

UNITED WISDOM

Preferred Things and What Is Necessary in Stoic Ethics

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *Neither good nor evil*

Cicero, *On the Ends of Good and Evil*, III.53: a short fragment of Cato's speech about preferred things, in H. Rackham's English translation. The passage read.

What this article is about

Someone needs a working tool, available time or another person's response to carry out a particular task. It does not follow that lacking this condition deprives them of moral dignity. The Stoic distinction between good and preferred things helps us ask these two questions separately. It is often expressed too sharply: if health, sufficient means and reputation are not good in the strict sense, it supposedly makes no sense to care about them. In the third book of Cicero read here, that position of indifference is expressly challenged. We will examine Cato's speech about the value of external conditions, reasonable selection and an action for which an account can be given. We will then test the distinction through a hypothetical small publishing task. What is necessary for a task does not become necessary for a person's worth, and a desirable outcome does not remove the question of means. This is philosophical inquiry, not financial, medical or professional guidance.

I. Necessary for what, exactly?

Imagine someone voluntarily preparing a small selection of texts for a group they know. They want to make it easy to read, check typographical errors and give it to participants by an agreed date. A printed version requires paper, access to a printer and some time. When the printer stops working, the person says that everything is now lost. But a narrower circumstance has so far been established: the previous means of production within the previous deadline is in question. The content of the work, the agreement about timing and the assessment of the person still require separate judgments.

The word necessary always needs a complement. Paper is necessary for a paper copy; a particular room may be necessary for a meeting in the chosen format. This is a relationship between a condition and a specific task. It does not prove that the same resource is necessary for every useful activity, still less for a person's claim to respect. When the complement

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

disappears, a technical constraint quietly becomes an overall verdict: without this, I have nothing. The original information no longer supports such a conclusion.

We can distinguish the questions without pretending that the obstacle is insignificant. Participants may really have counted on a printed selection. A change of format may cause inconvenience, and a failure to communicate it in time may create further difficulty. The person will therefore have to check the agreement and explain the obstacle. But they can do so without declaring equipment failure a moral defeat. The external condition remains important for the task, while gaining no authority to define their entire dignity or the quality of every possible action.

This clarification does not amount to a complete statement of Stoic doctrine. It is our limited entry into a historical distinction: what is necessary to carry out one form of a task and good as a subject of moral reasoning do not mean the same thing. Their coincidence needs to be demonstrated, rather than presumed from the strength of desire. A person may regret the unavailable option while seeking a more precise account of what is possible now, what they promised and what choice remains theirs.

II. Who is speaking in the source?

In the third book of *On the Ends of Good and Evil*, the Stoic position is presented by Cato, a participant in Cicero's dialogue. This matters for attribution. We are reading a crafted philosophical speech, rather than a transcript of a modern conversation or Cicero's unconditional personal endorsement of every Stoic formula. The selected sections establish the content of the argument presented; they do not permit us to declare all Stoics unanimous about every particular question. The text itself shows differences within the school under discussion, for example over good reputation.

In III.43–49, the speech compares Stoic and Peripatetic approaches to good and happiness. In the Stoic account, moral worth does not increase simply through adding bodily advantages. III.50 provides an essential continuation: there are nevertheless distinctions among external things, otherwise wisdom would have no subject of selection. To recognise morality as the only good does not therefore mean treating all conditions as identical. The argument preserves a place for preference, rejection and an explanation of why one condition is selected rather than another.

Our reading is limited to the selected III.43–59 and the introductory context of this book read earlier. The English text is identified as H. Rackham's translation in the Loeb edition, published on LacusCurtius. We do not present it as our own examination of the Latin manuscript tradition. The Russian rendering of the short quotations was made for this article. The source offers a

philosophical system and its arguments, rather than measured evidence that readers become calmer or more successful after encountering it.

