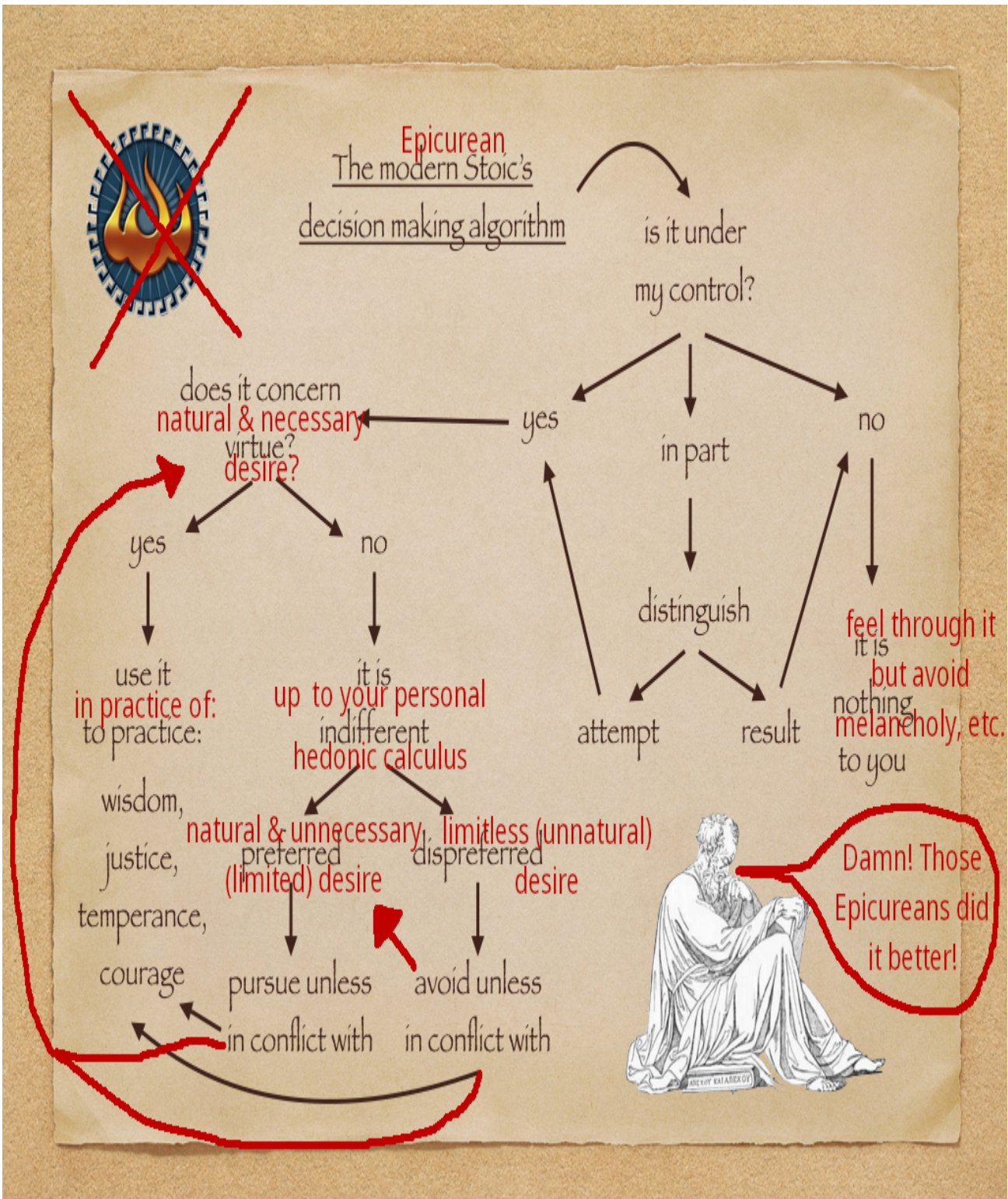


Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 7:05 AM

Before I came across Epicurean philosophy, I found this flow chart [online](#). Sometimes, when I'm confused, I now find myself circling back to a similar basic structure of thought, albeit with the contents rather different, so I took it upon myself to professionally and artfully 😊 tweak the original chart to match my current thinking. Feedback and comments welcome 😊



Post by "Cassius" of August 10, 2024 at 9:18 AM

I want to think further but my first reaction is that your modification definitely improves an otherwise questionable analysis.

What I want to think further about is whether it makes sense to elevate the "is it in my control?" to a first level division, and I am not sure that the natural and necessary deserves that either.

If the topic of the chart is "basic method of thinking" then I suspect the tree needs to be pulled up from its roots and reoriented toward keeping in the central focus the only criteria nature gives us to decide among what to choose and to avoid.

After that, There are likely many other questions to ask and considerations besides whether something is in your control and whether it is "natural" or "necessary"

I agree fleshing out charts is a very useful exercise.

Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 10:43 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What I want to think further about is whether it makes sense to elevate the "is it in my control?" to a first level division

True, and very good point. If one is powerless but enjoys thinking about something – maybe the outcome of match of one's favourite sports team – then there would be nothing wrong with that. For me – by chance – it happens to be that everything I do in fact think about but cannot change are things which make me very unhappy (primarily contemporary politics).

So, more correctly, the first question should be: "Does it cause pleasure?"

If it does bring pleasure, it should be analysed further (left half of chart).

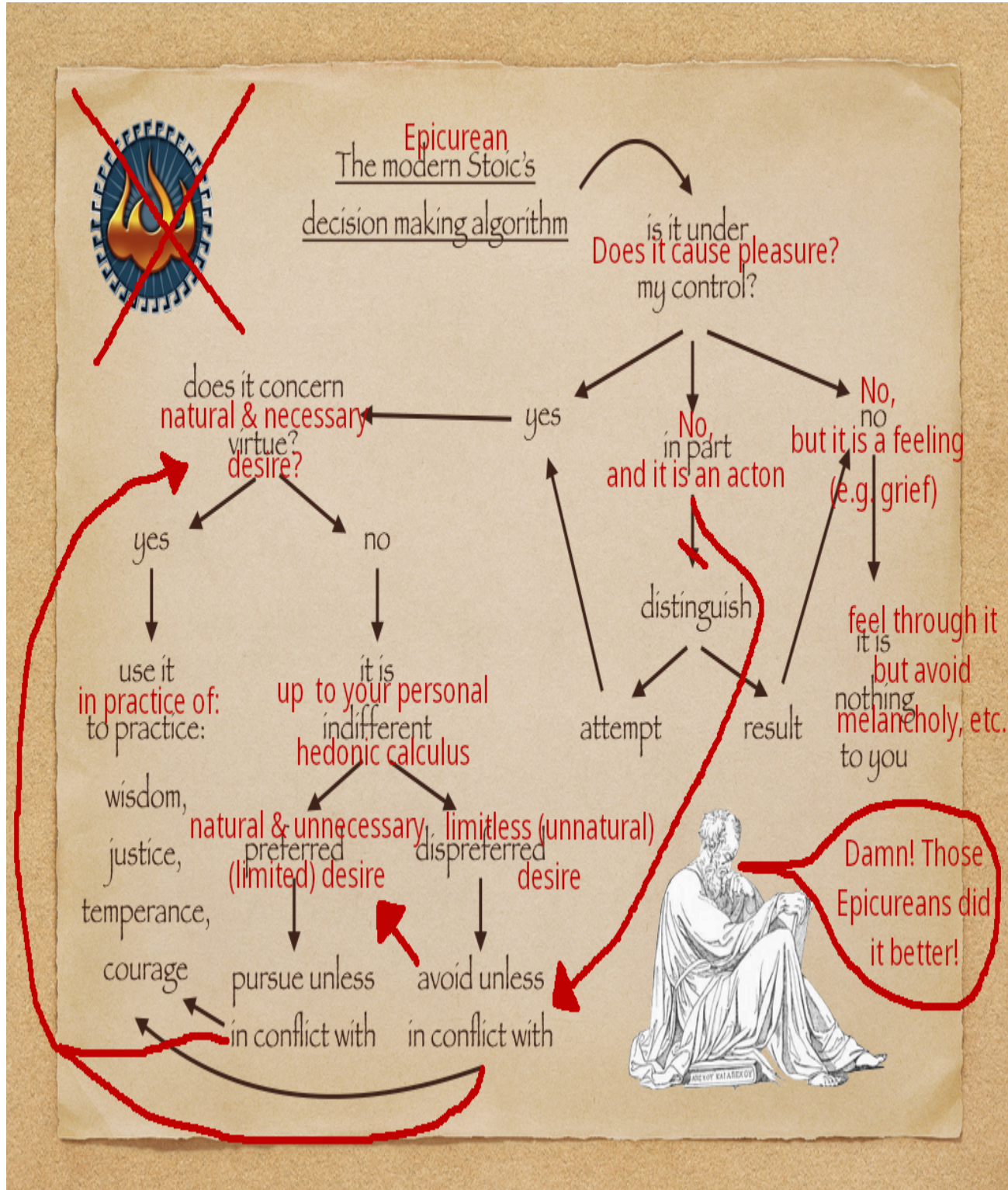
If it does not bring pleasure, it should be avoided unless it is a feeling, in which case it should be allowed without getting lost in it (“feel through it but avoid melancholy, etc”, because suppressing feelings only causes problems down the road). This basically awards and exemption to unpleasant, but natural & necessary emotions (e.g. grief, loss). Technically, *with sufficient foresight*, they could be handled by the left-hand side of the chart -- but it might be valuable to grant them a special category like this, because they're usually overwhelming and have a tendency to shut down rational thought. For example, if I were given the option, I (or certainly a younger me) would probably decide that my grief is limitless (unnatural) anyway and thus to be avoided (equal parts naive to or wilfully ignorant of the fact that this will cause

