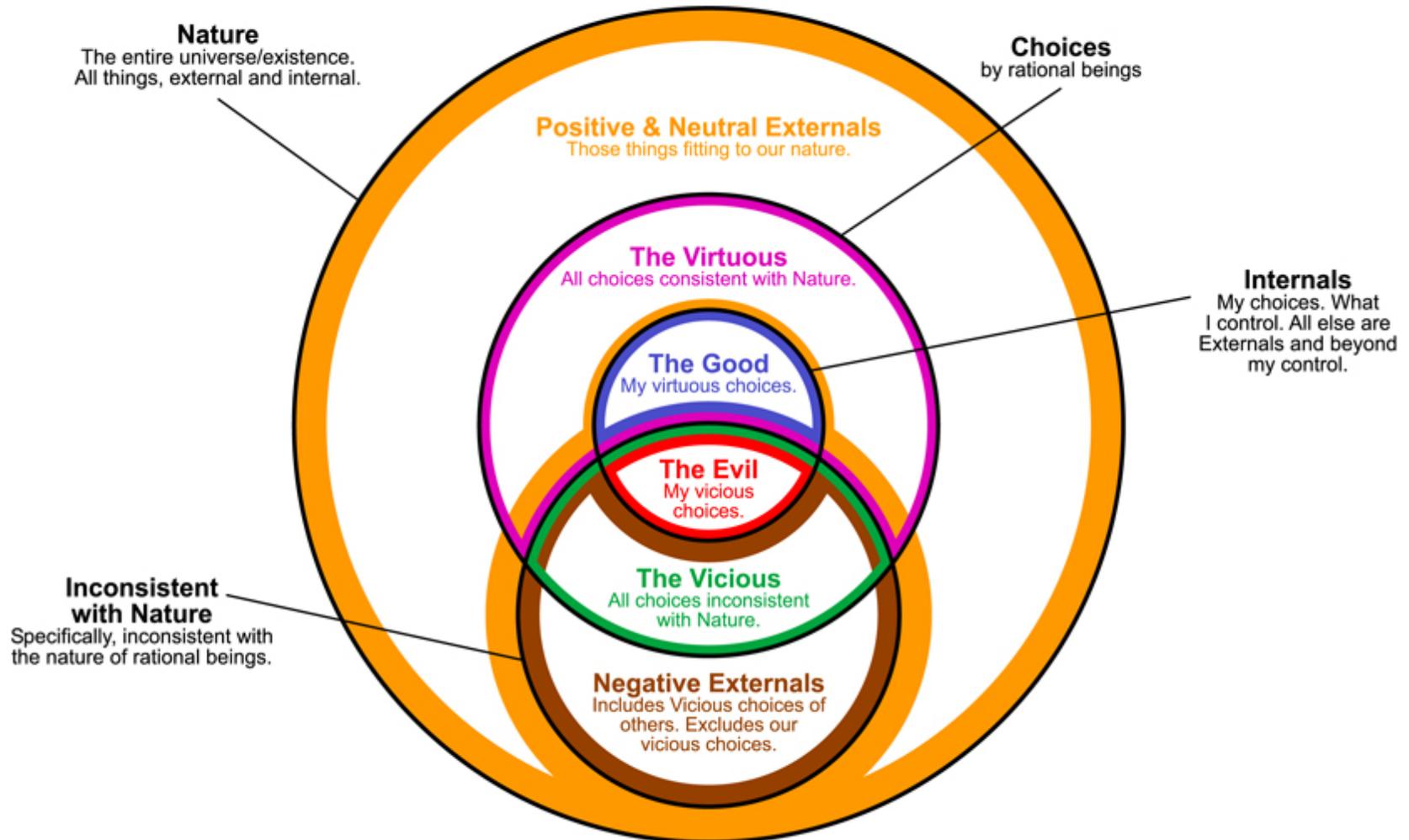


# Relationship between the Good, Evil, Virtuous, and Vicious



## The Good, Evil, Virtuous, and Vicious

By DT Strain, for the Spiritual Naturalist Society, 2012

The included image is a Venn diagram showing the relationships between the concepts of the Good, Evil, Virtuous, and Vicious. This model is closely inspired by the ancient Stoic model, with some differences in terminology to make understanding more clear.

The most helpful way to understand this diagram is to begin with the circles (in black). The outermost circle represents Nature (or the universe - all that exists). Nature is one, interconnected, monistic whole. The circle near the bottom represents those things inconsistent with Nature.

