

Eric's personal outline

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My thoughts on living well

Continuing from my "My thoughts on the Nature of the Universe" post, the most honest purpose of action for living beings is to seek and enjoy pleasure and avoid pain. One may think that they have some other purpose but even that thinking is motivated by pleasure and pain. Everyone that has a reward system, is honestly a hedonist but may simply extend their hedonic calculus to life after death which is not grounded in reality.

Pleasure and avoiding pain are the only thing intrinsically valuable to humans. Other values are always based on these.

One cannot reject pleasure/pain as the guide to and goal of life without using pleasure/pain to make that decision. A person who "renounces" pleasure isn't really getting rid of pleasure. They are simply choosing (often unwisely) a different pleasure and/or trying to avoid some pain.

What is pleasure? What is pain?

Pleasure is any experience that feels like you would be okay with being in this experience longer for the experience/feeling itself.

Pain is any experience that feels like you would not be okay with being in this experience longer for the experience/feeling itself.

One may be experiencing pleasure and pain signals simultaneously but if the overall experience is acceptable to be in for itself, one is feeling pleasure.

The limit of pleasure

The limit of pleasure is reached when all pain is removed. After that, pleasure cannot be increased but the experience varied. People who are not in pain do not need to increase the intensity of their pleasure signals as they are utterly content. People in pain may choose to increase the intensity of their pleasure signals in an effort to escape from their pain.

Managing pain

Acute pain does not last for very long and if pain is mild/moderate, it is tolerable. Ideally, if I cannot fix the source of the pain, I try to just wait it out instead of trying to hide it by foolish things that will cost me pleasure or cause me pain in the future.

Necessary needs vs Unnecessary desires

Necessary needs are those that which if not fulfilled, by the lack of themselves alone without externally acquired stress from added opinion/social pressure/addictions/triggers, will eventually cause death through loss of bodily functions. These lead to permanent pain at some point until satisfied. These include food, water, sleep, shelter, physical social presence (I would argue this is not an externally learned pressure as the detection is lack of social presence that intrinsically causes the body to stress itself to motivate returning to the safety of social groups) and movement (exercise). Necessary desires are desires that lead to the fulfillment of these needs.

Unnecessary desires are desires originating from beliefs, addictions, and the triggering of some innate reactive mechanisms (such as from the sexual or sociomoral brain systems). Such desires can be left unfulfilled without them leading to death, and any pain from the unfulfillment of the desire is temporary. External pressures may make feeding these desires practically necessary for survival or for coping with pain but without these circumstances, these desires are not necessary to engage in, and more (especially continuous) pleasure can be acquired and pain avoided by weakening these desires by not engaging in them or by avoiding their triggers. Some examples of unnecessary desires are the desire for involvement in politics, reading the news, engagement in sexual/romantic relations, and use of drugs.

Note: I am not saying taking pleasure from unnecessary desires is bad and advocating for total asceticism. Unnecessary desires are practically essential for building and maintaining friendships and for coping with life stresses and for keeping the mind sharp and body healthy and strong. The mind and body deteriorates if it is not used. What I am saying, is that asceticism can be used to gain more pleasure and lessen pain if done wisely and sparingly. Personally I need more of this myself to function in this world but am aware that some people have more capacity to live well without much of it.

Friendship

Friendship can provide the fulfillment of the necessary need for physical social presence but can also provide security against external or internal threats be they threats to wisdom, threats to financial security, or threats of physical harm. The confidence of receiving help if times get tough wards against fear (pain) even if we will never actually need help (which is desirable for the sake of our friends and for ourselves).

Also, friendship allows us to experience the joy of helping people we like. I like my boss and colleagues, and I like my family and friends. It brings me joy to help them and I may go through great efforts to help them and feel very satisfied and happy when I do so. This is a worthwhile desire to keep alive and engage in in moderation taking into account one's personal circumstances and resources.

I personally choose to live my life in such a way that I keep the reason for having friends as "I want friends because talking to them and helping them makes me feel joyful and secure" in my awareness instead of "I want friends because they will give me something or solve my problems". The former is easier for me when I am more sensitive to joy and being sensitive to

joy is achieved by reducing pain and by reducing over-stimulation via avoiding unnecessary desires.

Determinism (not very epicurean stance maybe)

As I wrote in my previous post, I believe in causal determinism.

Determinism is a double-edged sword: On one hand, I shouldn't be punished by my actions after death as my actions and thoughts are pre-determined (another potent cure for fear of death) and on the other hand, I logically should not be proud of my accomplishments as I merely had a better starting point and environment than others which I didn't choose. Thus I consider pride (sense of superiority over others) to be a kind of false opinion and it is easier for me to ignore and let go than vainly defend it. Furthermore, people do not like arrogant people so this humility helps me in finding friendships that are not based on competition which is peaceful.

I am aware that in some ways it does not feel good to not have true agency. Thus I choose to go a little bit with the illusion of agency so that I may feel like I have control over my actions and be happier that way. I am aware that I am in a way lying to myself just to be happier. "[There is no necessity to live under the control of necessity](#)" speaks to me in this way.

Virtues

Virtues are not ends in of themselves. They are simply tools for gaining pleasure and avoiding pain. Following some virtues provide external goods and others internal goods. Some virtues are based on biology, others are based on social phenomena in the culture we live in. Not all virtues need be cultivated, but they exist for a reason (remember: everyone is a hedonist) and should be investigated why and considered for adopting into one's life based on individual circumstances.

Some quick thoughts about some specific virtues

Honesty: Conducive to peace of mind. Reduced pain of anticipation of being caught in a lie and punished. Less internal cognitive dissonance to deal with.

Temperance: Too much of a good thing can lead to pain and if not pain, reduced ability to feel pleasure later.

Wisdom: Helps in learning actions that increase pleasure and minimize pain in life. Studying the nature of the universe and experiencing life leads to wisdom.

Justice: Do not harm and people will not harm you. This is simply an agreement. Breaking this rule will bring the fear of being caught which will inhibit pleasure via having to create and manage lies. Same with following the laws. There is no absolute justice

Courage:

Sometimes risks need to be taken to avoid a larger pain or to obtain continuous pleasure. To do this, fears need to be overcome.

Gods and spirituality

I don't believe gods are real but I can still sometimes experience gods or whatever by making myself sensitive to what is happening inside me via e.g. meditation, fasting and/or sensory deprivation. My brain makes errors and I can sometimes (rarely nowadays) feel a presence. I take an attitude that this presence is friendly and thus, it is friendly (much in the same way how I can skillfully influence my dreams by imagining the intent of the entity in the dream or the events). It is a nice experience and yet doesn't seem to have any harmful effects when I get out of the state compared to e.g. sex or videogames which leave me more numb than I was before indulging. In fact, I find myself refreshed. It is a sort of pretending play which I find highly pleasurable. I'd rather not be hostile to gods in attitude and don't pooh pooh all religious/spiritual practices, and instead try to learn the pleasure in them. Spiritual practice is valuable to the very least in regenerating one's ability to feel and be aware of pleasure and positive emotions (via e.g. upregulation of neurotransmitter receptors).

Security

Greatest security is acquired by staying away from the awareness of the multitude and from a quiet life surrounded by good friends.

I could write more but this seems a good enough start. Comments, criticisms and questions are welcome.