psychological baggage for the rest of my life), rather than allow myself to feel it, to work through the emotion (and thus trade unpleasantness now for more of a spring in my step later).

Thank you, Cassius! 🙌 I feel a lot better about this revision!

Revised

version:



Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2024 at 11:20 AM

There are many different ways of looking at things and therefore lots of charts, but I am tempted to say in the fundamental abstract that the first question is always as stated in "[VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

In my own mind I have a very hard time separating "desire" from "pleasure and pain" and "choice and avoidance" or even "willpower," and that's a major reason I have a problem separating out "desire" as if it is some fundamental of human nature apart from everything else. I think they are all a part of a bigger picture and acting as if there is a "desire" part of your brain that acts totally on its own is going to lead to lots of problems. Apart from the fundamental bodily needs it seems to me that what one desires is a complicated sum of all sorts of other influences and thoughts up to that moment of life, and all of those components have to be considered in how one's "desires" or "emotions" came into existence.

[Quote from Julia](#)

True, and very good point. If one is powerless but enjoys thinking about something – maybe the outcome of match of one's favourite sports team – then there would be nothing wrong with that

[Quote from Julia](#)

For me – by chance – it happens to be that everything I do in fact think about but cannot change are things which make me very unhappy (primarily contemporary politics).

The example of sports I think works very well. As a spectator you can't change the results of the game, and yet your observation of it certainly brings lots of pain or pleasure to some people. I am not a big sports fan myself (and don't remember that I ever was) but there can be lots of real benefits from being a "fan" of a particular team or sport, and I wouldn't think Epicurus would disapprove of it just because you have no influence over a particular game.

As to contemporary politics I agree that this is a topic of major concern. Our rule against discussing it on the forum is for the sake of the greater goal of pursuing the work of "Team Epicurus," and "Epicurus" doesn't have a stake in any political position other than as it directly affects Team Epicurus. Some political issues have to be dealt with even under the rules, and so

there are considerations on such issues as "censorship" and "free speech" where we already have to calibrate how best to proceed.

Here too I think Epicurus would say that the practical implications of political issues as the affect individuals cannot be ignored, and I would personally encourage everyone to firmly maintain awareness of world affairs that could impact them, and adjust their lives accordingly. But for the sake of the EpicureanFriends project we need to strictly moderate that here, so other venues for individual communication need to be used to pursue those adjustments to purely political events. I think we already have lots of private communications going on between members of EpicureanFriends without those bleeding over into problems for the forum, and that's something that probably needs to expand over time.

Quote from Julia

For example, if I were given the option, I (or certainly a younger me) would probably decide that my grief is limitless (unnatural) anyway and thus to be avoided (equal parts naive to or wilfully ignorant of the fact that this will cause psychological baggage for the rest of my life), rather than allow myself to feel it, to work through the emotion (and thus trade unpleasantness now for more of a spring in my step later).

One aspect of this time that has been on my mind recently is how giving in to worry about suffering is totally unproductive. By worrying or focusing on the suffering in life, we don't do a think to correct that suffering, or extend our own lives by an hour. The time spent on feeling bad about suffering is just subtracted from your life never to come again. I understand it's something we all go through and I go through it myself, but I think I am finding the best way to get over it is to focus on one of the many reminders that life is short and for an eternity we will be no more.

VS10. Remember that you are mortal, and have a limited time to live, and have devoted yourself to discussions on Nature for all time and eternity, and have seen "things that are now and are to come and have been."

I obviously don't think that should be read to mean "you have a limited time to live and therefore you should spend all your time "discussing" life. I think it means you've devoted yourself to understanding the big picture and then taking action to apply that knowledge to using your life to your best ability. And simply feeling overwhelmed by sorrow doesn't strike me as a good use of limited time. Some things can't be changed, but there's usually something that can be done to improve almost any situation.

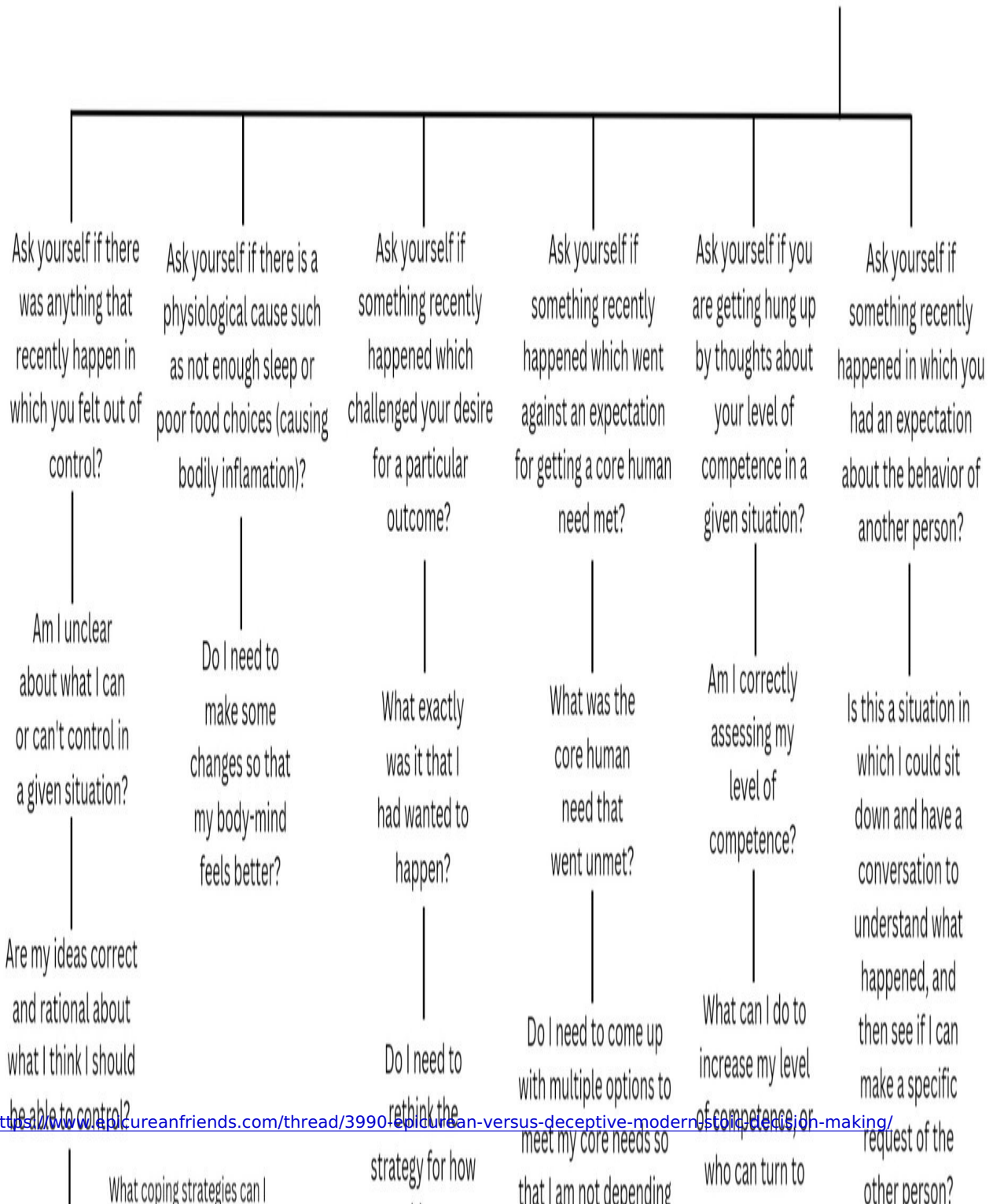
Post by "Kalosyni" of August 10, 2024 at 11:47 AM

