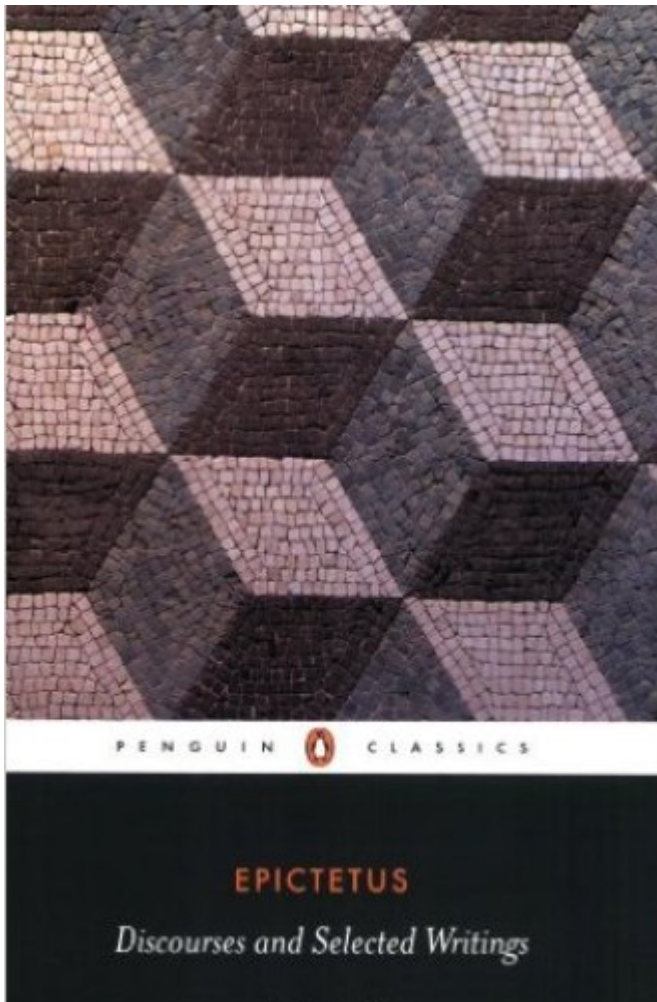


Discourses and Selected Writings, by Epictetus

selected by [Scott Samuelson](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Discourses and Selected Writings

by Epictetus

Penguin Classics

As I was in the midst of teaching the ancient Roman Stoic Epictetus at Oakdale Prison, an inmate stood up and launched into an argument that Stoicism is a loser's philosophy. I challenged him: "What does it mean to be a loser? Was Jesus on the

cross a loser? Were the 300 Spartans who died at Thermopylae losers?" I was trying to find examples of people whose virtue could be seen through their defeats. Retorting that the movie *300* wasn't real, he refused to believe that the core of its over-the-top theatrics is historical fact. Coming to my rescue, another inmate shot back, "Guess what? You're a loser! We're all losers. Why do you think we're in prison?" The enraged offender responded, "I'm not a true loser! A true loser is someone who accepts being a loser, and I don't accept that I'm a prisoner!" He turned to the guard and growled, "I can't stand this! Take me back to my cell."

After a stunned silence, a student volunteered, "Epictetus's point is that real freedom and real power come from within, from acceptance of things—right? Wasn't he always telling people who balked at Stoicism that they were going back to their cells, whether or not they were in prison?" The conversation that followed was a bona fide Socratic dialogue, the kind that works its way past a hothead and into a wide-ranging exploration of truth. Almost 2,000 years later, Epictetus still has the power to irritate and enlighten.