



Neuroeconomics: Chapter 18. From Experienced Utility to Decision Utility

Kent C. Berridge, John P. O'Doherty

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This chapter discusses how different forms of outcome utility are embedded in brain systems. Experienced utility, the actual pleasure of an outcome when received, is encoded by a neural activations in a network that includes limbic prefrontal cortex as well as deep brain structures below the cortex, but it is possible that causal generation of experienced utility, in the form of intense pleasures, may be more restricted to small hotspots within the deeper structures. Decision utility, manifested in choices to pursue or consume an outcome, is influenced by additional factors, including memories of past experienced utility resulting from outcomes (remembered utility), and predictions or beliefs about how good experienced utilities are likely to be in future (anticipated/predicted utility). Brain circuitry for decision utility can be separated to a degree from circuitry for experienced utility, and the brain mesolimbic dopamine system is one component that is especially important to decision utility as a mechanism for making choices. However, there is some controversy in the field today concerning the precise role of dopamine in decisions. One common view has been that mesolimbic dopamine influences choice by mediating learning and predicted utility (as teaching signal and prediction error), acting as an input to decision utility. An alternative view is that mesolimbic dopamine instead more purely mediates decision utility directly (as incentive salience or 'wanting'), being able to depart from learned or remembered utilities, and not necessary for reward learning or predictions. Berridge and O'Doherty favor different sides in this dopamine controversy, and so the authors here distill those different views into a brief debate. Finally, the relations among brain systems for various utilities opens up interaction possibilities that sometimes lead to irrational choices. These include 'wanting' a particular outcome whether or not that outcome turns out to be actually 'liked'. That phenomenon is particularly vivid in addiction but also may occur to some degree in ordinary life.

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