

Critique of the Control Dichotomy as a Useful Strategy

Post by "Matteng" of February 20, 2026 at 5:42 PM

I try to deconstruct it a little bit, point for point, my statements come after "=>":

Quote

Th 1) Everyone wants happiness.
Th 2) If you want happiness, it would be irrational to accept incomplete or imperfect happiness if you could get complete [continual, uninterrupted] happiness.
2*) Complete happiness is possible. [To be proven below.]

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=> 1) Compatible with Epicurean Philosophy
2) questionable

Quote

Section Two: Negative Happiness
Th 3) All human unhappiness is caused by having a desire or emotional commitment [I will henceforth say "desire" for simplicity] to some outcome, and then that outcome does not result.

=> 3) Yes ok, but Pain Signals are important Information for life/Health/self preservation

Quote

4) Ergo, if you desire something which is out of your control, you will be subject to possible unhappiness. If you desire many things out of your control, the possibility of complete happiness approaches zero.
5) By 4, 2*, and Th2, desiring things out of your control is irrational [if it is possible to control your desires].

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=> 4,5) No, because life/Degree of Health is the foundation of happiness and are not completely in our Control. That's the reason Epicurus differs between desires

Quote

Th 6) The only things in our control are our beliefs and will, and anything entailed by our beliefs and will.

Th 7) Desires are caused by beliefs (judgments) about good and evil. [You desire what you judge to be good, and desire to avoid what you judge to be evil.]



Ergo, Desires are in our control.

9) By 5 and 8, desiring things out of our control is irrational.

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=> 7) Incomplete: not only by our beliefs but also desires are caused by our bodily and psychological Needs and self-preservation. They are not arbitrary.

So belief/will are in our control and we should only desire them ? But what are they About ? Without Content they are empty and Nothing.

Quote

Th 10) The only thing actually good is virtue, the only thing actually evil is vice.

11) Ergo, since virtue and vice are types of acts of will, they are in our control.

12) Ergo, things that are not in our control [externals] are never good or evil.

13) [cf 9, above] Desiring things out of our control is irrational, since it involves false judgment.

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=> 10,11) just a Claim why is virtue good when not for its possible Outcomes ? Vice is in our Control so it would be rational to desire Vice ?

Quote

14) Ergo, if we value only virtue, we will both judge truly and be immune to all unhappiness.

=> 14) Virtue without Content and positive Outcome is empty and a phantasy. Believing in a positive phantasy can bring some Pleasure but it is short and in the consequence when desiring no positive Outcomes, no happiness will come but suffering.

Quote

Section Three: Positive Happiness or Appropriate Positive Feelings

15) Ergo, if we truly judge that virtue is good, we will desire it.

Th 16) If you desire something, and achieve it, you will get a positive feeling.

17) Ergo, if we correctly judge and correctly will, we will have appropriate positive feelings as a result.

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=> 15,16,17) Yes but is Virtue in the Stoic Theory really achievable ? It is very rare and means complete perfection in judging everything.

So it could be that it is an unreachable desire, in Epicurean teaching: An Empty / Unnatural desire.

Also this means that you have as a Stoic your whole life no positive Feelings until you are a perfect Sage and all your positive Feelings are doubtful and enjoying them must be seen als irrational. An instruction for unhappiness / depression in my view...

Quote

Th 18) Some positive feelings do not result from desires, and hence do not result from judgments about value. [E.g., the taste of a good meal, the sight of a beautiful sunset, etc.]

19) Ergo, such positive feelings are not irrational or inappropriate. [Though if we desire to achieve them or desire for them to continue beyond the present, then that would involve the judgment that they are good, and hence that would be irrational.]

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=> 18,19,20) For life/Health and so for happiness it is rational to desire them when they Benefit.

Quote

Th 20) The universe is, or is governed by, Nature, Providence, God or the gods. [Different Stoics approach this idea differently.]

Th 21) That which is Natural, or is governed by Providence, God, or the gods is exactly as it should be. [Zeus is just, or however you wish to express this.] {Nota bene that this produces a problem for those stoics who are strict determinists, since it would mean that even acts of vice were somehow correct, and are not actually in our control in any important sense. But I don't think strict determinism about internal states is a core belief of Stoicism.}

Th 22) If you regard any aspect [or, better, all aspects] of the world as being exactly as it should be, you will receive appropriate positive feelings.

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=> 20-22) Stoic Physics. It is inhuman/unnatural to judge harmful Things positive. Accepting necessities is rational but also to learn from them and be motivated to do Things better or protect from bad Things if possible or to Change Things.

Quote

23) Ergo, the Stoic will be positively happy, will have positive feelings, in at least three ways: appreciation of his own virtue, physical and sensory pleasures, and the appreciation of the world as it is. The last of those three is something that the Stoic could experience continually, every waking second, since at every waking second one can perceive something as being what it is, and hence what it should be.

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=> 23) Ignoring harmful Things can have bad consequences in the Long run and reduces Motivation to Change for better or to value relationships/Things more. Emotions form Values and reminds us how fast we can lose People/Things.

Quote

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4890-critique-of-the-control-dichotomy-as-a-useful-strategy/?postID=38819#post38819>

Section Four: Virtue

Th 24) In order to perform an act of will, the act of will must have some content. The content is composed of the result at which one aims.

Th 25) Some things are appropriate objects at which to aim, although they are not genuinely good.

Th 26) Some such objects are things like life [our own, or others'], health, pleasure, knowledge, justice, truth-telling, etc.

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=> 24-26 Is there an difference between desiring and aiming ? Is there aiming without wanting ? Value consists in Feeling the evolutionary psychologists say. So it is an Illusion to think we can value/aim on Things without Feeling/desire. Here reason/logic tries to get rid of (human) Nature. Why not end the desire for the external "Life" than you are never "unhappy" but you will die

Quote

Th 27) Virtue consists of rational acts of will, vice of irrational acts of will.

=> 27) ah.. but vice and irrational Acts of will are in our Control so shouldn't we desire them ? The logic is not consequent here.

Quote

28) Ergo, any act that aims at an [external] object of desire is not virtuous, since all desires [for externals] are irrational.

29) Ergo, virtue consists of the pursuit of appropriate objects of aim, not the pursuit of the [external] objects of our desires. Such virtuous acts will give us good feelings [by 17], and since we have no desires regarding the actual outcome, they will never produce unhappiness for us.

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=> 28-end) So the Stoic Sage has good Feelings about pursuing (without desire) on rational aims but not on the Content of the aims....

So they are just happy About their thoughts and Need Nothing else but their own inner mind and everything outside of the mind they rationally choose but don't want....

So in Terms of Epicurus desires: They deny the natural/necessary desire for Health and Life but pursue only the desire for Eudaimonia the happy life.

I think there are extreme situations in which Epicureans come the same conclusions for example when choosing to die for family/friend.
But in general I think Life/Health and choosing the risks of pain from missed Outcomes from Externals must be taken for Eudaimonia.