

Workout 2 ▪ Roles

Playing Your Assigned Role(s) Well

Prompt, Exercise & Practice for the Cynics

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"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy."—Julian, the Roman emperor

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UPON COMING INTO this world, our first role was straightforward and automatic. We did it so well, we didn't even know we were doing it. As a baby, it was our role to grow and learn by means of sleeping, eating, looking, and touching. But as we got older, things got more complicated. We realized we were sons or daughters, brothers or sisters. We were students, teammates, and friends. And as time went on, we took on even more roles. Some we chose. Some we did not.

Whatever the role, and whether chosen or not, notice that each role we play is an act with a purpose or function—the role's job or duty. To play the role well, then, is connected to its purpose or function.

That's why it was easy to be a baby—since being a baby is the same thing as functioning as a baby. Babies sleep with ease. Babies naturally cry so they can get food to grow. Babies instinctively reach out to be held to be safe. Babies touch things they see, thereby strengthening various visual and tactile networks.

Such is not the case with other roles. Though we may be a student, friend, or sibling, we may not be good students, friends, or siblings. It is the same with other roles. Think of a spouse. Or a

company president. Or a soldier. Or someone in the hospital or going through bankruptcy (both temporary roles). Or any other role (any specific act with a purpose or function, whether chosen or not) you can imagine.

The Cynics believed that we should strive to play our roles well, whether we chose them or not. Here's what the Cynic Teles of Megara wrote:

Just as a good actor must contend well for the victory with the mask and role that the playwright gives him, so also must a good man compete with the one that Fortune gives him. For Bion says that Fortune, like a playwright, sometimes gives the mask and role of a first-speaker [a leading role] and sometimes that of a second-speaker [a supporting role]. And sometimes a king, and sometimes a wandering beggar. So, when you are a second-speaker, do not wish for the mask and role of a first-speaker. Otherwise, you will do something unsuitable.

And: Fortune, as though a playwright, makes up roles of every kind: a shipwrecked man, a beggar, an exile, a well-regarded man, and one disreputable. A good man should, therefore, contend well with whatever role that Fortune gives him. You have become shipwrecked—play the shipwreck well. From

being well-off you have become poor—play the poor man well.

Greek & English ▪ The Greek word for "role" or "mask" is *prosōpon*, which also means "face" or "person."



Ancient Greek
stage mask

WORKOUT 2 • ROLES – PLAYING YOUR ASSIGNED ROLE(S) WELL

PROMPT ▪ REFLECTION ▪ What do you think of Teles of Megara’s analogy? —the one that compares life to a play in which we find ourselves playing various roles assigned by Fortune? Would you substitute another word in place of “Fortune”? What ability or power do we humans have to choose the various roles we play in life? Is it limited or unlimited or somewhere in between?

EXERCISE ▪ MY ROLES ▪ Identify all the roles you have played up to now. Child. Sibling. Friend. Spouse. Parent. Student. Teammate. Employee. Employer. Person in charge (leader, director). Person taking orders. Service provider. Customer. Other roles. **List** them below and **number** them in terms of their significance to you and others. **Circle** your most important role. **Circle** your least important role.

____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____
____ ROLE _____	____ ROLE _____

“Fortune, like a playwright, sometimes gives the mask and role of a first-speaker [a leading role] and sometimes that of a second-speaker [a supporting role]. And sometimes a king, and sometimes a wandering beggar. So, when you are a second-speaker, do not wish for the mask and role of a first-speaker. Otherwise, you will do something unsuitable.” —Teles the Cynic (citing Bion)

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EXERCISE • ROLE CRITIQUE • Consider all the roles you have played up to now (see the previous exercise). **Choose** three significant roles. **Critique** your role playing: If you were sitting in the audience watching yourself play the role, how would you critique yourself? How many **stars** (5 stars being the best) would you give the performance? **Color** them in. What did you do well? What could have you done better?

ROLE 1 _____ RATING



ROLE 2 _____ RATING



ROLE 3 _____ RATING



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EXERCISE • MY LIMITATIONS (LIMITATION-ROLES • Reflect on three limitations you have had at one time or another. For example, as Teles of Megara says, you were poor. Or you were shipwrecked (as it were). Or you were hungry or tired. See these limitations as roles you played (limitation-roles)—however temporary or long lasting they were. They could have been physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, relational, or circumstantial. Again, **critique your role playing: If you were in the audience watching yourself play the limitation-role, how would you critique yourself? How many **stars** (5 stars being the best) would you give the performance? **Color** them in. What did you do well? What could have you done better?**

LIMITATION-ROLE 1 _____

RATING



LIMITATION-ROLE 1 _____

RATING



LIMITATION-ROLE 1 _____

RATING



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PROMPT ▪ REFLECTION ▪ Respond to the following questions related to your roles. When you see “role,” consider not only typical roles but also temporary roles or limitation-roles.

What freedom may be had from wholeheartedly embracing your roles and playing them well?

What suffering may be caused by not embracing your roles and not playing them well? Suffering for you and others?

Is there harm in comparing yourself and your roles with others? If so, what is it?

How can you know when to stop playing a role? Or when to abandon one role in order to play another role?

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PRACTICE ▪ PLAYING YOUR ROLE(S) WELL ▪ Choose three challenging roles you now play. **Identify** how you can embrace and play each role well. Then **practice. Embrace** the roles you actually have rather than pining for ones you do not have.

Role 1 _____

Role 2 _____

Role 3 _____

3 ACTION POINTS

- **Know** your roles, including your limitations (limitation-roles).
- **Critique** yourself. **Be aware** of how well or not you played your roles in the past. The point is not to beat up on yourself but to figure out how you can better play your roles now. **Be thankful** for the times you played your roles well.
- **Practice** the ways you have identified to embrace and play each role well. **Embrace** your roles. **Play** your roles well.

Open pages for additional answers-journaling

“The practice of virtue involves choice—it *is* choice. We must choose to accept and be at harmony with the way things are in the world, the cosmos, including the good and the bad. We must wish things to be as they are. We must freely accept our place and role in the great cosmic play—even if it means death, as it did for Socrates. We must choose to follow the lead of Zeus and all the other directors of life—destiny, necessity, the other gods.” —Epictetus

"The Stoics hold that the wise man is like a good actor, who, if called on to take the part of a Thersites or of an Agamemnon will impersonate them in a suitable manner." —Diogenes Laertius

“Hector said, ‘Alas! The gods have lured me to my death. . . . And now evil death is very near to me and there’s no escape. . . . Now my fate has come! Let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that men to come will hear about!’ ” —Homer (the *Iliad*)

Open pages for additional answers-journaling

"Lead me, O Zeus, and you O Destiny, in whatever role you have assigned me. I will follow without hesitation.

- And if I am not willing to follow because I have become a bad man, even so I will follow.” —Cleanthes of Assos -

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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