[Julia](#) you may like this chart that I created, which is coming from a slightly different direction, and which is helpful for dealing with frustration, and incorporates an aspect of Epicureanism in making wise choices and avoidances:

Start at the top right where it says " I am noticing some tension and anxiety that is best described by the word "frustration", and then see which of the six below apply to the given situation, and then follow it downwards.

For When You Are Feeling Frustrated:

I am noticing some tension and anxiety that is best described by the word "frustration"



Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 9:50 PM

Julia's mind-blowing realisation of what should probably have been obvious to her all along

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[...] in the fundamental abstract that the first question is always as stated in "[VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

The key of [VS71](#) is in the grammar more than the words: "is accomplished", not "is *being* accomplished"! [VS71](#) places my point of view *after* (the completion of) the action, not *during* (the process of) the action. I already vaguely had this perspective in [item #4 of this post](#), but that was almost by chance, without much explicit cognitive awareness. Here's why this distinction matters so much to me:

In my mind, these four items are (almost) entirely separate: 1. desire, 2. emotion, 3. pleasure/pain, and 4. avoidance/inclination. Pleasure/pain are two sides of the same coin, one starts where the other ends. Similarly for avoidance/inclination. (Willpower is a distinct and more complicated thing, which I think doesn't actually matter that much here.) Either way, in my mind, these four concepts/entities/... are *not* structured in any way that would cause me to lead a happy, or at least logical, or even safe life at all without considerable navigation and active steering.

My desires are mostly sensible, but they don't carry any drive by themselves. Only when I visualise *having attained* them, only when I make vivid the future sensation of pleasure of *having made real* what I desire, does the drive materialise to direct my willpower outward and toward the pursuit of my desires. Otherwise, either nonsensical emotions continue to make me behave in dysfunctional ways (just because these emotions were once upon a time sensible as they lead to behaviour which then was adaptive) or I display no behaviour at all (such as staring at the ceiling all day long, because the action happens inwardly, inside of me).

I feel negative emotions before/during many pleasurable actions, and positive emotions before/during painful actions. Other times, I strongly avoid things which I want to do, or pursue with fortitude that which I do not want to do. Many things inside of me are rather upside-down and inside-out. For example, being talked to while I brush my teeth frightens me. (I doubt I was born that way, and I'm *not* recommending this; it just is how I am now.) I can, however, still

analyse things *cognitively* according to whether they will bring me pleasure *upon completion*.
Cognitively – upon completion:

It is *much* easier to correctly predict (cognitively, by thinking ahead) pleasure/pain about a result, than it is to correct my contorted feelings about an action and its result (emotionally, the feeling-ahead), let alone to correct the emotions during the action (the feeling-now).

For example, even when eating disgusts me, I still like having eaten. When I jump ahead cognitively and live in the conclusion, I can begin eating with reasonable ease and won't get too perturbed by the process, either. Once reality catches up with where I was all along – in the result, after it is done – things are just fine. This means I can do something which I otherwise avoid, because I have cognitively predicted that the result of *having done* it will bring me pleasure *and* mentally stayed in the space of that prediction – if I were to think about *the process of doing* it, my aversion would kick in and keep me away, even if it is good for me, even if I desire it, even if I want to, even though I have considerable willpower. If I derive everything in this way, I can create a life which is capable of making me happy – but it doesn't come natural to me at all. It does – at least in the initial phase I'm still in – even cause many unpleasant emotions, which only slowly begin to subside as the first results-of-action start to trickle in, the unpleasant emotions during the actions that lead to these results begin to fade, and further yet, the first emotional expectations (rather than cognitive predictions) of pleasures-of-results begin to form, still faint and vague, but increasingly present all the same.

Emotions, desires/aversions, and avoidance/inclination are learned, whereas pleasure/pain is not, and it turns out the pleasure/pain I feel about results-of-actions never actually changed; it was merely buried. Artificially twisted consequences-to-results lead to emotions associated with action and emotions associated with consequences-to-results, but *not* to emotions associated with the results-as-such: e.g., doing xyz scares me, the result of xyz would be pleasurable, but the thought of it also brings fear of the consequence, such as shame. The being-scared and fear-of-shame are learned. The scaredness is attached to the action, which offers a lot of sensory anchors for emotional memory, and it is independent of a 3rd party; that's pretty hard to unlearn, because sensations remain largely the same whenever xyz is repeated. The shame is associated with a 3rd party, thus fear-of-shame is (comparatively) easy to unlearn once the source-of-twisted-consequences is gone, as there is little sensory attachment with the result or the action leading to it, rather than with particular (past) circumstances and people.

Curiously, while I am breaking the rules and mental chains of my previous life, I imagine the same basic structure at work in some premeditated crimes: e.g., robbing a bank is scary, having the money would be pleasurable, but the thought of the consequences is a deterrent. Only by focusing on the result *and* staying focussed on it can the emotions about/during the process and its potential consequences be overcome. Upon release from prison, being haunted by what happened during the supposed-peaceful-heist-gone-wrong and the experience gained by having done time* will amplify the deterrent. However, crucially, the predicted pleasure of suddenly having lots of money remains just the same.

This is why I know to do anything to begin with, and what to do when I do something: because “what [I will feel] if the object of my desire is accomplished” is either pleasure or pain, and unlike any emotion or value-judgement, this compass and guide has not been corrupted!

* (Just to clarify: According to statistics, locking people up and throwing away the key doesn't make them better members of society, but giving people ample time to work on themselves and offering them plenty of assistance with and opportunities in which to do so, including behind bars, sometimes helps some to be somewhat better.)

Things which (in comparison) seem minor to me now, and which we seem to agree on anyway 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think Epicurus would say that the practical implications of political issues as they affect individuals cannot be ignored, and I would personally encourage everyone to firmly maintain awareness of world affairs that could impact them, and adjust their lives accordingly.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The time spent on feeling bad about suffering is just subtracted from your life never to come again. [...]

[VS10](#). Remember that you are mortal, and have a limited time to live, [...]

[...] Some things can't be changed, but there's usually something that can be done to improve almost any situation.

I concur; however, I tend to get hung up on politics, which makes it important for me to stay out of its day-to-day affairs and focus on overall developments only. For example, there's no point in me fretting over the countless instances of misconduct of politicians, parties and press, no matter how grievous, while a war is being brewed up all over the continent.