This limitation does not diminish the question's significance. It determines what kind of answer to expect. We can investigate how the distinction changes the basis of a choice in a hypothetical situation. We cannot promise that it will remove distress about loss, improve material circumstances or replace specialist assistance. A strong ancient ideal calls for precise attribution; a contemporary scene calls for separate responsibility for its conditions. A considered analogy is possible between them, but the quiet conversion of an ancient norm into a demonstrated effect is not.

III. Preference remains after the distinction

Among things possessing value, III.51 names health, unimpaired senses, freedom from pain, reputation and wealth. In the argument read here, they provide grounds for preference without constituting moral good in the same strict sense. This technical distinction should not be rendered as indifference in its everyday sense. In conversation, an indifferent person is someone who sees no difference or does not want to care. Here, by contrast, distinctions are preserved and supply the material of reasonable choice.

In our hypothetical task, a working printer is preferable to a broken one when a paper edition is needed. Sufficient time to check the text is preferable to haste. The person does not have to prove independence from externals by deliberately choosing inconvenience. Yet preference does not become an order to obtain the desired thing at any cost. It answers a question about a suitable condition without already justifying the means of acquiring it. We can want convenience while rejecting deception, pressure or appropriation of another person's resource to obtain it.

Suppose an acquaintance could provide equipment but has not promised to do so. Their ability to use a printer is not our right to control it. Even if their agreement would make the task easier, that agreement must first be obtained and the limits of use clarified. An unsuccessful request will change the available means. It does not by itself mean that the request was unworthy or that the acquaintance is obliged to remedy the situation. The preferred condition remains a subject of possible agreement, rather than another person's hidden obligation.

It does not follow that all contemporary duties derive from a single Stoic category. Agreements, organisational rules and existing rights must be examined on their own grounds. But the philosophical distinction helps us notice a specific substitution: I prefer this outcome, therefore others must provide it. There is no automatic transition between those statements. Recognising its absence preserves both the seriousness of the task and the boundary of

another person's participation. Care for the outcome becomes more precise when desire does not take the place of permission already obtained.

IV. A condition's value depends on its role

In III.56, preferred things are distinguished by the grounds of preference: some are valued for themselves, some for the result they produce, and some in both respects. Money is offered as a means in the selected account, while unimpaired senses and health also have their own value within the system described. What matters to us here is the form of the question: why is this condition being chosen? It prevents us from treating every desirable object as though its name already concluded the moral discussion.

In the publishing scene, an expensive form of presentation may be desirable because the person likes its appearance. Another option may be less impressive but easier for those who will read it. The difference requires information about participants and the purpose of the selection. If the person decides in advance that prestigious presentation is always better, they replace a task open to examination with their own preference. If they declare beauty a trivial matter for everyone, they erase the possible value of presentation just as hastily.

We need to clarify whose task the decision is meant to fulfil. Perhaps the group wants a working copy with large type; perhaps a gift in a particular format matters to them. These are different conditions, and our assumptions about others' tastes do not establish them. Where possible, it is worth asking participants and preserving any difference discovered. The choice need not then appear universal. It is enough to justify it in relation to the present task, known needs and genuinely available means, without turning them into a single ladder of dignity.

Such clarification allows reconsideration. An object may have seemed useful before it emerged that it made reading harder or required work that had not been agreed. Abandoning the original option is not necessarily weakness. It may follow from new information about its role. The article does not claim that this examination will necessarily produce a better result. Its narrow purpose is to make visible the basis on which a preference arose and on which it can be challenged, changed or maintained.

V. An account of an action and the image of an infallible person

III.58–59 discusses appropriate action: an action for which a reasonable account can be presented. The text distinguishes it from the perfect moral action of the Stoic sage. This difference prevents every outwardly successful step from becoming evidence of completed virtue. Returning something entrusted to us is offered as an action that may have different moral grounds. An observable coincidence of action does not yet tell us why it was performed or how consistently someone understands their obligation.

