

Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 9:50 PM

Julia's mind-blowing realisation of what should probably have been obvious to her all along

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[...] in the fundamental abstract that the first question is always as stated in "[VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

The key of [VS71](#) is in the grammar more than the words: "is accomplished", not "is *being* accomplished"! [VS71](#) places my point of view *after* (the completion of) the action, not *during* (the process of) the action. I already vaguely had this perspective in [item #4 of this post](#), but that was almost by chance, without much explicit cognitive awareness. Here's why this distinction matters so much to me:

In my mind, these four items are (almost) entirely separate: 1. desire, 2. emotion, 3. pleasure/pain, and 4. avoidance/inclination. Pleasure/pain are two sides of the same coin, one starts where the other ends. Similarly for avoidance/inclination. (Willpower is a distinct and more complicated thing, which I think doesn't actually matter that much here.) Either way, in my mind, these four concepts/entities/... are *not* structured in any way that would cause me to lead a happy, or at least logical, or even safe life at all without considerable navigation and active steering.

My desires are mostly sensible, but they don't carry any drive by themselves. Only when I visualise *having attained* them, only when I make vivid the future sensation of pleasure of *having made real* what I desire, does the drive materialise to direct my willpower outward and toward the pursuit of my desires. Otherwise, either nonsensical emotions continue to make me behave in dysfunctional ways (just because these emotions were once upon a time sensible as they lead to behaviour which then was adaptive) or I display no behaviour at all (such as staring at the ceiling all day long, because the action happens inwardly, inside of me).

I feel negative emotions before/during many pleasurable actions, and positive emotions before/during painful actions. Other times, I strongly avoid things which I want to do, or pursue with fortitude that which I do not want to do. Many things inside of me are rather upside-down and inside-out. For example, being talked to while I brush my teeth frightens me. (I doubt I was born that way, and I'm *not* recommending this; it just is how I am now.) I can, however, still

analyse things *cognitively* according to whether they will bring me pleasure *upon completion*.
Cognitively – upon completion:

It is *much* easier to correctly predict (cognitively, by thinking ahead) pleasure/pain about a result, than it is to correct my contorted feelings about an action and its result (emotionally, the feeling-ahead), let alone to correct the emotions during the action (the feeling-now).

For example, even when eating disgusts me, I still like having eaten. When I jump ahead cognitively and live in the conclusion, I can begin eating with reasonable ease and won't get too perturbed by the process, either. Once reality catches up with where I was all along – in the result, after it is done – things are just fine. This means I can do something which I otherwise avoid, because I have cognitively predicted that the result of *having done* it will bring me pleasure *and* mentally stayed in the space of that prediction – if I were to think about *the process of doing* it, my aversion would kick in and keep me away, even if it is good for me, even if I desire it, even if I want to, even though I have considerable willpower. If I derive everything in this way, I can create a life which is capable of making me happy – but it doesn't come natural to me at all. It does – at least in the initial phase I'm still in – even cause many unpleasant emotions, which only slowly begin to subside as the first results-of-action start to trickle in, the unpleasant emotions during the actions that lead to these results begin to fade, and further yet, the first emotional expectations (rather than cognitive predictions) of pleasures-of-results begin to form, still faint and vague, but increasingly present all the same.

Emotions, desires/aversions, and avoidance/inclination are learned, whereas pleasure/pain is not, and it turns out the pleasure/pain I feel about results-of-actions never actually changed; it was merely buried. Artificially twisted consequences-to-results lead to emotions associated with action and emotions associated with consequences-to-results, but *not* to emotions associated with the results-as-such: e.g., doing xyz scares me, the result of xyz would be pleasurable, but the thought of it also brings fear of the consequence, such as shame. The being-scared and fear-of-shame are learned. The scaredness is attached to the action, which offers a lot of sensory anchors for emotional memory, and it is independent of a 3rd party; that's pretty hard to unlearn, because sensations remain largely the same whenever xyz is repeated. The shame is associated with a 3rd party, thus fear-of-shame is (comparatively) easy to unlearn once the source-of-twisted-consequences is gone, as there is little sensory attachment with the result or the action leading to it, rather than with particular (past) circumstances and people.

Curiously, while I am breaking the rules and mental chains of my previous life, I imagine the same basic structure at work in some premeditated crimes: e.g., robbing a bank is scary, having the money would be pleasurable, but the thought of the consequences is a deterrent. Only by focusing on the result *and* staying focussed on it can the emotions about/during the process and its potential consequences be overcome. Upon release from prison, being haunted by what happened during the supposed-peaceful-heist-gone-wrong and the experience gained by having done time* will amplify the deterrent. However, crucially, the predicted pleasure of suddenly having lots of money remains just the same.

This is why I know to do anything to begin with, and what to do when I do something: because “what [I will feel] if the object of my desire is accomplished” is either pleasure or pain, and unlike any emotion or value-judgement, this compass and guide has not been corrupted!

* (Just to clarify: According to statistics, locking people up and throwing away the key doesn't make them better members of society, but giving people ample time to work on themselves and offering them plenty of assistance with and opportunities in which to do so, including behind bars, sometimes helps some to be somewhat better.)

Things which (in comparison) seem minor to me now, and which we seem to agree on anyway 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think Epicurus would say that the practical implications of political issues as they affect individuals cannot be ignored, and I would personally encourage everyone to firmly maintain awareness of world affairs that could impact them, and adjust their lives accordingly.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The time spent on feeling bad about suffering is just subtracted from your life never to come again. [...]

[VS10](#). Remember that you are mortal, and have a limited time to live, [...]

[...] Some things can't be changed, but there's usually something that can be done to improve almost any situation.

I concur; however, I tend to get hung up on politics, which makes it important for me to stay out of its day-to-day affairs and focus on overall developments only. For example, there's no point in me fretting over the countless instances of misconduct of politicians, parties and press, no matter how grievous, while a war is being brewed up all over the continent.

More generally speaking, I think it is very easy to get lost in ultimately pointless things nowadays, because today information is practically endless. I need to be very careful about delineating being "comprehensively informed" (painful, paralysing, ...) versus being "sufficiently informed" (often also painful *by itself*, but necessary to ensure pleasure long-term). For example, it isn't necessary to buy the absolute best value-for-money speaker (comprehensive information required), if all I want is to sing along in the shower (sufficient information is enough).

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3990-epicurean-versus-deceptive-modern-stoic-decision-making/?postID=31724#post31724>

[...] which is helpful for dealing with frustration [...]

It's a good chart, but neither frustration, anxiety nor tension were the issue.