More generally speaking, I think it is very easy to get lost in ultimately pointless things nowadays, because today information is practically endless. I need to be very careful about delineating being "comprehensively informed" (painful, paralysing, ...) versus being "sufficiently informed" (often also painful *by itself*, but necessary to ensure pleasure long-term). For example, it isn't necessary to buy the absolute best value-for-money speaker (comprehensive information required), if all I want is to sing along in the shower (sufficient information is enough).

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[...] which is helpful for dealing with frustration [...]

It's a good chart, but neither frustration, anxiety nor tension were the issue.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 10, 2024 at 9:52 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

There are many different ways of looking at things and therefore lots of charts, but I am tempted to say in the fundamental abstract that the first question is always as stated in "[VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

In my own mind I have a very hard time separating "desire" from "pleasure and pain" and "choice and avoidance" or even "willpower," and that's a major reason I have a problem separating out "desire" as if it is some fundamental of human nature apart from everything else. I think they are all a part of a bigger picture and acting as if there is a "desire" part of your brain that acts totally on its own is going to lead to lots of problems.

[Cassius](#) there's a lot to chew on here, but at the risk of oversimplification I'll take a quick stab at it before dinner 😊

[VS71](#) is a great way to analyze this. To my understanding, desire can be considered something that motivates me. The object of one's desire is, for example, a new car or true love. Or, in my current case, dinner. What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished is, ultimately, pleasure or pain. I think that it's pretty much as simple as that.

Desire and pleasure/pain, then, are two different things. Desire is the motivator, pleasure/pain is the result. The only qualification is that some desires might be considered pains. But they are still a motivator in that they make you want to do something. The way that you choose to eliminate that pain can lead to either pleasure or to more pain, so it's helpful to think what categories of desire might be involved as you choose/avoid how to eliminate that pain in order to obtain the resultant pleasure.

At least for me, willpower is another subject.

I think that it can be instructive to read some simplified neuroscience books to get a better grasp on the subject. Obviously Epicurus wasn't privy to that, but his intuition was remarkably close as far as I can tell. I'm guessing that [Don](#) and others may have something to add....

But for now, I think that I shall choose my natural/necessary desire for dinner over my desire to philosophize. All philosophy begins in the stomach, after all.

Post by “Julia” of August 10, 2024 at 11:32 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

To my understanding, desire can be considered something that motivates me. The object of one's desire is, for example, a new car or true love. Or, in my current case, dinner. What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished is, ultimately, pleasure or pain.

To you and quite possibly to most people, this might be splitting hairs, but to me [it makes all the difference](#) that it is *not* the desired object-or-event itself which motivates me. What motivates me, is *the pleasure of having accomplished* my desire. For example, the knowledge that I desire a new car and true love does *not* motivate me one bit. What motivates me – and indeed the only thing about that which motivates me! – is the pleasure I can predict to experience once I *have attained* a new car or true love.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Desire is the motivator, pleasure/pain is the result. The only qualification is that some desires might be considered pains. But they are still a motivator in that they make you want to do something. The way that you choose to eliminate that pain can lead to either pleasure or to more pain, so it's helpful to think what categories of desire might be involved as you choose/avoid how to eliminate that pain in order to obtain the resultant pleasure.

Desire is *not* the motivator, according to [VS71](#) desire is the thing to be evaluated (“Every desire must be confronted by this question: [...]”). Pleasure – if it is predicted to arise from attaining the desired object-or-event – should be the motivator (pleasure is the guide to life – not desire!). In my understanding of language, a desire which was determined to lead to pain ceases to be a desire, and will henceforth be, variously, an addiction, a compulsion, a confusion, an obsession, an urge, ...

Classic example for a less-motivating versus more-motivating desire:

a) "I want to lose some extra pounds, so that I can be a little healthier / fit into old jeans /"

b) "I want to lose some extra pounds, so that I can have a wild summer affair / date with confidence /"

Both sentences are logically valid (internally consistent), but (b) is typically considered to be more motivating than (a), because it emphasises what is presumed to be a pleasure. The action remains the same, but with the change in objective the predicted reward in pleasure changes.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

At least for me, willpower is another subject.

I concur. Willpower has oddly little to do with desire/aversion, avoidance/inclination, pleasure/pain. Neurologically, there are two parallel-but-opposite dopamine-powered circuits in the basal ganglia: One which starts with and persists in an action, and one which stops with and desists from an action. The action itself is largely irrelevant, the circuit is generic. (Whether you suppress an urge say "I will not check my messages again!" or whether it is "No, I'll not eat another piece of candy!", the circuit is the same, and the strength it has gained from controlling one impulse carries over to other impulses; analogous with the start/persist.) When we are children, our parents (hopefully) give us sane rules and structure, and "learning to behave" mostly equals suppressing impulses. That builds willpower, because it is unpleasant - and pleasant actions are self-reinforcing anyway: Children rarely need to be lectured about the importance of eating all their candy.

As adults, many people have internalised "how to behave" to such a degree that any impulse to misbehave is more or less dead anyway. (What that implies is a whole new post...) What is more, many people start to design their life such that they no longer have to use their stop/desist muscles, which leads the neural circuitry to eventually weaken (synaptic long-term depression). This is why some people, as kids, could sit still and quiet in the back of their family's van for hours, but fail to stay away from that cheap chocolate bar marketing-strategically placed at the cash register for impulse buyers...

Willpower is a vague expression, but if I had to define it, I'd identify it with start/persist-&-stop/desist-ability (and that is different from fortitude, from delayed gratification, from motivation, from drive, from wanting, from tenacity, from resilience, from ...).

Post by "Don" of August 10, 2024 at 11:38 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

The key of [VS71](#) is in the grammar more than the words: "is accomplished", not "is being accomplished"! [VS71](#) places my point of view after (the completion of) the action, not during (the process of) the action.

It does appear you're correct. To use Saint-Andre's translation as a starting point:

[VS71](#). Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?

πρὸς πάσας τὰς ἐπιθυμίας προσακτέον τὸ ἐπερώτημα τοῦτο· τί μοι γενήσεται ἂν τελεσθῇ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἐπιζητούμενον; καὶ τί ἔαν μὴ τελεσθῇ;

NOTE: Literally, τὸ κατὰ ἐπιθυμίαν ἐπιζητούμενον means something like "what is sought because of this desire" (cf. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics 1098b22); however "the object of desire" is more readable in modern English.

A more literal translation (sacrificing eloquence) would be:

Concerning all the desires, this question must be applied: What will happen to me if what is sought because of this desire should be fulfilled? and what if it is not fulfilled?

τελεσθῇ is a 3rd person Singular Aorist Subjunctive Passive verb. One page I found explains the aorist subjunctive as " if the subjunctive mood is used in a purpose or result clause, then the action should not be thought of as a possible result, but should be viewed as a definite outcome that will happen as a result of another stated action." That seems to apply here, since applying the accomplishment of the desire is a result of asking the question. It is also doing the action and asking "what will happen to me" if this action is completed. It seems to be the person is:

1. Recognizing a desire in themselves
2. Trying to imagine themselves in the future as having accomplished the action that fulfills the desire
3. Imagining what will happen to them after that desire is fulfilled: Did the action fulfilling the desire bring pleasure or bring pain?
4. Then acting in accordance with that future self's feeling of pleasure or pain.

Post by "Julia" of August 11, 2024 at 12:11 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

It does appear you're correct. To use Saint-Andre's translation as a starting point: [...]

Thank you! I do appreciate your verification 😊

It seems so obvious to me now: When placing myself *into* the future action would be a Cyrenaic position and placing myself *after* the future action is Epicurean, then of course I got tripped up by choosing, prioritising and planning my actions according to their outcome (Epicurean) but trying to start and accomplish them whilst fixated onto their progress (Cyrenaic).

