people who went after external things that were not under their control, failed, and as a result, suffered?”*  
- Epictetus, Discourses, 1.4

## Stoic philosophy in the real world

In the ideal world, Stoic life philosophy would work perfectly. We could liberate ourselves from “external things” and focus solely on developing our virtues and our faculty of choice.

Unfortunately, I live in the real world, and it’s a lot harder. What Epictetus describes above sounds simple: Don’t go after things that are external to you, and you won’t suffer.

## “But what’s external in a world where we are surrounded by loved ones and by personal relationships?”

But what’s external in a world where we are surrounded by loved ones and by personal relationships? In the “circles of concern” of my life, I care for my family – my husband, my two children, as well as my extended family. I collaborate closely with my coworkers and develop relationships with friends, other families, and neighbours in my community. Beyond that, I care about my country, people worldwide, and my planet. I embrace the concept of my caring for these

rings rippling out from my nuclear family all the way to the entire world, in concentric circles.

## What do we “owe” to each other?

But it’s what we focus on in that caring, and it’s what we feel we “owe” other people, that can cause concern, distress, and a desire to shape externals.

The philosophical question of “what do we owe each other” fascinates me. What got me thinking about this was the TV series “The Good Place.” (If you are interested in how philosophy is applied to real life, I suggest you give it a viewing.)

## “Only the wise can love”

As Stoics, it is important for us to reconcile this caring/what we owe others with the viewpoint of Epictetus. At Stoicon 2021, Brittany Polat gave a talk about “How Do Stoics Care,” where she made the point that “only the wise can love.” Epictetus discusses that living creators seek to benefit themselves, and explains:

*If I am where my moral self is, in that case alone will I be the friend, the son, the father that I ought to be. For then it will benefit me to preserve my trustworthiness, my sense of shame, my patience, my temperance, my cooperativeness, and to maintain good relations with others.* - Epictetus, Discourses, 2.22

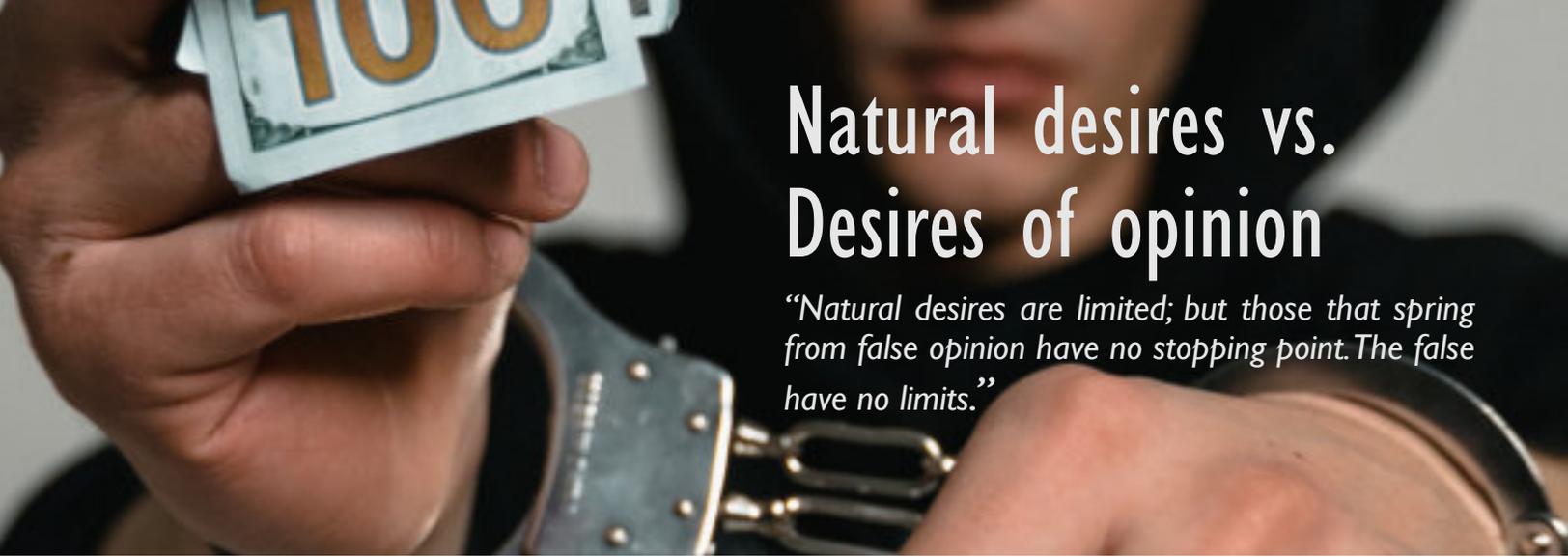
## Circles of concern

This way of thinking connects the “what is in our control” – that is, our moral self, our choices, our effort to live up to the best of what humans can be – with our motivation – benefitting ourselves and our moral development – and our circles of concern outside of ourselves. It tells us that what should focus on is developing our own inner strengths in order to be able to fulfill our roles as excellent humans with others. By being a “good” person, we can be a “good” family member, friend, colleague, actor in the world.

