

Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Julia” of August 12, 2024 at 8:47 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Julia I agree with the thrust of most of your post but as to this I am not completely clear on what you are saying: [...]

At the very least, as to pleasure, it seemed absolutely clear to Cicero, and I would say to Norman DeWitt and now to me also as the only logical way to read the texts, that Epicurus was in fact taking a very non-standard and radically different stance. He was redefining "pleasure" to include not only sensory stimulation but also all other experiences which are not painful, even if not normally considered by the majority of people to be included in pleasure. I see no other persuasive way to explain numerous statements by Torquatus, including his response to Chrysippus' "hand" argument.

I agree. What I meant by saying...

[Quote from Julia](#)

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).

...was that:

If we look inside of us, we will see that we feel "joy" when we hit the goal, master a formula, win a cup of ice cream, when our crush agrees to being our prom date, when we feel the soft warmth of a cat purring next to our ears. Those are mental, emotional, physical, social, ... joys - but they're all, equally, joy. Joy makes our faces light up, we stand tall, we get lightheartedly energetic; the specific type of joy doesn't change that, because joy is fundamental in the sense of atomic. Joy is one form of pleasure.

We feel relieve when we finally get to a rest room, when we can take a shower for the first time in a fortnight, when we are found not-guilty, when we found our misplaced wallet after all. Those are many different kinds of relief - but they're all, equally, relief. Relief makes us sigh,

makes tension drop from our minds and bodies, makes a heavyhearted energy flow out of us while it lifts a weight off our shoulders; the specific type of relief doesn't change that, because it is atomic. Relief is also a type of pleasure (though the pain we go through beforehand makes it not worth it, or else we would instinctively seek relief instead of joy).

Joy and relief are distinct fundamental ("atomic") building blocks of the human experience, and so is desire: While I could classify desires into various groups, *the experience of desire* I cannot subdivide any more than I can subdivide *the experience of joy*. Desire and joy are not built from smaller units; they're already atomic.

Unlike desire, pleasure and pain are umbrella terms (hypernyms). Pleasure and pain are *not* themselves atoms of experience *in adults*, but instead they are categories of experiences: Joy and relief are examples of pleasures, sadness and physical-pain are examples of pains. As such, I can easily subdivide a painful experience: If, in sports, I stumble, break my ankle and miss the shot, I will feel sadness and physical-pain; those two will be the atoms of my painful experience, and pain will merely be the adequate umbrella. Any mammal is born with the two categories of pleasure & pain, but (at least) humans only develop sufficient insight to differentiate the experiential atoms underneath later on. A newborn will know: "This is pleasurable", but it will not yet be able to see and name the elements this pleasure is made of (eg, lots of joy, moderate relief and a little bit of bitter-sweet melancholy). Vice versa analogous for pain.

So, despite pleasure and pain being umbrella terms (*not* atoms of experience), they *are* innate, which is rather unusual; as a matter of fact, I cannot come up with *any* other such instance. Children aren't born with an innate sense of the category of "tools" or "works of art" or anything, except for pleasure and pain. This is what makes pleasure & pain such odd fellas: they're innate, but not atomic (except in newborns).

"Getting fancy" with pleasure would be to artificially manipulate which items naturally fall under this umbrella: "Sex is only for procreation", "Food is only for sustenance", "Giving all your money to the church is fun" would be examples of trying to artificially modify the experiences which by nature are pleasurable. As such, Epicurus' redefinition of pleasure was rather only a *reinstatement* of its pure form, before all the manipulations of culture came to taint it; the way toddlers and piglets still perceive it. (Vice versa analogous for pain.) To me, this is what is in line with DeWitt:

Just because pleasure/pain might no longer be customarily applied to something due to various elements of society and culture having twisted and tainted how we verbalise these categories doesn't mean it is unclear, unjustified or unhelpful to right that wrong, and to adjust the structure of language to (again) match the structure of our minds.

There is a long history of societal forces manipulating language to control people; a process which was present 2500 years ago and still is going on. In the middle ages, instead of saying "war is peace" people said "sex is sin"; likewise, in ancient times, various distortions were commonplace. So another way to say Epicurus reinstated the pure form of the umbrella terms would be to say he undid a type of [newspeak](#).

With so much said about how I see pleasure & pain, allow me to circle back to desire:
Desire is easier, because it isn't just innate, it is also atomic – like joy.

The experience of desire is not made of smaller experiences, and so definitions like "passionate longing" or "sexual wanting" are necessarily false by being too narrow. I can desire something without having a passionate longing for it, but I cannot have a passionate longing for it without having a desire for it. Desire is the fundamental unit. Just like the experiential atom of joy, I can recognise various types of desires (social, mental, physical, ...) but *the experience of* desire still cannot be subdivided.

I don't have the scientific reference at hand just now, but: There was a study done where specific clusters in the human brain were stimulated from the outside (using strong magnets). The subjects then experienced various fundamental/atomic states, such as "conviction". When asked what it is they were so certain about, they didn't know. They said: "I'm just very certain!" This is an analogy to what I mean by saying that joy, relief and desire are fundamental/atomic.