(I feel like life threw me two compounding curveballs: the Stoics and 3rd wave dialectic behaviouralism, a type of “therapy” which anchors itself in the Stoics' radical acceptance and then adds “mindfulness” as an awareness of the present moment, environment, emotions and sensations – as if enduring everything wasn't enough, one has to also feel every detail of it! Now, I just do what brings me pleasure, and if doing something is itself not pleasurable, I may simply escape to the future, move my mind ahead in time, to after the task's completion, until reality catches up with me and the future pleasure I held onto finally materialises. That notion makes me very happy!)

Post by “Godfrey” of August 11, 2024 at 1:43 AM

[Quote from Julia](#)

To you and quite possibly to most people, this might be splitting hairs, but to me it makes all the difference that it is not the desired object-or-event itself which motivates me. What motivates me, is the pleasure of having accomplished my desire. For example, the knowledge that I desire a new car and true love does not motivate me one bit. What motivates me – and indeed the only thing about that which motivates me! – is the pleasure I can predict to experience once I have attained a new car or true love.



That's a good hair to split, as we're trying to come to clarity. I agree with your conclusion.

[Quote from Julia](#)

Desire is not the motivator, according to [VS71](#) desire is the thing to be evaluated (“Every desire must be confronted by this question: [...]). Pleasure – if it is predicted to arise from attaining the desired object-or-event – should be the motivator (pleasure is the guide to life – not desire!).



Well said. And this is where the categories of desire fit in, as one way to evaluate the desire.

[Quote from Julia](#)

In my understanding of language, a desire which was determined to lead to pain ceases to be a desire, and will henceforth be, variously, an addiction, a compulsion, a confusion, an obsession, an urge, ...

I wouldn't go this far... I would call some of these unnatural desires, but they're still desires. An urge, I believe, is synonymous with a desire. Some desires lead to pain if unfulfilled, these are natural and necessary. Some lead to net pain and these are unnatural desires. Some lead to short-term pain in order to obtain net pleasure, these I think would be considered natural and unnecessary desires.

This last category would include something like "I'm going to go work out, which I hate, and which will bring me pain. But I'm doing it for the net pleasure of fitting into my old jeans or having a wild affair or going on a ski vacation &c."

Post by "Cassius" of August 11, 2024 at 7:24 AM

i still detect there is ambiguity about the way the relationship between 'desire' and 'choice and avoidance' is being discussed here.

Does everyone agree that "I desire to brush my teeth right now" is a perfectly acceptable ordinary English equivalent of "I choose to brush my teeth right now"?

The point is that we can use

desire = the object of desire

and we can also use

desire = choose

So as to the discussion of whether desire is the motivator or not, it seems to me it should always be clear that what you are talking about as the "motivator" is the "reward" and not the initial willpower "choice" to pursue the reward.

That's all i will add at the moment but this gets into the whole problem of considering words like "virtue" as "ends in themselves" or "something to do because it produces pleasure."

There are lots of things in life that i can identify as "desirable" but would never choose to pursue because of the costs involved. But that doesn't mean that i discount them as being

desirable, or fail to hold in my mind the knowledge that they are desirable. It just means that we always have lots of alternative possibilities from which we have to constantly choose between according to the consequences of what actions we take.

So the phrasing "desire is the motivator" can be correct or incorrect depending on what definition is being given to "desire."

Post by "Julia" of August 11, 2024 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Some desires lead to pain if unfulfilled, these are natural and necessary. Some lead to net pain and these are unnatural desires. Some lead to short-term pain in order to obtain net pleasure, these I think would be considered natural and unnecessary desires.

I agree with your premise, and

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

This last category would include something like "I'm going to go work out, which I hate, and which will bring me pain. But I'm doing it for the net pleasure of fitting into my old jeans or having a wild affair or going on a ski vacation &c."

...I just want to explicate what I think you're already saying: The desire is neither the working-out (event-in-process) nor the having-worked-out (event-concluded); these cause net pain. The desire is the wearing of old jeans, which causes pleasure. Only with this pleasure is the net pain needed to obtain it outweighed, confirming the classification of *wearing the old jeans* as a natural-but-unnecessary desire.

What surprises me – but what I would agree with! – is that if this same person was working out for the sake of working out, that would be an unnatural desire in that person (because, without the eventual wearing of old jeans, they don't get pleasure from the workout). (That's a useful detail to me, because before this conversation, my mind's examples for unnatural (limitless) desires were still centred around "vices" like addiction and power, and didn't readily contain "virtuous actions" like workout.)

I'll have to remember that for the next cold-call about gym memberships 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Does everyone agree that "I desire to brush my teeth right now" is a perfectly acceptable ordinary English equivalent of "I choose to brush my teeth right now"?

The point is that we can use

desire = the object of desire

and we can also use

desire = choose

I cannot recall having encountered anyone who would, in their everyday ordinary speech, use "desire" to replace "want to" or "choose to". Do people say "I desire to take the trash out"?! To me, conflating "desire to" with "choose to", "want to" or even "have to" either conjures up stilted speech in a tense situation or some sort of Victorian era dialogue.

Furthermore, for the sake of this discussion, the distinction is quite important to me, too: I *never* desire to brush my teeth; it's painful. What I desire is the sensation after having brushed them; that's pleasurable. That might, once again, seem like splitting hairs, but it makes *all* the difference between whether or not I end up doing it! Only when I call to mind and keep in mind how it is going to feel afterwards will I begin to move my mental cogs, shift where I am inside my mind, eventually move the body, get up, move towards the bathroom, and go through with it.

With repetition, this process gets easier: The ignition power required to spark it drops. Once it's begun, the various individual steps begin to fall into place more easily, increasingly happen by habit, automatically. As such, I can see how eventually I might be tempted to say "I want/choose to brush my teeth" even though I very much dislike doing that. I can also see how I might say "I have to brush my teeth", especially when I am relating that to context, eg when stressing that, say, I can't go to bed just yet, because there's still this one item left to do on my agenda.

But even at that point, I don't see myself as saying "I desire to brush my teeth". For me, that would be just as weird as saying "I desire to go to work tomorrow" even though I really don't. What I desire is shelter and orange juice. And toothpaste, I guess 😊

If I wasn't so painstakingly clear about what it is that I desire, my entire behaviour and daily structure will soon be fragile again, prone to collapse, subject to both internal and external sources of corrosion. When I get sloppy with what I desire, the only sensible desires which continue to prevail are natural, necessary *and* immediate ones: food, water, sleep and shelter, but not even showering, doing dishes, or airing out the flat, and more abstract, more indirect things like work completely fly out the window anyway.

My point in saying this is not to whine or get a pat on the back; my point is that while the extent of this effect is a bit extreme in me, I am quite certain the underlying mechanics are the same for everyone. Therefore, when faced with a lack of drive, energy, motivation, consistency, structure, discipline, ..., everyone might benefit from being extra clear to themselves about what it is they desire.

That might just do the trick.

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 9:00 AM

I just checked wikipedia and several dictionary sites which are similar:

Quote

Desires are states of mind that are expressed by terms like "[wanting](#)", "[wishing](#)", "longing" or "craving". A great variety of features is commonly associated with desires. They are seen as [propositional attitudes](#) towards conceivable [states of affairs](#). They aim to change the world by representing how the world should be, unlike [beliefs](#), which aim to represent how the world actually is. Desires are closely related to [agency](#): they [motivate](#) the agent to realize them. For this to be possible, a desire has to be combined with a belief about which action would realize it. Desires present their objects in a favorable light, as something that appears to be good.

I am out of time to continue but it seems to me that there is a wide variety of intensities that can be encompassed in the word, and probably that is something to focus on whether we have any agreement.

If desire is forced into the box of "passionate longing" then we have one issue. If "desire" is used as a stand-in for "anything I wish to do" then we have an entirely different set of results.

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 9:43 AM

"[VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

I do not view that as referring only to, or primarily to, "passionate longing."