We do not need to declare the participant in the publishing task a sage to ask about the basis of their step. They may tell the group about a delay because they really consider it significant to others. They may do the same thing only out of fear that the delay will soon be discovered. The practical result of the communication may coincide, while the relationship to personal responsibility differs. We do not know another person's motive without sufficient information and do not propose guessing it. But we can check our own explanation against what we actually do.

For example, the person says they want to preserve participants' freedom to choose a format, yet offers only one option and conceals an available alternative. We can examine this contradiction without a verdict on their entire personality. It is enough to compare the stated grounds with the opportunity for choice provided. The correction concerns a specific action: disclose the known alternative, name the limitation and stop presenting a personal preference as the group's decision. Correction itself does not prove moral perfection; it changes only the present action and the information available to others.

Appropriate action in the historical system cannot be replaced entirely by a modern rule to explain decisions well. An explanation may sound persuasive while remaining inadequate in substance. Our limited examination therefore also asks about the truthfulness of the grounds, the agreement of people affected and the actual conditions. It preserves the distinction between a reasonable argument and retrospective justification. The stronger our desire to protect an attractive image of ourselves, the more useful it is to allow that our previous explanation may fail this particular examination.

VI. The external result remains significant for others

The distinction between moral good and an external result is sometimes used as though the consequences of an action no longer deserve attention. Yet if the selection was promised for a particular day, participants may have built plans around it. Failing to obtain what we want ourselves and inconveniencing others are different circumstances. The Stoic category does not authorise forgetting the second. After the printer fails, questions remain about communication, reconsidering the promise and possible help for those who relied on the previous agreement.

Imagine that one participant can read only the paper version at the proposed location. An electronic replacement does not necessarily preserve access. We cannot establish its adequacy from the single fact that the text now exists. We would need to check the person's actual ability to use it. The article does not derive a universal accessibility standard from the ancient dialogue. It offers a narrower moral observation: a solution convenient for us may leave another person's task unresolved, even when our own work seems complete and honest.

At the same time, an unknown limitation must not become an invented story about a participant. If their needs have not been established, that should be stated. When a question is available and appropriate, we can clarify which format suits them without requiring disclosure of their personal history. They retain the right to explain no more than the current choice requires. A preference for an outcome must consider this boundary: good intentions do not confer a right to gather additional information to make our moral report to the group, or to ourselves, more persuasive.

External things therefore have different roles for different people. What seems a pleasant addition to one may be a condition of participation in a particular task for another. This does not turn an external resource into an absolute moral good within the Stoic system. But it prevents us from deploying a technical term as a universal answer to someone else's difficulty. Reasonable choice requires attention to circumstances, rather than merely the ability to state the correct category. The category helps frame the question; the answer needs to be examined within the task itself.

VII. Losing a preferred thing is not a test of dignity

A person may feel regret, irritation or fear when an important condition disappears. The philosophical distinction does not impose an immediate requirement to stop feeling this. The historical Stoic ideal should be described honestly, but our exercise must not become a test of whether the reader has attained it. Continued distress about a delay does not prove moral corruption or a mistaken understanding of the text. The article establishes no required speed at which calm must be achieved after loss.

It is especially dangerous to use the technical distinction as a reproach to another person. We might remind them that an external object is not good in the strict Stoic sense and thereby evade assistance we promised. The philosophical formula would then conceal our own duty. Before discussing someone's attitude to loss, it is worth checking what we promised, what we can fulfil and what part of the difficulty we created ourselves. Their reaction does not automatically cancel these questions or make our earlier agreement insignificant.

In the hypothetical scene, the editor may acknowledge distress about being unable to finish the work in the chosen form. They may also ask for practical help without presenting the request as an admission of worthlessness. Assistance is not always possible; its absence requires a separate decision about the task. No automatic scale arises between these events: someone who manages alone is worthy, while someone who turns to another is unworthy. That scale does not follow from the selected sections and contradicts our distinction between a task and personal worth.

