

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2025 at 10:53 PM

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: [Bryan](#) or @Eikadistes or anyone good with ancient Greek - PLEASE feel free to check my grammar etc in the Letter to Menoikeus. If I'm missing something, this post just missed the mark! Thanks!

One thing that struck me tonight was the rest of that section in the letter to Menoikeus that discusses the categories of desires. Here's my translation (emphasis added - see commentary below the quote):

Quote

(127) ... on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] **The steady contemplation of these things** equips one to know **how to decide all choice and rejection** for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life. For the sake of this, we do everything in order to neither be in bodily or mental pain nor to be in fear or dread; and so, when once this has come into being around us, it sets free all of the calamity, distress, and suffering of the mind, seeing that the living being has no need to go in search of something that is lacking for the good of our mental and physical existence. For it is then that we need pleasure, if we were to be in pain from the pleasure not being present; but if we were to not be in pain, we no longer desire or beg for pleasure. And this is why we say pleasure is the foundation and fulfillment of the blessed life. [129] Because we perceived pleasure as a fundamental good and common to our nature, and so, as a result of this, **we begin every choice and rejection against this**, judging every good thing by the standard of how that pleasure affects us or how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure. And because pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good, this is why not every pleasure is seized and we pass by many pleasures when greater unpleasant things were to result for us as a result: and we think many pains better than pleasures whenever greater pleasure were to follow for a longer time by patiently abiding the pain. [130] So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, **not all are elected**; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned. It is proper when judging these things to consider what is advantageous and what is not advantageous for you; in other words, what the consequences will be. We consult the consequences

of our actions; because, on the one hand, pleasure over time can lead to pain; and on the other hand, pain can lead to pleasure.

What struck me this evening was what immediately follows the categorization. To review the categories (as I understand them) spelled out in this letter are:

1. natural desires (φυσικαί physikai)
 1. desires that are both necessary and natural (καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἰ ἀναγκαῖαι)
 1. necessary desires for eudaimonia
 2. necessary desires for the freedom from disturbance for the body
 3. necessary desires for life itself
 2. desires which are *only* natural (αἰ φυσικαὶ μόνον hai physikai monon)
2. empty, fruitless, or vain desires (κενάί kenai)

The word "unnecessary" doesn't seem to be used in the letter. Now, the sentiment does show up in VS20 (which is also nearly the same as [PD29](#)). If we look at VS20 there are interesting issues in the manuscript:

Post

[VS20 - Source in Vat.gr.1950](#)

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3912/

https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0256

402v

I'm skeptical now to say that VS20 = [PD29](#) since we've seen some discrepancies in a one-to-one duplication of VS's and PD's.

The transcription of this VS/PD appears to run here:

τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἰ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ καὶ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἰ δὲ φυσικαὶ καὶ epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3913/ ἀναγκαῖαι, δὲ αἰ δὲ οὔτε φυσικαὶ οὔτε ἀναγκαῖαι, ἀλλὰ παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν γινόμεναι.

or as it appears to be...

τῶν...



Don

July 8, 2023 at 9:46 PM

The manuscript appears to run:

τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ καὶ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ καὶ μὲν οὐκ ἀναγκαῖαι, δὲ αἱ δὲ οὔτε φυσικαὶ οὔτε ἀναγκαῖαι, ἀλλὰ παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν γινόμεναι.

Of the desires, on the one hand, there are the natural and necessary; then the natural ones and the not necessary ones; then the not natural and not necessary arising from empty belief.

VS20's categories seem to be able to be listed like this:

1. the natural and necessary desires
2. the natural and not necessary desires
3. not natural and not necessary desires arising from empty belief

But I've gotten off on a TANGENT!!

My point (egads, I'm easily distracted) is what came after the categories in the letter to Menoikeus:

[128] **The steady contemplation of these things** equips one to know **how to decide all choice and rejection** for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

This takes me back to [Cassius](#) 's idea to categorize all desires into (four) categories. I'm not sure there are four, but his point is well taken.

Plus, the phrase that stands out for me in the letter is: The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection.

This steady contemplation is ἀπλανής "not wandering, steady, fixed" θεωρία "consideration, theory, speculation; contemplation". This word θεωρία shows up in the characteristics of the sage in Diogenes Laertius, Book X.120: The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation, speculation, and theorizing.

Epicurus is calling Menoikeus to consider every desire **in light of these categories** he just laid out. So, in keeping with [Cassius](#) 's idea, we should be able to categorize every desire we have into natural, necessary, or empty. If we go by VS20, every desire should be natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, or empty. We can ask the question of every desire at any given moment "Will this desire lead to pleasure?" and "How much struggle will I need to fulfill this desire?" and "Is the pain of struggle worth pursuing this desire?" And similar questions. That **steady contemplation** is what is important and why this categorization is a TOOL and not an EDICT. Epicurus isn't **telling** us what desires to fulfill. He's instructing us to APPLY his tools and assess what each desire offers in the way of the goal of pleasure (whether that pleasure is sensory, or memory, or any other type of pleasurable outcome).