So what do we think the context supports as to the intent of [VS71](#)?

Post by “Julia” of August 11, 2024 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I do not view that as referring only to, or primarily to, "passionate longing"

I agree, and I also agree with that, ultimately, words always mean something a little different for everyone. But whether we call it desire or kxtzqptrr, what I wanted to stress was: It helps a lot to be precise and honest with oneself about what it truly is one wants, and why.

For the linguistically inclined, trying to grasp the word via Latin didn't get me far: to **desire**, **desidero**, of/from the stars (figures of speech like heavenly/shooting star/...). Related with **consider**, **considero**, with the stars (less clear, but I speculate it is meant as: in agreement with the constellations).

However, looking at the Old English word which is replaced was more illuminating: The root of **wilnung** (the desire; -ung is a noun-forming suffix) and **wilnian** (to desire; -nian is a verb-forming suffix) is still familiar to us in words like "**wel**come", which means "**desired-one-who-came**". It is rather something related to our **will**, our **volition**, related to things which we **are willing** to do, experience or be participant of, and related to things which we would consider **well** if we did, had or experienced them.

Would you consider it to be **well**? Then it is desirable.
Are you **willing** to do/have it? Then you desire doing/having it.

That's how I understand the word. That's why I do not desire to take the trash out, but I desire to have a clean kitchen so much that I endure undesirable tasks to get there - and that distinction changes everything, because taking the trash out for the sake of it is very much a Stoic attitude in my mind, which would soon make me lie in bed to stare at the ceiling all day long... 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 11:34 AM

I am looking forward to input from our Greek Expert Team on this topic! 😊

I know it makes sense to me that the question of what will happen based on any decision is intuitively the right way to look every question.

Whether [VS71](#) was intended to be targeted at passionate intoxicating desires, such as love which is extensively addressed by Lucretius, is a separate but very related issue.

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 12:56 PM

Same question will apply to use of the word "desire" in the entire topic of "natural and necessary *desires."

But I presume there that everyone is taking the position that desire is *all* choice and avoidance and not limited to "passionate longing"

Post by “Julia” of August 11, 2024 at 1:23 PM

"What is desire?" reminds me of [how important it is to stick closely to ordinary language](#), to not redefine things but to remain as close to everyday speech as possible.

Some – in my mind very mistaken – dictionary definitions of "desire" even go so far as to say desire is something sexual. If that were the case, the entirety of Epicurean philosophy would not be applicable to children, even though its central tenet is, in part, derived from observation of toddlers and piglets. If we only go so far as to define it as "passionate longing", then – keeping in mind the importance of sticking to ordinary everyday language – it also just doesn't make sense anymore. To proof that point by counterexample:

I am neither passionate about nor longing for death;
however, I very much do desire to eventually die, one way or another.
As I sit here, I don't have a passionate longing for a good death;
however, as I sit here, I'd say drifting off in my sleep would, someday, be desirable.

To me, this is sufficient proof that "desire" is much broader than "passionate longing" or, even worse, as "something related to sex". (A bit besides the point, but what would an "unnatural passionate longing" even mean? That sounds very much like what I imagine is catered to in the

back room of an adult video store...)

So I'll have to very much come back to my definition based on Old English with a pinch of what, to me, is just "common sense" (in the meaning of "one just knows", obvious; ordinary, everyday language):

[Quote from Julia](#)

Would you consider it to be **well**? Then it is desirable.
Are you **willing** to do/have it? Then you desire doing/having it.

Crucially, this quasi-definition allows for things to be desired even though they are not desirable, which is a situation the word "desire" has to be able to capture; I'm not sure how this would be possible with "passionate longings": I cannot have a passionate longing for something which I am dispassionate about. That just doesn't compute in my mind.

(Of course, none of this means that a passionate longing cannot also be a desire; that something sexual cannot also be desired. However, it is not the ordinary meaning in the context of Epicurean philosophy. Just like a car, ordinarily, would be an civilian automobile, not a street car, not a baggage car, not a cable car, not an elevator car, ... even though all of these can, arguably, be seen as "cars" one way or another...)

Post by “Todd” of August 11, 2024 at 2:21 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The point is that we can use
desire = the object of desire
and we can also use
desire = choose

While I acknowledge that these are common usages, I disagree with both of these equivalencies when discussing Epicurean philosophy. For the sake of clarity, we should not redefine common words, but we also can't just allow a given word to have any of several different meanings in a given context.

In my opinion, and I believe this to be consistent with Epicurus' usages...

A desire is a state of mind: a belief regarding a potential future state.

More specifically, a desire is a belief (maybe false) that pleasure could be increased in the future (maybe the very immediate future) by substituting one state of affairs for another.

To say, "I desire a car," is to describe your mental state. You are stating your belief that your future pleasure would be increased if you had a car. You have not "chosen" a car until you have performed some action toward the end of acquiring one. In fact, by failing to act on your desire, you are implicitly choosing "not-car" (unless doing nothing is somehow expected to lead to you acquiring a car).

Plenty of people go through life desiring things that they never choose.

Also...nice to see many you here again after my long hiatus.

Post by “Julia” of August 11, 2024 at 2:29 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

A desire is a state of mind [...] Plenty of people go through life desiring things that they never choose.

Yes, that! 👍

[Quote from Todd](#)

Also...nice to see many you here again after my long hiatus.

Welcome back! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 3:21 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

"What is desire?" reminds me of how important it is to stick closely to ordinary language, to not redefine things but to remain as close to everyday speech as possible.

To this we are going to have to compare a series of text references that show that while Epicurus felt it important to be clear, he did not think it was important, and in fact was willing to radically redefine, that to which ordinary words are used to refer.

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.

For example he said:

Letter to Herodotus: "First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning. [38] 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, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference. And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen."

--- I do not believe this means that we use words in a way that conforms to ordinary usage in all cases, but overridingly that we are clear, by stating our terms, even when others disagree with us:

[VS29](#). For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many. Note 29 Translation by C. Yapijakis, Epicurean Garden of Athens, Greece. Bailey: "In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and like an oracle to give answers serviceable to all mankind, even though no one should understand me, rather than to conform to popular opinions and so win the praise freely scattered by the mob."

And we know from repeated complaints from Cicero that Epicurus used words (such as pleasure and prolepsis) in new ways that no one had done before, which was such a great source of controversy that Cicero's complaints are unmistakeable that he was in fact actually doing that.\

So with "desire" as much as "pleasure," it will be necessary for us to take a position on exactly what Epicurus was referring to. 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.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 11, 2024 at 6:06 PM

In terms of the difficulty of pinning down a definition, "desire" is quite like "pleasure." They're also quite alike in terms of pinning down a workable Epicurean ethics.

We've given a lot of effort to understanding what Epicurus meant by "pleasure;" the same effort needs to be applied to understanding what he meant by "desire." And that is not to imply in any way that they are the same thing: they're not. I tend to agree with how [Julia](#) and [Todd](#) are interpreting it, and I also agree that a good look at the original passages in the Greek may be helpful (by someone who understands Greek, not by me!)

As for choice: between desire and pleasure or pain lie choice or avoidance.

(Oops, I see that I missed the two posts above.)

Post by "Cassius" of August 11, 2024 at 6:36 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

We've given a lot of effort to understanding what Epicurus meant by "pleasure;" the same effort needs to be applied to understanding what he meant by "desire."

Yes I agree and for the reasons I have stated. Buddhism and Stoicism have introduced poisonous presumptions in ordinary communication that "desires" are all of a single class, and that that class is to be eliminated as bad or even evil. That may or may not have been the case in 300 BC, but it is the case today, so when we talk about desires today there is a huge difference between ordinary issues of "wanting to accomplish a goal (any goal)" vs "passionate

intoxicating ardent longing" which most everyone will agree is a thing to be avoided. (At the very least, most of us would agree that the "intoxicating" part is bad. I would be willing to defend "passionate ardent longing" depending on the context of what is being discussed. But at some point most of us will agree that there is a red line where desire that is intoxicating and gives no regard to other realities is dangerous and self-destructive.)