The problem for me boils down to what I think others expect of me, need from me, or hope from me that I can’t provide – because they are externals. I can’t cure an illness or even improve a grade for my child. I can’t solve every problem for a coworker or perfectly navigate every contentious negotiation. Then the sense of guilt about my inability to help others sets in and adds to a feeling of failing at what I “owe” others.

## Walking the fine line

But if what I really owe others is my “moral self” and my role-based care and support, without any claim to control externals – well, this can benefit both me and my loved ones. I aim each day to walk this fine line, despite the gravitational pulls in so many other directions.



# Natural desires vs. Desires of opinion

*“Natural desires are limited; but those that spring from false opinion have no stopping point. The false have no limits.”*

## Natural desires and desires of opinions

There are two kinds of desires. Desires that are natural, such as the desire for food when hungry or the desire for water when thirsty. And there are desires born of our opinion: we will be happy if we have so much money, such and such position, so many friends, so much sex, and so on. What is the difference between the two?

Natural desires are satisfied once you fulfil them. When you eat, you stop being hungry. When you drink water, you stop being thirsty. When you have a roof over your head, you feel protected. Natural desires have limits so you can fulfil them.

Desires born of your opinion are unlikely to be satisfied when you fulfil them. An expensive dress that you so desired and bought makes you happy. But only for a while. After a few months, not so much. You get the promotion you desired, you are happy for a while, but soon enough you will be looking for the next promotion. Those who desire a million dollars and get it will be looking for the next million, and those who desire a billion dollars and get it will be looking for the next billion.

*Natural desires are limited; but those that spring from false opinion have no stopping point. The false have no limits.* - Seneca, Moral Letters, 16

## Desires and envy

Because desires of opinion have constantly shifting goal posts, we compare what we have with what others have, to decide where the goal post should be. You may be happy with your income until you learn that your coworker – someone who you thought was half as good as you – is paid twice as much. You may be happy with your car until you

see the fancy car bought by your neighbour.

Desires of opinions naturally generate envy. We acquire more and more, desire more and more when we see what others have. We value less and less what we have. What should make us happy doesn't because someone else has more of it.

*No one who views the lot of others is content with their own.* - Seneca, On Anger 3.31

## The skill of moderation

So, to have joy and happiness that last, we should moderate our desires. We see how excessive desires trap us. Instead of being free, we become prisoners of our desires. So, the skill or virtue we need to practice is moderation. This means we pursue our desires only to the extent they don't start controlling us.

## What does it mean to us?

In practical terms, what does that mean? We can use the following guidelines to understand and moderate our desires, so we use our desires rather than be used by them.

- There are natural desires, such as quenching thirst or hunger. It is rational to fulfil such desires.
- There are desires compatible with wisdom and justice, such as the desire to earn a living to provide for oneself and others. It is also rational to fulfil such desires.
- Then there are desires that are neither natural nor related to wisdom or justice, such as the desire for gourmet food or drink, or good clothes, or a nice house. These desires, by themselves, are neither good nor bad.

You can pursue such desires provided (a) you don't believe that they are needed for your happiness; (b) you are not driven by what others have; and (c) you are not bothered if you don't attain them or, after having attained them, they are taken away from you. This is the skill of moderation.

*You indulge in pleasure, I use it. You think it is the highest good, I do not even think it to be good. For the sake of pleasure I do nothing, you do everything.* - Seneca, On the Happy Life, 10.

## Key takeaways

1. *Our desires have no logical end. Satisfying one desire creates another. Fulfilling that desire creates another desire. The cycle keeps repeating because desires have no logical end.*
2. *Fulfilling all our desires is not in our best interest. Some of them (such as excessive eating or drinking) are likely to bring us pain in the end.*
3. *Even fulfilled desires won't bring us as much joy as we anticipate. Even if they do, we will get used to them fairly quickly.*
4. *Fulfilling desires to make others admire us will not work either. It might in fact create envy in others.*
5. *Our desires make us a slave of those who control what we want.*
6. *We generally have all we need but are constantly being held hostage by our desires.*
7. *We can live much more happily if we moderate our desires.*

Adapted from *How to be a Stoic When You Don't Know How*, published by The Stoic Gym (2PioGFc)