

A User's Guide to the Inner Life: Evagrius on the Psychology of Action

Human beings are a combination of three different parts/powers:

One rational part, which allows one to govern oneself and maintain a consistent identity and policy through the use of reason:

(1) Nous="intellect," "mind"

Is immaterial in character and characterized by rapid activity and the ability to see and grasp things intuitively

- This (seeing/grasping things intuitively) is contemplation (theoria) and allows one to intuitively see/grasp the gracious action of God toward us.
- God's action may be perceived as light, since we lack any way of grasping God's being as he is in himself (God is immaterial and has no limits or boundaries, so what he is in himself can never be circumscribed or fully comprehended by created minds).

There is also a lower level of reasoning (dialogismos), which starts not from insight, but from limitation of knowledge and therefore must reason toward conclusions (a more imperfect and fallible form of knowledge) before it can proceed with practical action in the world.

- This kind of knowing uses pictures of previous or present events in the external world. These sense impressions (phantasiai) are stored in memory and can be recalled (depicting the past event as if it were present).
- Certain interpretations are attached to these pictures (sense impressions), fitting them into a broader context of meaning and giving them value.

Two independent non-rational parts:

(2) Thumos/thumetike dunamis ="irascibility," "irascible power"

=quick, energetic response (reaction) to stimuli (not intrinsically rational, but capable of being guided and governed by reason)

=demands immediate satisfaction, according to justice, but often misconceives what justice requires and, in responding, goes beyond what justice requires

- a. good: courage → perseverance
- b. bad: irrational, destructive anger → people reduced/made less/brought down to nothing

(3) Epithumia/epithumetike dunamis ="concupiscibility," "concupiscible power"

=a [bodily] desire, craving which demands immediate satisfaction/gratification.

It is unwilling to wait for reason and not interested in reasons given or policies set by reason, so is essentially irrational, but can be restrained when reason and thumos are in agreement and act together

How does action happen?

(1) *Picture + Interpretation=Proposal for Action*

A picture (sense-impression) appears before the mind, together with an interpretation that gives specific value to what is pictured (X is good and to be desired/sought; Y is bad and to be avoided)

The interpretation can have content connected with bodily desire (the “concupiscible power”):

- This is pleasant; seek this out and you will find gratification in this. There is no need to wait or think further, just act know to get what you need.

The interpretation can also have content connected with quick, passionate reaction (the “irascible power”)

- You have been wronged! You should be outraged! Time to set matters straight!

(Think American action movie with bad guys being dispatched and stuff blowing up, e.g. any Jason Statham film or Arnold Schwarzenegger in Terminator 2 saying, “Hasta la vista, baby!”)
- You are in danger! You must flee now and do whatever is necessary to avoid this thing and the pain/harm that comes with it!
(Think Godzilla or Jurassic Park)

(2) *One Can Assent to (or Refuse) This Proposal for Action*

- What happens to us (as a result of external circumstances) is often beyond our control.
- It is, however, always within our control to assent to something or to refuse to assent to it.
- When we assent to it (agree with the proposal for action and approve it), action will follow as soon as circumstances permit.
 - Cf. Evagrius on Mt. 5:28 (ESV): “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart”
 - The commitment/approval has already been given, so the action will follow (whether the outward action has already occurred is not the point).

(3) *Assent is the Basis for Moral Responsibility*

- To be responsible for an action (praised or blamed for it; rewarded or punished for it) one must
 - be the origin of the action
 - If I take A’s hand and use it to punch B, A would not be blamed for the punch. I would be blamed because the action started with me and I made it happen.
 - have the kind of knowledge necessary to control the action
 - If the bartender gives a poisoned drink and the waiter delivers it to the customer’s table, the waiter will not be blamed if he did not know the drink was poisoned.

Assenting to a proposal for action makes one fully responsible because

- (1) Action doesn't happen until assent has been given, so the person who assents is the origin of the action.
- (2) Assent means giving approval to a plan. The plan indicates knowledge of a goal and the means by which one can obtain the thing. This includes a knowledge of causes and consequences, giving one the kind of knowledge necessary to control the action.
 - a. Cf. M'Naghten's Rule (legal rule used to determine whether one is excused from legal responsibility for one's actions due to insanity):
To be responsible for an action, the individual must
 - i. "know the nature and quality of the act he was doing"
 - ii. have been able to know the act was wrong.

Objection #1:

What about shocks that move the body to action even before reflection/reasoning (and thus, assent) occur?

Answer: If one is tossed around while traveling on a boat and grows pale, this is simply a physical reaction to a blow suffered by the body. Following this "prior passion" (propatheia) or first movement, the choice is still open either to assent to fear or to refuse to assent to fear.

One would not be blamed for growing pale (just as one would not be blamed for moving one's knee when the doctor hits it with a hammer to test one's reflexes). To control that action is not in one's power.

One would be blamed for assenting to fear ("It's hopeless!! I'm going to die!"). That choice always remains within one's power.

Objection #2:

"I wasn't committing to it! I was just thinking about it!"

The individual holds the thought/picture in front of their mind continuously for a period of time, focuses on it, and derives pleasure/gratification from this.

Examples:

"I never actually committed to putting a whoopee cushion on the boss's chair, but boy I sure enjoyed the time I spent thinking about it" (anger)

"Yeah, I sometimes think about what it would be like to be in a relationship with so-and-so, but that doesn't mean that I've given up on my marriage or that I'm going to act on these musings and leave my spouse." (lust)

Evagrius: These people are fooling themselves.

To hold something before the mind and to make it one's focus is a choice and involves an implicit commitment.

The fact that one holds it before one's mind to savor the pleasure this brings shows that

- (1) one views the action as good and
- (2) one views the pleasure as desirable,

having already offered unformed assent to these interpretations. (Cf. Evagrius *Praktikos* 75: "sin is assent to the forbidden pleasure of the thought.")

The only difference between conscious assent and unformed assent is that in unformed assent one is not consciously focusing on one's own process of evaluation and commitment. The mind always has the ability to adjust its focus and move things out of the center to one's peripheral vision (where one is not attending to it). This involves an unreflective choice.

In reality, what one is doing is diverting one's focus from the process of evaluation/acceptance to the object/pleasure itself (as "objective" and "obvious").

Evagrius Response to Objections #1 and #2:

The eight evil thoughts/reasonings (suggestions/proposals for action) can function like a prior passion or first movement.

They can grip one so strongly that one feels oneself affected (passion), as if by a blow, a bite, a heating, an agitation or a shrinking away. In other words, one is initially moved by fear or grief but nonetheless is still able to recover and commit to what is right, resisting the incitement to sin/evil.

If one doesn't move from the initial movement/thought back to evaluation/discernment of what is right, one has given unformed assent (committing without thinking consciously about what one is doing). One is effectively approving the thought that is affecting/troubling/disturbing/moving one: "This thought is true, this feeling is right, therefore I must..."). It is no longer an unwilled movement; instead, without thinking directly about it, one is accepting the reasons/motives for action which are proposed.

- To give unformed assent creates a habit. Unformed assent identifies the thought/project with me, so that it becomes tacitly a part of who I am and allows the thought/project to put down roots in me.
- To give unformed assent shuts down the ability to see other things/other options, darkening the mind. This leaves one without insight and gripped by things that appear to be objective and to have no other way forward and no other possible outcome.

