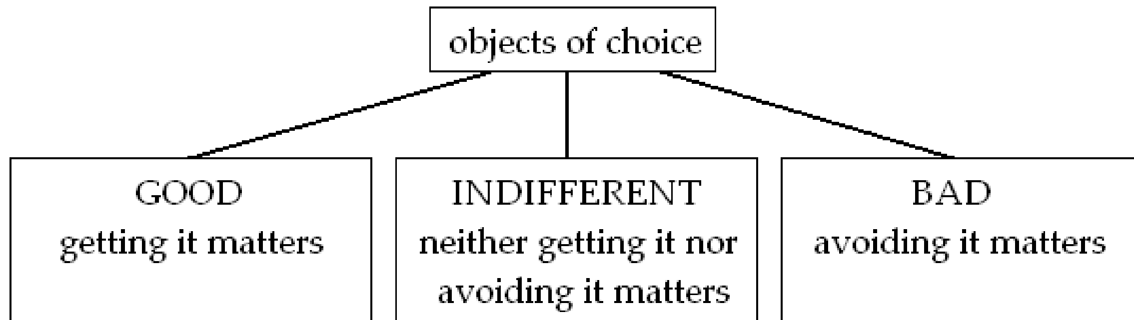
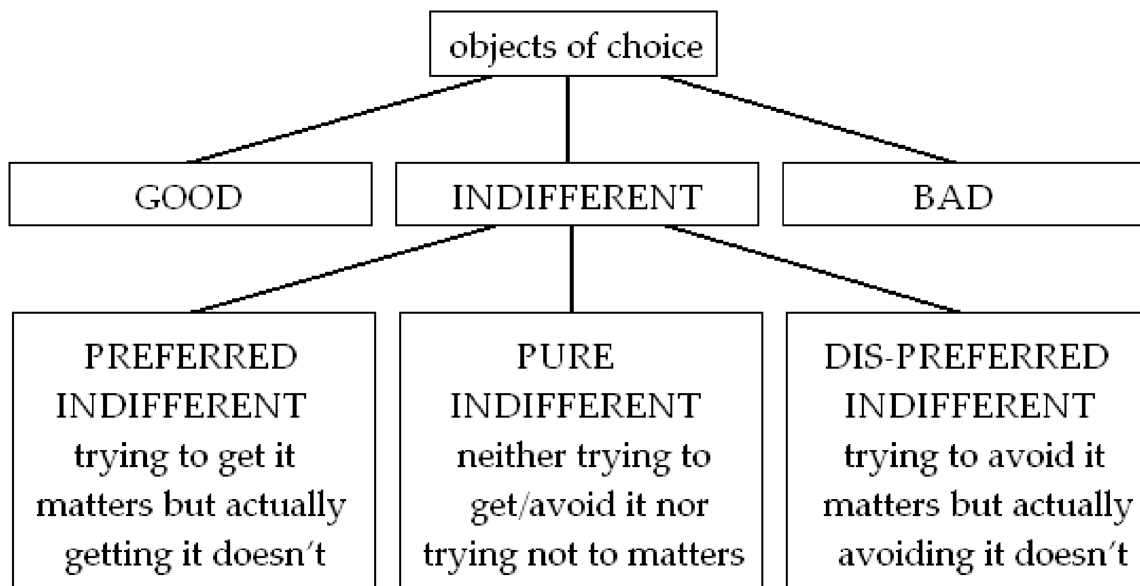
The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent

The Stoics divide all objects of choice into *good* (worth getting), *bad* (worth avoiding), and *indifferent* (doesn't matter whether you get it or not):



That by itself is not unusual; the unusual bit begins when the Stoics further divide the class of indifferents into *preferred* indifferents (worth *trying* to get, but you shouldn't care about actually getting them), *dis-preferred* indifferents (worth *trying* to avoid, but you shouldn't care about actually avoiding them), and *pure* indifferents (neither getting/avoiding nor trying to get/avoid them matters).



