

Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 11:32 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

To my understanding, desire can be considered something that motivates me. The object of one's desire is, for example, a new car or true love. Or, in my current case, dinner. What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished is, ultimately, pleasure or pain.

To you and quite possibly to most people, this might be splitting hairs, but to me [it makes all the difference](#) that it is *not* the desired object-or-event itself which motivates me. What motivates me, is *the pleasure of having accomplished* my desire. For example, the knowledge that I desire a new car and true love does *not* motivate me one bit. What motivates me – and indeed the only thing about that which motivates me! – is the pleasure I can predict to experience once I *have attained* a new car or true love.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Desire is the motivator, pleasure/pain is the result. The only qualification is that some desires might be considered pains. But they are still a motivator in that they make you want to do something. The way that you choose to eliminate that pain can lead to either pleasure or to more pain, so it's helpful to think what categories of desire might be involved as you choose/avoid how to eliminate that pain in order to obtain the resultant pleasure.

Desire is *not* the motivator, according to [VS71](#) desire is the thing to be evaluated (“Every desire must be confronted by this question: [...]”). Pleasure – if it is predicted to arise from attaining the desired object-or-event – should be the motivator (pleasure is the guide to life – not desire!). In my understanding of language, a desire which was determined to lead to pain ceases to be a desire, and will henceforth be, variously, an addiction, a compulsion, a confusion, an obsession, an urge, ...

Classic example for a less-motivating versus more-motivating desire:

- a) “I want to lose some extra pounds, so that I can be a little healthier / fit into old jeans /”
- b) “I want to lose some extra pounds, so that I can have a wild summer affair / date with confidence /”

Both sentences are logically valid (internally consistent), but (b) is typically considered to be more motivating than (a), because it emphasises what is presumed to be a pleasure. The action

remains the same, but with the change in objective the predicted reward in pleasure changes.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

At least for me, willpower is another subject.

I concur. Willpower has oddly little to do with desire/aversion, avoidance/inclination, pleasure/pain. Neurologically, there are two parallel-but-opposite dopamine-powered circuits in the basal ganglia: One which starts with and persists in an action, and one which stops with and desists from an action. The action itself is largely irrelevant, the circuit is generic. (Whether you suppress an urge say "I will not check my messages again!" or whether it is "No, I'll not eat another piece of candy!", the circuit is the same, and the strength it has gained from controlling one impulse carries over to other impulses; analogous with the start/persist.) When we are children, our parents (hopefully) give us sane rules and structure, and "learning to behave" mostly equals suppressing impulses. That builds willpower, because it is unpleasant - and pleasant actions are self-reinforcing anyway: Children rarely need to be lectured about the importance of eating all their candy.

As adults, many people have internalised "how to behave" to such a degree that any impulse to misbehave is more or less dead anyway. (What that implies is a whole new post...) What is more, many people start to design their life such that they no longer have to use their stop/desist muscles, which leads the neural circuitry to eventually weaken (synaptic long-term depression). This is why some people, as kids, could sit still and quiet in the back of their family's van for hours, but fail to stay away from that cheap chocolate bar marketing-strategically placed at the cash register for impulse buyers...

Willpower is a vague expression, but if I had to define it, I'd identify it with start/persist-&-stop/desist-ability (and that is different from fortitude, from delayed gratification, from motivation, from drive, from wanting, from tenacity, from resilience, from ...).