

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2025 at 10:04 AM

Kalosyni's post is a good summary of the practical reasons why you would pursue the course advised by Epicurus.

I also want to add another consideration to my posts above. I would argue that people who focus on understanding the philosophy are naturally going to want to proceed to understand and apply the practice, but people who focus on "practice" are far more likely to never proceed any further, and rather quickly drift away, if they do not put equal or greater focus on the philosophy. I would wager that's the largest explanation for the percentage of those who come through the forum and don't hang around very long.

Also, I see the natural and necessary question as very similar to the "pleasure = absence of pain" question. Both are on their face very easy for someone to think they understand, but if you do not know the philosophic background of both then you're going to apply them superficially and never understand the deeper meaning. I'll never accept that anyone can make sense of "pleasure = absence of pain" without the context of knowing that there are only two feelings, and so the equation is a mathematical equivalency. There's absolutely no way to grasp a definite meaning for "absence of pain" without that background, and that's why the Stoics and Buddhists who pay visits to Epicurus love to talk about the formula superficially but never explain it further.

In the case of "pleasure = absence of pain" there is therefore a pretty quick and direct context which can be explained, and someone set on the right path, pretty easily. You tell them that they are equivalent because there are only two possibilities when you are alive, and that means absence of one means the presence of the other.

In the case of the "natural and necessary desire" formula, I don't think most of us (including me) can easily give a short pithy logical explanation of why - just as "pleasure = absence of pain" doesn't lead to general asceticism and minimalism - the "natural and necessary desire" formula doesn't also lead to general asceticism and minimalism. What Kalosyni and others have give above is a "clinical" reason for the conclusion, but a philosopher is never going to abandon the field of philosophy, and we need the "logical" side too.

Think about [PD10](#) - Epicurus has already said that if the life of a profligate - which presumably embraces all sorts of unnatural and necessary desires - actually brought happiness, we would have no complaint with it. That's an example of embracing the logical conclusions of one's philosophy. Is part of the background that Epicurus has already said that success is the measure of the theory, not any particular tool, so we would never interpret "natural" and "necessary" in an absolute way? Because surely if we were to pursue nothing but unnatural and

unnecessary desires, and we were one of those rare success stories, Epicurus would say "I have no complaint with you - you have reached the goal."

So it seems to me we need to think about "What is/are the background premises that explain this saying?" so we can give people the full picture early in their reading.

The best I've come up with is the Torquatus explanation that the whole natural/necessary thing is simply pointing out that exotic pleasures (just as is over-devotion to romance/sex) are difficult or impossible to get without excess pain, while the more ordinary and indeed natural and necessary are generally (not always) easy to get without excess pain.

It's very possible there are other and better ways of explaining it, such as Kalosyni's but for purposes of clarity it needs to be short and hard-hitting, just as is the observation that there are only two feelings.

Remember what Frances Wright has Epicurus say in his debate with Zeno:

'Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.' This is the thrust which Zeno now makes at Epicurus; and did it hit, I grant it were a mortal one."

I would say that we should not through lack of logical diligence present the natural and necessary desires formula in a way that *leaves an open gate to vice*. And I would call excessive frugality/asceticism/minimalism a "vice" - so we shouldn't leave an open door to it.