Meeting Primer: What's Actually Good?

An optional read-ahead and quick reference, about 10 minutes

The Stoic Fellowship Meeting Guide · Everyday Problems

Guiding Question: If money, health, and reputation aren't the goal, what is?

At the Meeting

- **Today's reading: Plato, *Euthydemus* 278e–282e**. We'll read key passages aloud together.
- **The practice:** The Wise-Person Test, in three steps.
  1. **Want.** What do I want here, and why?
  2. **Ask.** What would a wise person do, and why?
  3. **Let go.** What would I have to let go of?

What's Actually Good?

A job offer pays much more. It also means longer hours, more travel, and less time with the people you care about. Is it good?

In Plato's *Euthydemus*, Socrates asks a young man what makes a life go well. Wealth, health, good looks, and power seem obvious answers. But each of them can do harm in foolish hands: money spent badly, strength used to bully. They benefit us only when they're used wisely. So, Socrates concludes, wisdom is what makes anything good.

The Stoics built on this argument. They kept the word *good* for what always benefits: virtue, or excellence of character. Money, health, and reputation they called "preferred indifferents." They're reasonable to prefer and worth using well, but they don't decide whether a life is good. A good person can live well with them or without them.

For ancient texts, use any translation you like.

Optional Reading (about 10 minutes)

1. **Plato, *Euthydemus* 278e–282e** (6 minutes) This is the passage we'll read from. Why does Socrates say wealth and health are neither good nor bad in themselves?
2. **Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.1–9** (2 minutes) "Materials are indifferent, but the use we make of them is not." How does a game player treat the ball?
3. **Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 7.101–105** (2 minutes) A summary of what the Stoics called good, bad, and indifferent. Which items on the "indifferent"

list surprise you?

Think About

We'll test a shared case aloud. You can use a made-up example.

- **Want.** Think of a choice you're facing. What do you want from it, and why?
- **Ask.** Picture someone you consider wise. What would they do, and why?
- **Let go.** What would you have to let go of to follow their lead?

Key Terms

For reference during the meeting. No need to memorize these.

Good. For the Stoics, only what always benefits: virtue, or excellence of character.

Bad. Only what always harms: vice.

Indifferent. Everything else, such as health, money, and reputation. Neither good nor bad in itself.

Preferred indifferents (*proēgmena*). Indifferents worth choosing, like health and income. Reasonable to prefer, but not what makes a life good.

Wisdom (*phronēsis*). Knowing what is good, bad, and neither, and acting on it. One of the four virtues.