

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2025 at 12:55 PM

Following up on Don's last comment, there seems to me to be an important issue in how we approach:

[PD29](#). Among desires, some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination.

as against -

[PD03](#). The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.

As I see it, Torquatus was able to take a dogmatic and literalist position on the argument that when you're not in pain you're in pleasure, because it's definitional - virtually mathematical - that when one is absent the other is present.

But when referring to [PD29](#) he talks in terms of profitability or suitability or usefulness (depending on the translator) which seems to me a more "practical" basis for the analysis.

[45] I ask what classification is either more profitable or more suited to the life of happiness than that adopted by Epicurus? He affirmed that there is one class of passions which are both natural and needful; another class which are natural without being needful; a third class which are neither natural nor needful; and such are the conditions of these passions that the needful class are satisfied without much trouble or expenditure; nor is it much that the natural passions crave, since nature herself makes such wealth as will satisfy her both easy of access and moderate in amount; and it is not possible to discover any boundary or limit to false passions.

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 riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.

Now I certainly think that both doctrines ("pleasure is the absence of pain" and the "classification of the desires") are *both* practical *and* useful, it seems to me that the first is

more clearly a definitional choice that derives from logic (it's clearly possible to break pain and pleasure into subcategories, so it's by intelligent choice that we reduce them to two). The classifications of desires are also matters of choice, but it's harder to see because in the case of the terms "pleasure" and "pain" we all know that there are many different types of pleasures and pains. In the case of "necessary desires" however, we jump more readily to the idea that there's only a short and definable list of what is "natural" and "necessary."

Actually as I am writing this I am talking myself into a somewhat different view from where I started..... I am now liking the natural and necessary classification more, if we can link it to the same kind of broad analysis as pain and pleasure, and resist the temptation to think that there's a strict absolute list. Maybe the necessity to analyze and understand the two separate classification systems in the two different doctrines complements each other!