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

Post by “Julia” of September 8, 2024 at 8:19 PM

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> I spent some time studying a system of self-help and mediation called Nonviolent Communication

I'm familiar with NVC, but I see it as more of a communication style, a technique; it can be used as part of pretty much anything, especially couples therapy and mediation. However, I don't see how it would help in "Clarifying Your Philosophical Goal Through Your Individual Definition of Pleasure", which is specifically what I sat down to write my post for.

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> I found this method called WOOP

I've had never heard of "WOOP" before, but the website you linked to says it equals Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions (MCII). MCII is not a therapy; it is an exercise / technique / specific task. As such, MCII is implicitly a part of what I tried to outline above. On its own, however, I don't think it would be sufficient for glueing the high (abstract) level of Epicurean philosophy well to the low (concrete) level of self-management, because it stays very close to the latter.

ACT is much broader than this. To quote one of the original ACT books: "If theory is necessary, is philosophy also? It is. […] This book is based on a particular philosophy and a set of theoretical concepts that differ notably from those within the psychological mainstream. If the core philosophies of ACT are understood, many techniques can be added to it and it will still be ACT. ACT is an approach, based on a theory and set firmly within a philosophical tradition. It is to that tradition that we now turn." (Quotation source: Part 1, Chapter 2 of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change, by Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) It has begun 40ish years ago, has garnered large research interest, is widely used clinically all over the world, and as a self-help tool is endorsed and offered by world-class universities for struggling students as well as by WHO for refugees. So it's kind of a thing.

> Quote from Kalosyni

> Here I mean "goal" in a philosophical sense, not in getting a good career or marriage and family (these could be thought of as a means but not an end). The goal we hold in our mind becomes a kind of "canon" for how we make decisions.

I think of that goal-in-the-philosophical-sense as my values-in-the-ACT-sense. It was not my intention to argue for or against the compatibility of one or another therapy or self-help guide with Epicurean philosophy (but of course I would not suggest one which I consider incompatible). For me, ACT is the bridge which translates Epicurean philosophy into life goals and actionable plans (which will make me happy), and this is what I understood your other post (linked above) to be about – maybe I misunderstood?

> Quote from Cassius
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> Julia I see that ACT is compared to Cognitive Behavior Therapy (perhaps as a self-help version of it?)

CBT is a class of therapies which developed in waves. I suppose ACT *can* be put in that box, but if I had to write a classification of therapies, I probably wouldn't place it there; among other reasons, because it does *not* share this "basic norm":

> Quote from Cassius
>
> "The basic norm of cognitive therapy is this: except for how the patient thinks, everything is ok"

> Quote from Cassius
>
> (perhaps as a self-help version of it?)

It is not primarily designed as a self-help tool, but it can be used as such with reasonable ease, and some off-the-shelf variants exist for that purpose.

> Quote from Cassius
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> Would ACT be subject to similar criticisms of determinism or lack of identification of the proper goal?

I would reject both of these claims.

To reject determinism, I combed through the same book I already quoted above (because it has the distinction of being the first one published in a little series by the group which made ACT really gel together, and also because it has a focus on theory, laying out what I called attitude and approach): "Most clients have little appreciation for how random social conditioning actually is. Instead of approaching the issue from the perspective of random and accidental learning, the client may […]" → By seeing learning as random and accidental, determinism is implicitly rejected. Furthermore, they quote research showing that humans can be trained in producing statistically random sequences – which isn't quite compatible with determinism, is it? And finally, "free choice" is a common theme in ACT, and while the authors acknowledge that behaviour is not, in fact, *entirely* free, they also do not argue for determinism: "That does not mean [the behaviour] is random or literally free. From a scientific perspective, such contingency-shaped behavior occurs because of certain historical conditions, and thus choices are sensible, coherent, and historical. […] From the point of view of the client, the closest we can get to peaking about such situations honestly is that choices are “free.”"

I am confident to reject the "lack of identification of a proper goal", because there are various passages which stress actual experiences (as opposed to numbness/nirvana or living-in-your-head) alongside a focus on "happiness" and an absence of "pain". To me, this is quite close to Epicurean philosophy (and I perceive it as close to that in other ways, too). What is more, they are well-aware that normal/average ways of thinking are far from ideal, and the entire dance is not about making the client normal but about making them well; what is well isn't arbitrarily magicked out of thin air, but is carefully reasoned about and is, by now, tried and tested in practice for decades; to quote: "Happiness for a dog or a cat is straightforward. If pets are given shelter, food and drink, warmth, stimulation, play, and physical health they are contented. […] But many humans have all the things a nonverbal organism would need to be happy, and yet they are not. […] Literally nothing external that you can name […] [is] enough to ensure that a human will not suffer terribly. […] [And despite all evidence to the contrary, in mental health] there is the assumption of healthy normality."