ACT - a bridge which translates Epicurean philosophy into life goals (thread started by Julia)

Post by “Julia” of September 8, 2024 at 9:12 AM

A psychotherapy answer compatible with Epicurean philosophy

In think Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) – unlike most therapies – is fully compatible with Epicurean philosophy, especially regarding its attitude, and I think it is very helpful in solving the problem you've described here. It is also *not* a therapy which inherently requires a group or a therapist, which makes it accessible to anyone, at any time – much like having a philosophy 🙂

I understand psychotherapy as consisting of: exercises, models, approaches, attitudes, and therapies. Exercises are practical hands-on (social/physical/cognitive/emotional) tasks aimed at improving a skill (eg the skill of perceiving emotions before they become overwhelming). Models are maps, schematic assumptions of how the mind is built/works (eg the dialogical self). Approaches are a combination of a model and exercises to reach a goal (analogous to climbing routes). Attitude is the "philosophy" (colloquial sense of the word) underlying the therapy. A therapy is a combination of attitude, approach, model and exercises (similar to a style in traditional martial arts).

Summary:

1. ACT posits that suppressing thoughts and feelings is futile and counter-productive. ("Please try not to think about pink elephants for two minutes", "Just calm down!" – these things don't work.)
2. In practicing «defusion» the "I" is separated from thoughts and feelings: "I should have bought oranges." → "I notice the thought that I should have bought oranges." → The self is once-removed from the thought; the self is no longer identical to the thoughts and feelings, it became their observer. I am not my thoughts and feelings, I am *the context of* my thoughts and feelings. (Many other words exist for «defusion»; this is simply the ACT jargon for it.)
3. Next, thoughts and feelings are accepted: like feedback from our friends can sometimes be hard to hear, our own thoughts and feelings can be hard to accept, too. Because the self is a separate thing, it can fall into the trap of rejecting the arising thoughts and feelings; however, because it is separate, it can also accept them without agreeing with them – same as feedback from our friends. This allows me to hold both: "I notice the thought that I should have bought oranges, and I sense the sadness about not having any now. I appreciate being made aware of this thought and feeling, I agree it is valid on its own, but I continue to uphold my choice for prudent budget reasons."

4. This ability of holding both leads to two more traps: 1. rejecting reality ("I drink ten bottles each day but because I have a job and only drink with friends it is not a problem"), 2. rejecting/neglecting one's values
5. Values in ACT are understood as qualities of goals, but they are *not* virtues. Goals are specific tasks. Metaphor/Analogy: "Fly to Seattle" is a goal in support of the value to "Go West". When I've reached Seattle, my goal will be fulfilled, but the value will continue to exist – next stop: Honolulu! So the value of "Fitness" can be achieved by continually setting the goal to eat healthy and move my body. There are countless values, for example Love, Romance, Intimacy, Sexuality: This illustrates how fine-grained the values are. (Another value is Pleasure: ACT-Pleasure is defined as "give pleasure to oneself or others", which is more immediate/Cyrenaic than the Epicurean Guide-To-Life-Pleasure, which prudently considers Choice & Avoidance as part of Hedonic Calculus.)
6. Values are primary (true value) or secondary (false value): Each value which has another underlying value is a false value. For example, my value to Go West is only a false value, because it has an underlying value of Freedom. When I recognise this, I can conclude that I do should not Go West forever: I might end up in North Korea (which is further west, but less free). A true values is found when only Epicurean Pleasure can be named as its underlying motivation.
7. Whenever I act against my true values, that causes pain. I don't like pain, and since I myself am not my feelings (#2 above) and I can hold both (#3), I can fall into the trap of mental gymnastics (#4): I can rationalise my actions ("It had to be done!"), finding excuses ("Other people do that, too!"), minimise ("I don't do it often!"), and bargaining with myself ("There are many times I didn't do that!"). All of these mental gymnastics serve one purpose: To not have to accept and agree with the feeling and felt sense of having messed up. The thoughts and feelings which imply "I just betrayed my true values" are kept at a distance from the I, from my Self.
8. This psychological defence (#7) is a *very* slippery slope. For example, Power is a value in ACT. However, power is an unnatural desire. If I pursue power, I will soon need a lot of mental gymnastics, because I will have to act against my values of humility, honest, friendliness, trustworthiness, ... The longer I do this, the harder it will be to stop, because psychological defences are habit-forming and it is much harder to admit "I did wrong for ten years" than to accept "I made a mistake this once."
9. Now that the Acceptance is covered, it is time for Commitment: Once I have determined and prioritised my true values, it is time to commit to them. Counterexample: Power *is* a (false) value of mine, I *accept* that, *but also* I know it is an unnatural desire and it would undermine most of my other values, thus it only gets such a low priority as to be invisible in actual practice. Example: Responsibility/Accountability is a true value of mine. I know that making excuses doesn't get me anywhere, I don't like unreliable/flaky people, and I don't want to be one of them! So I commit to that value.
10. After committing to my true values, I select and plan specific goals which will bring their qualities into my life. (In ACT, goals which take a lifetime to achieve are called missions.) Because my plans serve my goals, my goals serve my values and my values serve Epicurean pleasure, I have no reason to diverge, and whenever I am tempted to diverge

from my *plans*, I remember how painful it is to act against my *values*. The memory of that pain spoils the temptation, and the (greater) pleasure I get in following through with my plan is my reward. Every once in a while, one's values and the goals planned because of them should be reviewed – however, this should be done consciously, and not as an excuse to give in to unwise pleasures (#7, #8).

High-level (Epicurean): The ultimate goal of my nature is pleasure. It is what happiness is made of. I pursue pleasure through Choice and Avoidance guided by the virtues. Mid-level (ACT): Under the Epicurean umbrella, my commitment to my true values allows me to deduce my goals (and possibly a mission). Low-level (eclectic self-management): Under the ACT umbrella, I organise my smart-compliant goals according to an Eisenhower matrix – and once all this preparation is done, all that's left is to just do it. (A new book is published about this low-level category every day, but the truth is that almost always do I already know what to do and how to do it – and if I don't know how, I know who to ask or what to learn – and if I wouldn't know what to do, a fancy new way of writing my to-do lists wouldn't change that.) The mid-level is the glue, the bridge that connects philosophy to everyday life and vice versa.

This is a spontaneous summary of how I perceive ACT to relate to this thread, and while I'm certainly not an ACT expert, but I am quite an expert at being lost in life 🙂 so when I suggest having a look at Acceptance & Commitment Therapy, I do that because its attitude, approach, model, and exercises were very helpful to me, because reading the thoughts behind it and doing the exercises can be done on one's own, and also because I think it is a recipe which favourably complements our Epicurean main course.