

# An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 9:23 PM

## [Quote from Godfrey](#)

So, conversely, without understanding the categories of desires one can't make proper decisions regarding pleasure and pain.

I think we are communicating, because I think what you write there is pretty clear, but I am not sure we are agreeing 😊

I have always looked at it pretty much from the reverse perspective, influenced by Rackham's translation of Torquatus:

45 Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus's doctrine as to the different classes of the desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own p51 riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary10 desires no bound or limit can be discovered. 14 46 If then we observe that ignorance and error reduce the whole of life to confusion, while Wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of appetite and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and peace, why should we hesitate to avow that Wisdom is to be desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and Folly to be avoided because of its injurious consequences?

To me, the "principle of the classification" is the key, and the principle does not derived from human-described categories, but from the nature of the activities involved. Breathing, for example, is absolutely natural and necessary through the nature of things, but not because we ourselves recognized it is as category. On the other hand things which are unnecessary and unnatural (absolute political power, maybe?) have no limit because we can always ask for more. Again, that's from the nature of the situation, not because we categorize it that way.

So from my point of view the understanding of the principle involved is not really an invitation to categorize intellectually, but just a recognition that the closer to absolutely natural you get, nature has made those easiest to obtain, while the opposite nature has made the hardest, with the recognition being that the hardest requires the most pain and the easiest requires the least pain.

But in the end, the whole exercise is nothing more than posing the same question: How much pain is my chosen pleasure going to cost me to obtain? And in that, you rank the intensity and satisfaction you get from your pleasure, and you rank the intensity and length of the pain it is going to cost you, and you make a totally personal and subjective decision based on your own unique circumstances.

The result (to me) is that you've performed a mental exercise that really does nothing but help you reflect on what you expect to be the pleasure and pain that you yourself expect to experience, and you decide to go forward or not on that basis.

That's really the way the spreadsheet we talked about was set up. You can perform the mental exercise of thinking about these things, but there's no way in the end to make the final decision except for you yourself to decide how much you value a particular pleasure, and how much you mind the particular pain you expect that to cost, and then you go ahead or not based on your own estimation of "is it worth it to me." And in the final analysis the dividing up into categories has pretty much zero to do with the final result. You keep those in minds and thumbnail aids to thinking, but they don't dictate anything in and of themselves, and more than the spreadsheet model dictates anything. There's no "necessity" in human action so there's no way to reduce these questions to across the board formulas that always apply. Even breathing you can give up for a few minutes if it's necessary to swim through a flooded corridor to get out of a sinking submarine. The rules of thumb are always rules of thumb and never absolute categories in themselves.

Maybe the bottom line is that the categories we are discussing are "useful" but not necessary and in fact don't add a lot if you just use common sense to evaluate the situation carefully. And if we ever move to the point where the categories become hard and fast rules in themselves, then we have moved into the same danger as when "virtue" seems to be an end in and of itself. And in fact some writers do seem to state or at least imply that Epicurus held that we should always and only pursue pleasures that are natural AND necessary, which I do not think he would say at all -- or at least - Epicurus certainly did not live that way himself, with his relatively wealthy living with multiple pieces of real estate, material goods, and even slaves. The same would go for Atticus especially, nor do I understand that the historical record reveals even a single Epicurean reputed for his or her truly ascetic living.