

# Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Julia” of August 12, 2024 at 6:44 AM

## [Quote from Martin](#)

Quote

..., he did not think it was important, and in fact was willing to radically redefine, that to which ordinary words are used to refer.

This is in contradiction to the quoted part of the letter to Herodotus:

Quote

For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, ...

This means that typically, we should use words the way they are usually meant. Epicurus himself made exceptions from this and then usually gave an explanation why a word would be used with a different meaning than commonly (mis)understood.

I very much agree! 👍

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

I think it is clear from the texts for example that he used "gods," and "pleasure," and even "virtue" in ways radically different than common usage, and so he was not willing to accept terminology that is used in everyday speech.

What strikes me as important is: "gods" and "virtues" are abstract concepts of things which exist neither in the external world, nor in the internal experience of humans *by nature*. Toddlers don't know of gods or virtues. So redefining gods and virtue is like redefining justice and good behaviour. Epicurus certainly didn't "behave well" when he invited women, even women of low social status, to join his garden and be heard. He did that, because he thought it was unjust they were excluded. "Justice" does not mean the same thing around the world, it might not even mean the same thing for you and me. Saying "justice" is like saying "a picture of a tree" – the tree which we see will differ (fruit vs pine; civic law vs religious law) and the technique with which it is made will differ (oil vs mosaic; capital punishment vs forensic psychiatry). Yet, all of those are equally "pictures of trees", equally "justice". You see where I'm going with that?

Desire is *not* an abstract concept; it is as real as our emotions are – we cannot touch them, others cannot see them (not without modern scanners, like fMRI, anyway), but they're there, they're real, and we all have them. Crucially, we all have them and we also all have the same range of them: everyone gets sad, happy, angry, afraid. (There are rare psychological exceptions, but there are also humans with two heads, so let's stick to the 99% case here, please.) Like emotions, we all have desires and the internal experience of "I desire something" is known to all humans. Some desires may be overshadowed with shame or fear, not all desires exist in all humans, but we all have these two related but distinct internal experiences: 1. "I desire Xyz" and 2. "Xyz is desirable" just like we all have a) "I love abc" and b) "Abc is lovable"

The same holds true for pleasure: Epicurean pleasure is broad, it contains things which are fun but "bad behaviour" and continues to encompass things which are neither sexual nor sensual. ("Pleasure" has, in my experience, been increasingly sexualised, but that wasn't always the case, or else the idiomatic "My pleasure!", "Pleasure to meet you." would be a rather lewd expressions!)

So where Epicurus redefined words, he either did so to more truly reflect actual human experience (desire, pleasure) or they were abstract concepts which he simply disagreed with (gods, justice).

(Regarding the gods, things might seem clearer to us today if he had said "There are no gods at all, instead there are [new word] and they are like this and that" but that's a whole new rabbit whole, so suffice it to say that I'm sure he had his reasons given the importance of the subject.)

In my opinion, getting fancy with "desire"/"desirable" and "pleasure"/"pleasurable" would be like getting fancy with emotion-words, like "happiness", or, more precisely, with experience-words, like "joy". When first grasping the word, it matters to be precise about the inner experience it refers to (eg something fun-but-forbidden may cause joy and guilt, pleasure and pain; it matters to delineate that honestly, precisely, without getting hung up on morals).

Just like joy, desire simply denotes a certain human experience. Which is what Todd already said:

#### [Quote from Todd](#)

[...] A desire is a state of mind: [...]

Another example would be jealousy/envy/begrudgery: They are neighbours in the semantic vector space and colloquially confused for one another, but they are in fact clearly delineated and separate: jealousy is fear someone takes what you have, envy is wanting what someone else has, and begrudgery is not wanting someone to have what they have.

Likewise, desire & desirable, pleasure & pleasurable are semantic neighbours but do already all know what they are, just like we all know what joy, warmth, tiredness and sweet are. Because there are "**experiential atoms**", they are indivisible units of the human experience. I cannot

subdivide joy. I cannot subdivide desire. Unlike mixed emotions, unlike complex experiences, they are pure in the sense of one-thing-only.

This, and the fact that the majority of Epicurean philosophy wouldn't make any sense, is why I

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

This would be at the root of the controversy we continually have over whether Epicurus was attempting to "eradicate all desire" as Buddhists or Stoics would argue, or whether it was only particularly harmful desires (those that cannot possibly be attained or clearly can be expected to bring more pain than pleasure) to which he was advising caution.

I'm firm in that "eradicate all desire" was certainly not on the agenda of ancient Epicureans, and so...

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

But the real objective is clarity and for the purpose of happy living, and when that means rejecting the majority definition, seems to me he is advocating rejecting it.

...this is, to me, is in line with that we simply need to get to the core of human experience - eg, delineate pleasure and guilt if we did something fun-but-forbidden - but I feel like that has been accomplished in the way in which we use "desire" and "desirable": as fundamentals of human nature, as experiential atoms.

To me, this "experiential atomism" is what Epicurus uses himself and what (among other things) he refers to in his Letter To Herodotus.