This might seem puzzling. Why would you care about *trying* to get something if you didn't care about actually getting it?

Well, here's an imaginary case that might at least make such a thing seem possible. Suppose a telepathic millionaire offers you a million dollars to *try your best* to hit the target. Whether you get the million dollars doesn't depend on whether you actually hit the target but on whether you try your best. (The millionaire can tell whether you're trying your best because, like I said, he's telepathic.) In that case you might care a lot about trying to hit the target, without caring much at all about actually hitting it; so you'd be treating hitting the target as a preferred indifferent.

Or for a more realistic case, think of follow-through in golf. In some sense your follow-through doesn't matter in itself; nothing you do *after* you hit the ball will affect where the ball goes. But *how* you hit the ball depends on whether you're *planning* to follow-through; so it's important to *plan* to do it, even though it's not important to do it.

What's odd about Stoic theory is not just *that* it recognises categories of preferred and dis-preferred indifferents, but *what* it places in those categories. For the Stoics, your own virtue is the *only* thing you should treat as good, and your own vice is the *only* thing you should treat as bad. Everything else is indifferent, though some indifferents are preferred and some aren't. Example: virtue requires you to *try* to defend your city against invasion, but it doesn't require you to succeed. So trying to defend your city is good, but succeeding in defending your city is merely a preferred indifferent. (Most of the things that Aristotle treats as good, the Stoics will treat as preferred indifferents.)

But *why* should we treat everything other than virtue and vice as indifferent? The Stoics offer three main arguments:

Virtue-based argument: A virtuous person has to be committed to choosing virtue no matter what. If you assign value to *any* other thing besides virtue, then enough of that other thing could tempt you away from virtue; so a virtuous person must assign zero value to everything else. (This argument is most clearly expressed in Seneca.)

Happiness-based argument: The more invulnerable to bad luck you are, the happier you are. So the best conception of happiness is one that makes happiness *completely* invulnerable to bad luck. [This is what I call the **super-stability requirement**, by contrast with Aristotle's mere **stability requirement**.] The only way that your happiness can be completely invulnerable to bad luck if you only care about things that are in your power; tryings are always in your power, while succeedings aren't. (This argument is most clearly expressed in Epictetus.)

Theological argument: The part cannot be superior to the whole. I'm part of the universe, so I can't be superior to the universe. But I'm governed by my mind, and anything governed by a mind is superior to anything not governed by a mind; so if the universe weren't governed by a mind, then I'd be superior to the universe, which I'm not. So the universe must be governed by a mind – the mind of God ("Zeus"). So everything that happens is part of a supremely rational plan, and I should do my best to play out the role in which Zeus has cast me. If I care about anything outside my power, I'm (irrationally) setting my will against a supremely rational plan.

<u>The Stoics on Emotion</u>

The Stoics maintain that we should have no emotions (or, perhaps more accurately, no "passions" or "affections" – a better translation of *pathê*). Why do they think this, and how do they suppose such a goal is even possible?

For the Stoics, as for Aristotle before them, emotions are not raw feelings like itches or tickles, but embody value judgments. Part of feeling sad is judging that something *bad* has happened or is happening; part of feeling angry is judging that someone has done something *wrong*; part of feeling proud is judging that you or someone you identify with possesses some *good* quality or achievement, *etc.*

But unlike Aristotle, the Stoics think that most of our ordinary value judgments are necessarily *false*. If you should regard nothing as good except your own virtue, and nothing as bad except your own vice, then emotions embodying value judgments about things *other* than your own virtue and vice are necessarily irrational. Hence the Stoics are not opposed to your feeling good about your own virtue or feeling fear of your becoming vicious; those emotions are allowed, though the Stoics don't call them "emotions" (well, don't call them *pathê*), preferring to reserve that term for emotions involving the evaluation of things outside the agent's power. (Even feeling bad about your *past* sins is irrational, since your past sins are now outside your power; only fear of *future* vice is permissible.)