If the discussion intensifies self-abasement or obstructs an available decision, the exercise can be stopped. A real threat, a serious condition or a professional problem calls for support and competence appropriate to the circumstances. A philosophical note does not replace them. Its possible result is more modest: noticing where the lack of an external condition became an unsupported verdict, and separating those statements again. It need not produce a pleasant feeling to remain accurate, and it does not justify continuing at any cost.

VIII. Competing preferences are not resolved by one label

Sometimes a choice is needed between two external conditions, each with its own grounds. The editor wants to finish the selection on time and preserve sufficient time for checking. Participants want to receive it conveniently and without additional work. Calling all these things preferred is not enough to establish how to decide. We must find out what promises have already been made, what consequences are known, what can really be changed and whose agreement is required. One philosophical classification does not perform this factual work on our behalf.

Suppose the previous deadline can be preserved only with an acquaintance's help, requiring them to abandon their own plan. We can make a request while accurately naming its extent. But we cannot conceal the cost of assistance under the language of the common good. If they refuse, the decision must be reconsidered in light of that refusal. Reasonable selection does not mean that every preferred outcome is achievable. Nor does it require treating a refusal as nonexistent to preserve our promise, made without confirmed access to someone else's resource.

The moral question here concerns how the person deals with a conflict of conditions. They may acknowledge inadequate planning, give the group truthful information and propose discussion of an available change. They may conceal the obstacle and pressure another person to remedy it. Both courses could outwardly end in a printed selection. The object obtained therefore does not complete the assessment. The preference for the result does not make the means of achieving it equivalent or remove consideration of the inconvenience caused to others.

This examination establishes no arithmetic of all moral conflicts. We have no basis for deriving a universal ordering of every obligation from what we read. In a particular case, we can honestly identify which questions remain open and who participates in the decision. Uncertainty does not equal a refusal to think. It can accurately describe the state of knowledge while information or agreement is still unavailable. Acknowledging it may sometimes be more responsible than declaring one preferred outcome uniquely necessary and then subordinating all other circumstances to it.

IX. Correction concerns the grounds, not only the outcome

If the selection is eventually produced, the person may decide that every earlier difficulty is now justified. But the result does not erase the way it was achieved. If the acquaintance was pressured into helping, if an available alternative was concealed from participants, or if responsibility for the delay was unjustifiably shifted to another person, those actions remain open to examination. Success is useful for the task, but it does not turn an inaccurate statement into a truthful one. The Stoic distinction matters particularly when the desired thing has already been obtained and ending all questions seems convenient.

Correction can begin with a specific acknowledgment: I communicated a deadline without checking the resource; I called it the group's choice although it was my decision; I did not disclose an available replacement. This language confines the claim to what is really known. It does not demand public self-condemnation in every respect or promise that others will immediately accept the explanation. Participants may retain their own assessment of what happened. Their right to it does not disappear because the editor has understood a philosophical category more precisely or acknowledged a mistake.

We can then ask about possible repair of consequences, where appropriate and available. Sometimes a missing option can be provided, sometimes a future agreement changed, and sometimes only an inaccurate statement clarified. None of these steps should be invented in place of real possibilities. Recognising limited resources can form part of honest action. It does not release us from an existing obligation, but it helps distinguish the available part of repair from a promise that would again require unconfirmed time, agreement or someone else's labour.

Completing this examination need not coincide with restoring our previous image of ourselves. A person may remain dissatisfied with an action while understanding the next step more clearly. Our question concerns the grounds of choice and their relationship to the task. It does not require obtaining everyone's approval as final evidence of having corrected ourselves. Approval may be a desirable external response, but making it an indispensable condition of honesty would again merge the categories whose separation began the inquiry.