But to repeat the poison in the air is the idea that Epicurus would agree with the Buddhists and Stoics and other ascetics and agree that all desire is to be eliminated, and I would say that is an implication that should never go unchallenged.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 11, 2024 at 8:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that is an implication that should never go unchallenged.

Yes, I've noticed that!

Epicurus may have been dealing with similar conflicts, and his categories are, to me, quite an improvement over the other versions of dealing with desire. Having said that, even once (or if) we settle on an appropriate definition of the term, we'll find that desires are wide-ranging by nature. That's what the categories are most valuable for, at least in my humble opinion.

Post by "Cassius" of August 11, 2024 at 8:41 PM

Gosh my typing is terrible. I've now changed "implicated" to "implication"

Post by "Martin" of August 12, 2024 at 3:51 AM

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.

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2024 at 6:26 AM

Martin I read the quoted part as saying that the important thing is to arrive at the point where the mental image associated with each word is absolutely clear to the person who is stating the formulation, not that the person stating the formulation has to accept the definition proposed by others. And I'd relate that to the discussion of the development of language and how different peoples arrive at different words and languages, because language is not handed down by a god or central authority, but by local people developing their own word assignments. In most cases you can and should, because it is most convenient, to use the commonly-established formulation. 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.

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](#)

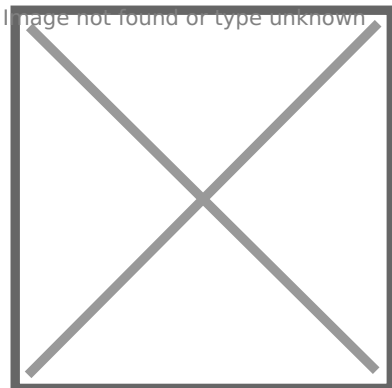
But the real objective is clarity and for the purpose of happy living, and when that means rejecting the majority definition, seems to me he is advocating rejecting it.

...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.

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2024 at 6:45 AM

The longest treatise on language by Epicurus left to us is Book 28 of On Nature:



[Epicurus, On nature, book 28](#)

Epicurus, On nature, book 28

Sedley's translation is the best source to dig into that work.

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2024 at 7:19 AM

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:

[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).

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 don't see you referring to that his expansion of the definition of pleasure in your comments so far. I think it's important to take a position on how Epicurus was using the word pleasure in a non-standard way to make any sense of many highly reliable texts, including but not limited to the Principle Doctrines and the letter to Menoeceus themselves.

The line from DeWitt that's right on point is from page 240 of his book:

Quote

“The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being

denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. *The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.*

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.

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2024 at 8:57 AM

[Quote from Julia](#)

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.



I admit I haven't thought of it in that way before, but I like it.

Post by “Julia” of August 12, 2024 at 11:27 AM

When one considers pleasure to be a sin or at least a dangerous temptation (such as Aristotle, Plato and the Stoics did) then if even a steady state of homeostasis is identified as a pleasure, there remains no more escape from sin/temptation except in pain. This might be a more honest reason for why the backlash Epicurus received was such a "persistent and vigorous condemnation" and yet remained "really superficial and captious".

The argument that he was conflating two distinct states under one label is, to me, null and void, because he simply wasn't doing that: Babies, toddlers and animals all *enjoy* their share of normal, neutral, static states, and with a look at primates, so should adult humans. As a matter of fact, few humans are more miserable than those haunted to the degree where they can no longer find pleasure in what should, ordinarily, be a neutral state...

Do we all agree that "to desire sth" is an "atom of experience" just like "feels warm" is, too, meaning both are indivisible and not made up of smaller, lower-level, more fine-grained units of experience?

Post by “Martin” of August 13, 2024 at 1:55 AM

Quote

Do we all agree that "to desire sth" is an "atom of experience" just like "feels warm" is, too, meaning both are indivisible and not made up of smaller, lower-level, more fine-grained units of experience?

I agree, at least in the sense that I am not aware of a meaningful way to compose a desire of smaller units.

Post by “Julia” of August 13, 2024 at 8:47 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

I agree, at least in the sense that I am not aware of a meaningful way to compose a desire of smaller units.

Thank you for confirming (always risky to extrapolate from oneself to general human nature). For the time being, I shall maintain my point of view then:

- *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
- *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.)

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2024 at 11:40 AM

[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.)

OK when stated as in post 36 quoted above (I added the emphasis on the first part), I have to state a reservation, particularly on the statement that pleasures and pains are "not fundamental units of experience themselves, but innate categories of fundamental experiences."

I think the terms "pleasure" and "pain" are in fact properly used both to refer to "categories of experiences" as well as "particular experiences," and we have to be clear which perspective we mean when we discuss them.

This issue of the multiple meanings of words such as "good" and "gods" is largely the issue that ended up being the topic of our podcast [Episode 241](#). Coincidentally, before reading this thread, I had just added an insert to assert that the discussion of the way Epicurus was approaching defining his terms before discussing particulars should be taken to refer to "pleasure" and "the limit of pleasure" as well.

If anyone gets a chance to listen to that discussion please let us know if you agree or disagree, either in this thread or preferably the episode thread, where it will probably be more findable in the future.

Post by "Julia" of August 13, 2024 at 1:30 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the issue that ended up being the topic of our podcast Episode 241

I'm not even close to 241 yet, but continue to catch up 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think the terms "pleasure" and "pain" are in fact properly used both to refer to "categories of experiences" as well as "particular experiences," and we have to be clear which perspective we mean when we discuss them.

I'm not sure what it is you're saying 😊

The category of pleasures is filled with these fundamental experiences: Joy, relief, et cetera. The fundamental experiences (joy, relief, ...) inside that category each are a pleasure. To have one of these experiences is pleasurable.

Is it correct to state that the ambiguity arises (mostly) because I tend to imprecisely refer to the category of pleasures by the singular? Is that an adequate way to rephrase the objection you're raising? 🤔

I feel like with inanimate objects I would be less tempted to slip up regarding that singular/plural imprecision; for example: The category of trees contains apple, pine, et cetera. A pine is a tree.

It would not occur to me for me to say "The category of tree contains", and if someone were to say that to me it would strike me as odd.

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.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2024 at 1:53 PM

I will repeat the caveat that i hope everyone constantly remembers:

I'm not representing that I have everything figured out, and I welcome challenges and disagreements (at least when stated constructively 😊)

The benefit that the podcast is providing, as Joshua also states in Episode 241, is that it is very helpful to challenge oneself to articulate these issues precisely. Unless you do get pretty deep in the weeds (another term Joshua used today) then it can sometimes be hard to see how important some of these issues are.

And this thread is a good example too - starting out talking about a Stoic chart, but now wrestling with some extremely deep conceptual issues that need to be resolved before we can

adequately construct an alternative presentation.

I perceive that where we are in the discussion is a question that has to be answered before we can delete the "does it concern virtue?" and replace it with a question relating to "Pleasure." This dual perspective on Pleasure, as both a category and a particular experience, has to be understood before one can see that "absence of pain" is being used by Epicurus as a term that is an EXACT equivalent of "pleasure," and not a separate and unique category that some set out as so unique and perceptive that even Buddhists and Stoics would envy. I would say more confidently here in August of 2024 than every before that the truth is nothing of the kind. "Absence of pain" is simply a way of extending the definition of pleasure to ALL non-painful experiences, just as "gods" are defined as living beings who are blessed and incorruptible, and just as "the highest good" is defined to be "the standard by which we are bound to test all things by, but the standard itself by nothing."

"Pleasure" can only be understood as deserving of its place in the first rank of any "choice and avoidance" chart by understanding it in this wider way of: "all experience which is not painful." The problem is that we are so conditioned to see "pleasure" as "sex drugs and rock and roll" and therefore "bad," that we are intimidated away from putting the word "Pleasure" in its rightful position as the keystone of the whole analysis.

