

Why Minimizing All Desire Is Incorrect (And What To Do Instead)

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 4, 2024 at 11:15 AM

I've been thinking about how to express a response to incorrect statements that Epicureans were people who minimized their desires. Also behind this is the idea that having desires cause pain, and thus leads to the erroneous idea to try to remove desire rather than doing what needs to be done to achieve the goals of desire. But the goals of desire are pleasure and removal of pain. We've talked about this already in many other places on the forum in other threads, but...well why not again. 😊

Since I am starting with theory (and quotes from the [Principal Doctrines](#)) to point to why this idea is incorrect, I decided to post in this forum rather than the [Practical Applications Forum](#). But ultimately this needs to be applied in one's life, so I hope to write about practical applications as well (in later additional posts).

In the [Principal Doctrines](#) we see:

[PD22](#): You must reflect on the fundamental goal and everything that is clear, to which opinions are referred; if you do not, all will be full of trouble and confusion. (Saint Andre translation)

[PD25](#): If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether to avoid or pursue something, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony. (Saint Andre translation)

In the Torquatus narrative (section 30) we read:

"Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet..." (Reid translation)

Seeing that we are naturally drawn to pleasure just as we are naturally drawn to the sweetness of honey, let us now consider this question: What should we do when we want something but it is difficult or impossible to get?

[PD26](#) says this: "The desires that do not bring pain when they go unfulfilled are not necessary; indeed they are easy to reject if they are hard to achieve or if they seem to produce harm."

1) If a desire for something is easy to fulfill then there is no problem with it unless it produces harm as a consequence. (see PD8)

2) The desires that bring pain when unfulfilled are the ones that are necessary (necessary desires) and so these are the ones to put time and effort into fulfilling. By pain = physical pain AND those things which when unfulfilled lead to depletion of strength/health of the body and the mind. (see Letter to Menoeceus).

[PD30](#) says this: "Among natural desires, those that do not bring pain when unfulfilled and that require intense exertion arise from groundless opinion; and such desires fail to be stamped out not by nature but because of the groundless opinions of humankind."

It is common sense that all animals (including humans) need to eat to live, and naturally become hungry (with a feeling of discomfort). This occurs daily and we easily know what to do when we are hungry - we eat!

It is important to think about what other "creature comforts" we are born to desire? These are the desires that occur over and over again, and when they are adequately fulfilled on an ongoing basis they lead to good health and happiness, plus the experience of pleasure arises when these desires are fulfilled. Unfortunately we don't have a specific list from the extant texts of Epicurus, but we do see that friendship ([PD27](#)) and self-sufficiency (achieving security of adequate skills/resources) are ones that are highlighted.

I hope this shows that Epicureans are actually embracing many desires by fulfilling desires, and that we need not fear the feeling of desire, but instead turn towards the ones that nature gives us with joy.

There is probably a lot more to add here, so I welcome further thoughts. 😊