



# A STOIC WOULDN'T PLAY THE SQUID GAME

BY KONSTANTIN PAVLIOUTS

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Stoicism is a philosophy that calls for great self-control, concerning one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. This is not a matter of making a simple intellectual decision. Rather, it demands practice, and role models are particularly helpful in inspiring practice. The Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius writes in his diary, later published as *Meditations*:

*When you wish to delight yourself, think of the virtues of those who live with you; for instance, the activity of one, and the modesty of another, and the liberality of a third, and some other good quality of a fourth. For nothing delights so much as the examples of the virtues, when they are exhibited in the morals of those who live with us and present themselves in abundance, as far as is possible. Wherefore we must keep them before us [Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VI.48].*

While virtuous role models are very helpful, even bad examples can be useful. Along these lines, *Squid Game* is populated by characters who serve as examples of how not to be a Stoic. It is hard not to feel sorry for many of the characters, but it is also hard not to wonder if they could have avoided the perils of the game by adjusting their mindsets in accord with Stoicism.

In the final episode of the first season, an old man—former gamer 001—and creator of the bloody survival game explains to the winner, gamer 456, the main reason for the invention of such a game:

*Do you know what someone who doesn't have any money has in common with someone with too much money to know what to do with it? Living is... no fun for either of them. If you have too much money, then it...doesn't matter what you buy, or eat, or drink, or whatever. Everything, well, it all gets boring. All of my clients, started to eventually say the exact same things whenever we talked. Everybody felt...that there was no joy in their lives anymore.*

Gamer 456 cannot believe that the cruel game of human lives was created just for fun, but gamer 001 explains:

*It seems...that you forgot how...no one had to play, and you...all put your signatures on the agreement. And that all you made your decision to come back on your own.*

Many of the gamers decided to play because of crushing debt, but the choice was still theirs. If they had practiced Stoicism before being offered the choice to play the game, they would have declined.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught us that we should develop proper desire and aversion. We have to learn what we should desire and what we should avoid. Without Stoic training, people tend to desire wealth, health, popularity, status, etc. All of these things are great, but we do not have complete control of whether we acquire them or keep them. By contrast, Stoic training teaches us how to desire only what can be brought under our complete control, our thoughts and actions.

Most people try to avoid certain external adversities (poverty, illness, etc.), but Stoic training teaches us to avoid internal negatives, vicious thoughts and desires for what we cannot control.

Surely, it's hard to live the good life in an extreme financial situation and be satisfied in a state of poverty. *Squid Game* is influenced in part by an actual [debt problem in South Korea](#). Most characters in the show decide to take part in a game due to their situation, and their primary motivation is to get out of devastating debt. The main character, gamer 456, lost his job, and then his wife left him. After that, he made a bad decision to start gambling that led him to huge debts and the decision to take part in the game. We can understand the complexity and tragedy of the situation. But does it justify a decision to take part in the game?

Consider Epictetus. He wasn't a member of Greco-Roman elites. He was a slave for part of his life. In addition, Epictetus had a disabled leg, probably broken by his master. Despite this condition, he wrote:

*Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to your ability to choose, unless that is your choice. Lameness is a hindrance to the leg, but not to your ability to choose. Say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens, then you will see such obstacles as hindrances to something else, but not to yourself. [Epictetus, Enchiridion IX]*

Epictetus would tell the characters in *Squid Game* that your debt is a hindrance to something else, not to yourself. Yes, the society is unjust, the game is unjust and immoral, but you don't have to be unjust and immoral yourself. You have a choice.

To be clear, the ancient Stoics weren't passive toward social injustices. Some Stoics actively opposed Nero and other tyrants. Of course, not everyone is in a position to challenge power, but a Stoic can always at least choose not to support injustices.

Stoicism reminds us that to be poor or rich doesn't mean to be good or bad. A rich person and a poor person could be equally bad or equally ignorant of a life worth living. As Epictetus said: *"These reasonings do not cohere: I am richer than you, therefore I am better than you."* [Epictetus, Enchiridion XLIV]

*Squid Game* depicts the social consequences of inequality that lead people to hard decisions. In fact, debt is linked to an increase in [suicide in South Korea](#). This is a serious matter.

So let's imagine that you are in debt and have only three available options. You can commit suicide to leave these problems behind; you can give your kidney to debt collectors from a gang; or you can take part in a survival game. If you win this game among 456 competitors, you will get the fantastic sum of 46.5 billion South Korean won. So you can pay your debt and live comfortably for the rest of your life.

Due to his way of life, a Stoic sage would be unlikely to face such a trilemma in the first place, but for the sake of the argument, let us imagine.

The Stoic sage wouldn't play the game because it partially depends on luck and it's not completely up to you.

What about suicide? Well, the decision to commit suicide is up to you, and if you have sufficient reason you can walk through the open door. As Epictetus said:

*In sum remember this: the door is open; be not more timid than little children, but as they say, when the thing does not please them, "I will play no longer", so do you, when things seem to you of such a kind, say I will no longer play, and be gone: but if you stay, do not complain. [Epictetus, Discourses I.24.20]*

Of course, the Stoic sage probably wouldn't find debt to be a sufficient reason to commit suicide.

So he would have to give his kidney to the collectors. This choice might negatively affect his lifespan and physical condition. But it would clear the debt, and he would be able to live in accord with reason and virtue.

For a person who is not already a Stoic sage, the loss of the kidney could catalyze the sobering realization that what matters most in life is the peace and serenity that come with control of one's mind. Perhaps with that realization a person could then live a life that does not fall prey to the snares set by society. Stoicism is not easy, but it is preferable to a life that depends on things we cannot control.