A story that has attached itself to a number of different Stoics tells of a father being brought the bad news that his son has just died. When the father is asked why he takes the news so calmly, he replies, "Well, after all I knew my son was mortal." In other words, to moan and wail about death and treat it as a bad thing would imply that it's the sort of thing whose avoidance is in our power. But it's not in our power, so we shouldn't let it affect us. (Plato and Aristotle had argued that emotions are useful in motivating us to do the right thing – that anger, for example, helps motivate us to be courageous. <u>Read carefully</u> what Seneca says in *To Novatus on Anger* I. 9 in response to this argument.)

So that's why the Stoics think the elimination of emotion is *desirable*. But why do they think it's *possible*? After all, it might seem psychologically unrealistic to suppose we even *can* get rid of having emotions.

Well, perhaps it is, but the Stoic view is at least not *quite* as unrealistic as it seems, because the Stoics distinguish between *emotional* appearance, emotional *impulse*, and emotional *assent*. To understand this distinction, we need to take a look at the difference, as the Stoics would understand it, between impulse and assent generally. So consider, *e.g.*, a sensory illusion, as when on a hot day the agitated air molecules above the surface of the road create a shimmering effect, giving rise to the *appearance* that there's water on the road.

If you're driving along and see the illusion, you might be led to believe that there really is water ahead on the road, and you might let the appearance of water affect your actions (you might slow down to avoid skidding in the water, for example). In this case you are not just being subject to an appearance as of water ahead, but you are *assenting* to the appearance, *i.e.*, you are accepting it as true and allowing it to guide your actions.

Now suppose instead that you see the shimmering effect but you recognise it as an illusion and are not fooled. You don't believe it, and you don't slow down. You're still subject to the same appearance, but in this case you don't *assent* to it.

But now take a third case. You're driving along when *suddenly* you see the shimmering *directly* ahead, and before you can pause to consider rationally whether it's really water or just a false appearance you panic and hit the brakes to avoid skidding. You might think that in this case you assented *very quickly* to the appearance. But the Stoics would say you didn't assent at all. Deciding whether to accept an appearance as true or false is a matter of rational reflection; in this case you had not time for rational reflection, and the appearance just kicked you directly into action, bypassing reflection entirely. In such a case, say the Stoics, your response is the result of *impulse* rather than assent.

Likewise, then, suppose you're a Stoic sage walking along a dark street at night and suddenly someone jumps out at you behind a bush and yells "boo!" Will you jump back, startled and scared, or will you react with equanimity? And if you do jump back, does that show you're not a true Stoic sage after all?

The Stoics were asked just this sort of question by their critics, and they replied: Yes, the Stoic sage might very well jump back, startled and scared, because in such cases the appearance acts as an impulse, moving the Stoic directly into action without any intermediate stage of reflection. But once the Stoic has time to reflect, he can choose not to assent to the impulse, and his startlement will then cease. (He may still run away from danger, *if* he determines that doing so in the context is a preferred indifferent, but in such a case he will do so calmly and efficiently.)

When the Stoics say we can get rid of our emotions, then, what they mean is that we can get rid of our *assent* to emotional impulses; they reserve the term *pathē* for the acts of assent, not for the impulses themselves; and they do not claim it is possible to get rid of the impulse. (It may be possible to reduce the impulse through self-discipline and habituation, but probably not to eliminate it completely.) We are not responsible, and so not to be blamed, for what we do in cases where impulse bypasses reflection entirely; but such cases are only momentary. What we *are* responsible for is whether our reflection issues in assent to or rejection of the impulse or appearance. Since it is the assent, not the impulse, that the Stoics recommend getting rid of, what they propose is at any rate not as psychologically impossible as it sounds. Whether it really is desirable is of course the crucial question.

"He was a Stoic's Stoic."