It may seem odd for that which is inconsistent with Nature to be represented as being within Nature. The two things that must be understood are (1) Nature, and (2) What we mean by this phrase, and the purposes of the phrase.

First, Nature includes everything. In this thought, nothing is outside of, or beyond, Nature. Secondly, the notion of 'that which is inconsistent with Nature' is a human-centric concept, purposely so. This is because the concept exists to assist us in living in accord with Nature. What does this mean? It means, more specifically, living in accord with *our higher nature as rational, moral, beings*. So, one might phrase it as 'those things inconsistent with a rational, moral, being's nature'. However, we consider this as inconsistent with Nature because all of Nature is one integrated whole. When we act in discord with our nature, we are acting in discord with Nature, *because we are part of Nature*.

The next circle to observe is the larger of the two circles in the center of the outside circle. This circle represents all choices by rational beings (those beings capable of making choices beyond their instinct and molding their behavior by those fully aware rational observations, perhaps even despite more basic instinctive urges). This includes all normally-functioning human beings, and would include any sapient extra-terrestrial species should they exist. Some arguments can be made that certain more complex animals may contain some of these abilities, but our aim here is to focus on our own practices, so we will move on from what is an academic matter.

The innermost circle represents, for this writer, *my choices*. For you, it represents *your choices*. Ultimately, spiritual practice is about developing the person in the mirror, so we always can only refer to that within this circle in the first person. Another term we can use is the *Will* (which includes my attitudes, choices, values, priorities, and character). These are what are called the *Internal*; all else being *Externals*. Only the Internal - the *Will* - is within my control. All else is not within my control.

The colored areas represent terms that relate to overlapping phenomena - relationships between the Internal, the External, Choices, things beyond Choices, things in accord with Nature, and things in discord with Nature.

Among all choices (by me or others) are those which are in accord with Nature and those which are not. Those choices in accord with Nature are Virtuous choices. Those in discord with Nature are reflective of *vice* and therefore are Vicious choices. I can make virtuous and vicious choices, and so can others.

Among Internals are *my* choices - the only thing I control. When my choice is Virtuous (consistent with Nature), it is Good. In fact, the *only* Good is *my* Virtuous choice. The *only* Evil is *my* Vicious choice. I can describe the choices of others to be Virtuous or Vicious, as well as my own - but it is impossible for others to do Good or Evil. Only I can do either. The actions of others are in the same category as everything else outside my control - Externals. Thus, they are no different than rain falling on my crops or rocks falling on my head - merely different positive and negative external happenings beyond my control.

Among Externals are the positive, negative, and neutral. This is an objective matter and has nothing to do with my personal liking/disliking or preference for an External. Negative Externals are those things outside my Will (outside my control) which are against the nature of rational beings. For example, if a natural disaster destroys my possessions, family, friends, wealth, or my body, these are not conducive toward the normal healthy inclinations of a rational being. *All else being equal*, it is reasonable and rational for me to work to avoid these calamities. Those Externals which are positive are those things fitting to the nature of rational beings. *All else being equal*, it is reasonable and rational for a rational being to work to accumulate resources, build positive relationships, enjoy entertainments, and work toward a healthy body. Neutral Externals are those things neither helpful nor harmful to rational beings, but they may be pursued or avoided as per a person's individual preferences, *all else being equal*.

The reason we say, *all else being equal*, is because none of these Externals are considered Good or Evil. Being outside our control, they are never allowed that status. No External, be it another person or a natural happenstance, can ever *do Evil* to us. No

External prize can ever be a *true Good* for us. So, it is appropriate to pursue or avoid Externals, provided that we keep this in mind, and provided that we make no choices to do so which are Vicious. When we do this, it is a sign that we are suffering from *delusion* - the *false judgment* that mistakes an External for a Good or an Evil.

This model is a mental tool used to help conform our attitudes, dispositions, and character such that we come to habitually attach our True Happiness and contentment only to that which is in our control - our choices - and to focus those choices on those consistent with our Natures (the Virtuous). Only by doing so can a human being enjoy contentment independent of circumstance. When our perspectives, choices, and actions are in discord with Nature (Vicious), we will know by their symptoms, which are pathos (the harmful passions), and True Suffering (a long term, deep, discontentment and unhappiness in life).

But such a model is only the very beginning of wisdom. The model must be more than merely understood, and more than merely agreed upon. It must be internalized on an intuitive level. To do so, a number of practices and other elements are needed to remove egotistical and biased judgments and ideas from our character over time.