

Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2024 at 1:46 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

pleasure & pain: not fundamental units of experience themselves, but innate categories of fundamental experiences. When undistorted by judgements of others (religion, society, ...) and undistorted by scarring life experience (eg "fear of joy" as is possible in PTSD), pleasure is the set of fundamental experiences which humans by nature find agreeable (joy, relief, ...) and pain is the set of fundamental experience which humans by nature find disagreeable (physical-pain, grief, ...). (Moving away from pain is called avoidance. Moving towards pleasure is called play.)

What I am focusing on as potentially objectionable - depending on how one reads this sentence, is that I think it would be inappropriate if a reader were to say that "pleasure" cannot refer to an individual experience, but it always used as a "category" term to abstractly stand for the whole "set" of experiences.

I am emphatically agreeing that the word "pleasure" *can* be used that way, and at times *is* used that way by Epicurus (for example in formulations such as "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain," but I am ALSO saying that the word "pleasure" can be used to refer to a single experience, e.g., "Eating peas today at lunch was a pleasure."

I am really focusing mainly on the "not fundamental units of experience themselves." So as to be more clear I would prefer to reword that as:

pleasure & pain: These terms can be used to describe BOTH fundamental units of experience themselves, AS WELL AS innate categories of fundamental experiences, depending on the context of the discussion.

And then I would reword the rest of the paragraph in a way consistent with that.

I feel sure I should be making the same comment as to desire, when I read this:

[Quote from Julia](#)

desire: a fundamental unit of experience (cannot be divided into smaller experiences; is not made up of smaller units); by being fundamental in this way, it is simultaneously

something we somehow just know (like "sweet taste", "feels warm") and yet very hard to define, to pin down with other words

But I confess I am losing track of some of the original detail of the thread as it started out. Maybe there is some reason that you are focusing on desire and pleasure as categories, and maybe you are putting the particular pleasures and the particular desires aside for some reason, but if so, I think that makes me want to emphasize the point of the podcast even more strongly.

These words - gods, good, pleasure, desire -- can be viewed equally correctly as either "concepts" standing for a particular class, or *individual particular examples* of experience within that particular class. Either viewpoint can be correct and useful and is valid, but it's essential to be clear as to whether you are talking about a class or a particular.

If you're NOT careful, then you run into this trouble that plagues Epicurean philosophy today: "Absence of pain" can be confused as referring to a particular experience that nobody can adequately define outside of a particular context, and thus a great source of confusion, rather than being seen as a definition of the "limit of quantity of pleasure" in which context it is a very useful and helpful definition.

Same with desire: If you view desires solely as a "group," and imply all desires should be minimized or eliminated, then you are on the straight path to Stoicism or Buddhism or worse. But if you take the common sense approach that desire is also a term that can be used to refer to many individual experiences, some of which are very healthful and beneficial and some of which are more like a disease and damaging, then you'll be able to productively realize that many desires are to be encouraged and pursued, while many others are to be suppressed.