X. The importance of a thing and the moral question's freedom

A Stoic preferred thing is not something we should cease to notice. In the selected account, external conditions provide material for choice, and a reasonable action can be given an account. At the same time, moral good does not consist in the simple accumulation of conveniences. These sides need to be held together. Keeping only independence from externals removes attention to the task and to other people. Keeping only the condition's value allows a desirable object to justify any means of obtaining it and to define the person's entire dignity.

In our scene, a paper selection may really be needed for particular participation. Its format, timing and accessibility therefore need serious examination. But the printed copy does not by itself prove the editor's truthfulness, while a broken printer does not prove their unworthiness. The moral question remains open to examination of the action: how they communicated the difficulty, considered another person's response, explained their choice and corrected their own mistake. The importance of the external condition remains without becoming the sole measure of that assessment.

This approach does not decide for readers what exactly should be sacrificed. It restores a distinction between an object of care, a condition of a particular task and the grounds of action. A person can select what is preferred, acknowledge what is unavailable and reject an unworthy means without pretending that everything is identical. If the decision is not yet known, the question and the boundary of knowledge can remain open. Moral reasoning need not end favourably to require truthfulness; a favourable outcome does not make that truthfulness unnecessary after the task ends.

What this means in practice

Where appropriate, choose one small voluntary task in which a desirable resource has come to seem a condition of your own worth. Do not use a dangerous, serious situation, or one requiring specialist help, for the exercise. It can be skipped or stopped; it is not a test of endurance and requires no disclosure of personal information to others.

Write down the specific form of work for which the resource is necessary. Then separately name why you prefer it and what information supports that basis. Do not replace other people's unknown needs with your assumption. If an appropriate question is available, clarify what is needed for the present choice; if it is not, preserve the limitation of knowledge.

Separate the desirable result from the means of obtaining it. Check promises already made, required agreement and possible costs for people affected. Choose one available step or acknowledge that none is available now. Do not promise repair for which the means are

unconfirmed. A possible result of the note is a more precise distinction between the task and its moral grounds, without a guarantee of calm, success or universal approval.

If conditions later change, returning to the note is optional. If you wish, check only one previous ground: does its factual support remain, or has new information emerged? This does not require repeating the entire argument or assessing yourself as a whole again. It is enough to identify a change to a specific decision, if it is actually needed for the task and available without new pressure on yourself or others.

Key quotation

> *An account can be rendered*

Cicero, *On the Ends of Good and Evil*, III.58, a fragment of Cato's speech about the reasonableness of appropriate action, in H. Rackham's translation. This forms part of a philosophical definition, rather than confirming the correctness of every explanation. The passage read.

Connections between traditions

Question	Source read	Comparison	Boundary
An external condition's value	Cicero, III.50–56, Cato's speech	Stoic good differs from preferred things, but selection among conditions remains.	This is an account of a particular school within a dialogue, rather than agreement among all ancient traditions.
An account of action	Cicero, III.58–59; our hypothetical publishing task	A needed resource and the grounds of an action can be considered separately.	Contemporary duties, rights and accessibility cannot be derived from a single ancient definition.

No external interreligious identity or historical influence is asserted. The comparison is limited to the philosophical argument read and the identified editorial analogy.

Primary sources

1. **Cicero. On the Ends of Good and Evil / De Finibus, III.43–59.** H. Rackham's English translation, Loeb Classical Library,1931, digitally presented by LacusCurtius. The selected sections and introductory context of the book were read; no reading of the whole treatise or Latin critical tradition is claimed. Cato presents the Stoic position within the dialogue. Text. The page marking identifies this version as public domain; universal rights and import of the complete text were not separately established.

Tags

Stoicism, Cicero, Cato, preferred things, necessary things, good, virtue, value, choice, grounds, action, responsibility, condition, resource, purpose, means, consent, obligation, outcome, dignity, indifferent things, appropriate action, agreement, access, mistake, correction, uncertainty, truthfulness, moral philosophy, boundary

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He researches inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.