Post by "Julia" of August 13, 2024 at 4:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

To me, the plainest statement of a *negative* implicitly refers to the *broadest* interpretation (any → not one).

Example: "There is an absence of food" means that my kitchen is entirely empty. It does not mean "I ran out of rice" or "I have no more soda." Instead, the "absence of food" means I have nothing whatsoever left at all.

The plainest statement of a *positive* implicitly refers to the *narrowest* interpretation (some → at least one).

Example: "There was a police presence" only asserts that there was one officer somewhere on

the site. There *might* have been hundreds right on target, but the assertion is only made of one officer somewhere on site.

So maybe I'm just still not getting the point(?!), but I've never understood how "absence of pain" could possibly be referring to particulars? To me, "absence of pain" has always been "absence of *any* pain *whatsoever*". Otherwise it would have to be explicated via one of these three options: "absence of a *particular* pain", "absence of any pain *to some extent*", or "absence of a *particular* pain *to some extent*"...

I should probably revisit this thread after I'm more caught up with the podcast 😊

I might try following this convention

- the pleasures (definite, plural) refers to the category
- a pleasure (indefinite, singular) refers to one particular
- pleasures (indefinite, plural) refers to an undefined group of particulars
- these/those pleasures (determiner, plural) refers to a defined group of particulars

to see if that reduces the amount of confusion, in me, in others, or both 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2024 at 5:33 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

To me, the plainest statement of a negative implicitly refers to the broadest interpretation (any → not one).

Example: "There is an absence of food" means that my kitchen is entirely empty. It does not mean "I ran out of rice" or "I have no more soda." Instead, the "absence of food" means I have nothing whatsoever left at all.

I think you're approaching things properly, but you're stating the absence of a positive (food), which clearly means that the kitchen when absent of food has absolutely nothing in it -- the broadest possible interpretation, as you say.

But in the case that is the rule for most modern Epicurean discussion, we're not talking about a positive thing, but a negative thing (pain). So when someone says "the Epicurean goal is the absence of pain," due to the prominence of Stoic and Buddhist and Judeo-Christian "anti-pleasure" views, it is not immediately obvious to many people what should come to mind when the statement "i am feeling no pain" is said. It is unacceptable to many people to include "the whole pantry of possible pleasures" when someone says the kitchen is "without pain." What is immediately presumed to be the case by the "pro-ascetic" world is that when you say "I am free from pain" what you really mean is essentially "I have reached a state of nirvana - nothingness - and I am FREE from all desire and all attachment to the world!" --- Because that is what THEY think "freedom from pain" should mean!

It is impermissible to them to think that when someone says "all pain is gone" that the kitchen is then FULLY STOCKED - with all sorts of pleasures of body and mind, both pleasures that are stimulating to the senses and those pleasures of consciousness of *anything* without pain attached to it. Such people want to drain the experience of absence of pain down to what a normal active person would call a "near-death" experience -- because that is the way THEY - such ascetic-minded people - interpret the best life due to their Stoic/Buddhist/Judeo-Christian orientation.

Of course I am not saying that *everyone* does this, and we've collected quite a group of people who would never think that way.

But I will contend to you that behind the writing of 90% or more of modern Epicurean commentators (primarily in the Academy, including most **major** recognized books OTHER than "Epicurus and His Philosophy" and "Living For Pleasure") that that is the orientation. Their definition of pleasure and absence of pain is the type that any Buddhist or Stoic or Judeo-Christian would love -- and if that is the case, you have virtually a canonical guarantee that that version is *not* what Epicurus was teaching.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 13, 2024 at 6:06 PM

The kitchen example falls apart because there is only one "thing:" food. Absence of food leaves nothing. Absence of pain involves two "things:" pain and pleasure. So if there is no pain there is pure pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2024 at 7:21 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The kitchen example falls apart because there is only one "thing:" food. Absence of food leaves nothing. Absence of pain involves two "things:" pain and pleasure. So if there is no pain there is pure pleasure.

Yes that's a good point to make about any hypothetical in this arena. The Epicurean texts are very clear that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and when you don't have one you have the other. Any hypothetical that seeks to be a true analogy has to stipulate that there are only two classes of items possible, and that if you don't have items from class1 then you by definition have items from class2, and vice versa.

Post by "Julia" of August 13, 2024 at 8:14 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[...] It is impermissible to them to think that when someone says "all pain is gone" that the kitchen is then FULLY STOCKED [...]

I think I get it now – thank you for your patience! 👍

Noting that it is seen as the absence of a *negative* along with using the analogy of physical objects helped me (in establishing an understanding of the erroneous view). Indeed, I can see how "the absence of shortage" might be commonly mistaken for an in-between state instead of being correctly identified as synonymous with "fully stocked". To me, pain has never been a negative; instead:

I view both the pleasures and the pains as things in their own right – like two bacteria strains. Both strains live in the same petri dish (my mind), which is fully covered (no uncolonised space left). The two strains compete for space, such that whenever one is reduced for any reason, the other expands, and vice versa. This way, any would-be empty space is immediately covered by the other colony. In this analogy, the absence of one is *not* by itself a synonym for the other – it only becomes a synonym because *it just so happens that* both live in the same dish, all space is covered, and they compete for it.

The root cause and justification for "absence of one is synonymous for the other" lies within neither player; it lies instead within the rules of the game.

[Quote from Cassius \(emphasis added by me\)](#)

Any hypothetical that seeks to be a true analogy has to stipulate that there are only two classes of items possible, and that if you don't have items from class1 then you by definition have items from class2, and vice versa.

That leaves me wondering whether my model is in contradiction with the texts, because it identifies the rules of the game - not the categories of pleasure and pain themselves - as the cause for the validity of the synonym...?

(1) To work using a negative (kitchen analogy: shortage vs food) instead of making pleasure & pain things in their own right (competing strain analogy);

(2) and also to identify a negative-positive duality (shortage and food extinguish each other *by their nature*) as the cause of an *inherent* synonymy of absence of one for the presence of the other, instead of identifying the game's rules and playing field (not *per se* competition against each other, but for limited and exhausted space) as the cause of a *de facto* synonymy of such same kind;

each of these two aspects (1) and (2) would be in such stark contradiction to my experience that - dare I say it - I don't see myself ignoring the evidence my life's path gathered in their regard...

Luckily, we seem to agree that regarding (1) my model is congruent with the Epicurean view; but what about (2)?

In my view, it is *not* necessarily a pleasure which eliminates a pain, or vice versa; both pleasures and pains may come and go for any number of reasons. It is *merely* the case that whatever space is available to hold experience will in fact be holding experience. For example: a single pain may be superseded by a mixture of numerous pains and pleasures of various qualities and quantities, none of which was necessarily a part of the cause for the previously existing single pain to disappear - all provided that the space available to hold experience is, in fact, utilised and holding experience.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2024 at 10:38 PM

I think I agree generally with what you have written Julia. One text to keep in mind is XVII from the Torquatus section of book one:

(4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain.

Post by “Julia” of August 14, 2024 at 1:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain.

Okay, that confirms the model I use for both directions; especially: The gladness of losing a pain is a consequence of having lost the pain; it is not what caused the pain to be lost in the first place.

Thank you! 👍 That's a relief 😊

Post by “Bryan” of August 14, 2024 at 2:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

Yes I agree. Epicurus employs this flexibility.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Absence of pain" is simply a way of extending the definition of pleasure to ALL non-painful experiences

And how happy we are to realize this truth -- an instant and constant source of gratitude!

"4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain."

As we know, this is true of active pleasures of variation that we experience after we have established a foundation of static pleasure through philosophy. When an active pleasure is withdrawn, static pleasure remains. And we are of course fully grateful to lose an active pain -- even if not replaced by an active pleasure, because we have our foundation of static pleasure.