

Study Guide on Epictetus' *Encheiridion* (Handbook)

What does Epictetus propose as the highest good? What is the purpose of life? Consider the following passages, in which Epictetus praises various goods:

- Living in accord with “nature” (49¹).
- Freedom (1, 14, 19, 29).
- Tranquility (12, 29).
- Not to fail to get what one desires, and thereby to be like the gods (14–15).

By what means can this highest good be attained? How should someone set about pursuing it?

- How should one treat the appearances?
- Consider Epictetus' emphasis on judgment: one must say truly what each thing and action is (3, 4); discontent comes from incorrect judgments (5, 15, 20, 41).
- How can one make progress (12, 13)? How does one know he is making progress (48, 51)?

What order do you see in the presentation of the work? Why does it begin with the distinction between what is and what is not up to us (1)?

What role does desire play in the philosophy of Epictetus? Consider:

- “For the time being eliminate desire completely. . . . Make use only of impulse and its contrary, rejection” (2).
- “Do not stretch your desire out toward it . . .” (15).
- “So whoever takes care to have desires and aversions as one should also in the same instance takes care about being pious” (31).

What does Epictetus teach regarding moderation (1, 39, 41)?

What does Epictetus understand by “nature”? How does he view it, and what role does it play in his proposed way of living? Consider the following aspects:

¹ Epictetus. *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*. Translated by Nicholas White. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983. (All section numbers refer to this edition.)



- Choosing according to nature (4, 30).
- The “will of nature” (26, 27).
- “Nothing bad by nature happens in the world” (27).

According to the *Encheiridion*, should one engage in politics (24)? Why or why not?

What view does Epictetus have of the gods? How do they come into play, if at all, in his practical prescriptions for life?

- Note references to “the giver” (11) and the “playwright” (17).
- “The most important aspect of piety toward the gods is certainly both to have correct beliefs about them, as beings that arrange the universe well and justly, and to set yourself to obey them and acquiesce in everything that happens and to follow it willingly, as something brought to completion by the best judgment” (31).
- What is the foundation for piety? How does it relate to advantage (31)?

What kind of work is the *Encheiridion*? Is it ordered to knowing or to doing?

Is Epictetus warranted in his appeals to Socrates (33, 46, 51)?

What kind of goal does Epictetus seem to have in mind? Is it happiness as a positive good, or merely the avoidance of pain?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Epictetus’ *Encheiridion*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

