

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by “Rolf” of May 2, 2025 at 12:41 PM

Hey folks!

I’m getting stumped on something that previously I felt I had a firm grasp on: Why pursue (natural) unnecessary desires, if necessary desires are all that are needed for happiness? If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain (ie. 100% pleasure 0% pain), aren’t unnecessary desires merely variation?

I recall the ‘cup’ infographic. One of the examples of a “bad” cup is one that is half full, in which only necessary desires are pursued - a cup of asceticism. I can acknowledge that I enjoy unnecessary pleasures and wish to pursue them, but logically speaking, *why* exactly should we not aim to fulfil only our necessary desires?

Post by “Joshua” of May 2, 2025 at 1:05 PM

Quote

If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain (ie. 100% pleasure 0% pain), aren’t unnecessary desires merely variation?

I agree with this, but I would put a different connotation on it. Satisfying unnecessary desires can be enriching. For example, I would prefer to live in a city with better museums; I don't actually need them, but I do enjoy them.

The limit of the quantity of pixels on a given screen is x , and even a black and white film will employ every pixel - but will the quality of the experience be better in full color? I think it probably will be.

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 1:09 PM

Great question.

My first response would be that all desires are pleasurable, and that only those desires that bring more pain than pleasure in net total are clearly out of reasonable bounds.

Yes you can live your life in a cave on bread and water and sustain yourself, and since life in the absence of pain is pleasure, and if you succeed in living without pain, then you have reached "pure pleasure" in an abstract general sense. There is no absolute arbiter that says "you are not living pleurably enough" and you should make another choice and pursue other sorts of pleasures.

But given the way the universe operates, it is possible for most people to obtain much more pleasure than that. Most people will realize what they are passing up, and they will regret not obtaining what they could have obtained with reasonable cost in pain, and so they will of their own accord feel regret and therefore pain and not be content with their minimalist choice. In most circumstances they will also find that they are not immune to the impact of outside pressures which virtually always occur, whether it be disease or criminals or invasion or whatever. And living strictly minimally is generally not going to prepare you for those hazards.

That's not to say that some will not be content with total minimalism, but there's no absolute rule other than that pleasure is desirable and pain is undesirable, and no one has the natural right to say "this is all anyone needs" and enforce that view on anyone else. They can do that under civil law, but that's not the same as saying that they have a natural philosophical moral right to do so.

So I think everyone has to ask themselves that question: "I can get by on a lot less than I have now, and I can feed and drink and live minimally. Should that be good enough for me?"

I don't think Epicurus would say that everyone should live like that, nor did he live like that himself. Look at the property that he accumulated and disbursed in his will. I would argue that there is no evidence that Epicurus or any other Epicurean ever lived such a "minimalist" lifestyle. Statements that all one needs is water and bread and cheese have in my view all the markings of "philosophical extreme" statements, meant to prove the point, but by which no one actually lived -- because it's not necessary to live that way, and choosing to do so is generally an abdication of the experience of many other pleasures that are possible in life.

No other animal or infant of any species lives that way - pushing away any pleasure above what it needs to actually "survive" - and neither should we.

That's one way of making the argument.

In addition to that, I think Torquatus gives us additional valuable information about what is going on with the natural and necessary distinction. As Torquatus explains, "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."

I interpret that to mean that what Epicurus was doing was pointing out a way of analyzing desires so that we can predict their consequences and THEN factor those consequences into our choices. Obviously we need a method of predicting how much pain any given set of choices might bring, and this classification makes perfect sense -- the more extravagant the goal, the more likely it is going to cost a lot in pain to pursue it. That's not saying "don't ever pursue it" - it's saying that this is the way to analyze what to expect. Epicurus does a lot of that, as about sex and marriage for instance. He points out the ways to analyze the advantages and disadvantages, but he doesn't say that there's a flat rule of nature against something.

In the end everyone has to make these decisions for themselves realizing that there's no absolute right or wrong answer or supernatural god to reward or punish you for your choice.

But in the end, for my own analysis, it comes down to: In an eternity of time I am only alive for a very short period, and restricting the amount of pleasure I pursue to only what is necessary to keep me alive is about as foolish a thing as one could possibly do.

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The limit of the quantity of pixels on a given screen is x , and even a black and white film will employ every pixel - but will the quality of the experience be better in full color? I think it probably will be.

And an unstated premise of Joshua's analogy is that no general photographer in his right mind would even think to choose black and white over color unless the photographer were specifically wanting the black and white effect. The additional richness or even just information conveyed by the color is much greater.

So someone can be completely justified in picking black and white if they have a particular reason to do so, just as we often have reason to cut back and live more minimally when circumstances require, but in general it makes no sense to pass over any desire that is

attainable for a reasonable next of pleasure over pain.

All of this sounds very generic or even juvenile in referring to "pleasure" and "pain," but of course the point is that everything in life that you find desirable falls under pleasure, so no matter whether your preference is art or literature or poetry or civil society or any other plain or exotic experience, that's what we're talking about.

And most importantly, mental pleasures are frequently much more significant to us than physical pains, and that's an important point to keep in mind to refute the nay-sayers.

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 1:30 PM

Another answer:

Quote

If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain (ie. 100% pleasure 0% pain), aren't unnecessary desires merely variation?

Yes the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain, and yes unnecessary desires (just like any other) are variation past the point of 100%.

But it's a key issue to remember that variation is pleasure too, and Epicurus is not saying "and variation is not desirable."

My view is that you have to keep in mind that Epicurus is making a very specific point in defining "the limit of quantity of pleasure." It is not a good idea to presume that this statement carries over to mean that "when you've reached the limit you're finished once and for all" or that "the limit of pleasure" is a description of a particular pleasure. That would be as wrong as taking "[all sensations are true](#)" to mean that every thought you have at any particular moment based on a single fleeting sight or sound is totally correct. The senses are never "true" in the sense of being "true opinions." The senses are true in being "reported *honestly* without their own opinions."

We have a lot of past discussion here that relates the limit issue to a challenge by Plato and others that pleasure has no limit, and that's in my view the main context in which this statement has the clearest meaning.

"Variation" can also mean that you just live another day to experience new pleasures, and life is desirable as Epicurus says.

Your question arises in everyone who thinks about these issues and only if a person gets past this to understanding how it makes sense does the person stay with Epicurean philosophy.

For those who are convinced that these apparent contradictions have no plausible explanation I would advise them to stop studying Epicurus and go read other philosophers for a while, rather than conclude that they should in fact adopt a goal of minimalism as a generic lifestyle. I'd say that's a tragic misunderstanding of what Epicurus is saying, but we unfortunately see it happen all the time, especially among general audience writers who think they are brilliantly explaining Epicurus in their "one-off" philosophy article.

Post by "Rolf" of May 2, 2025 at 2:51 PM

Thanks for the insight, Don and Cassius. A few notes...

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The limit of the quantity of pixels on a given screen is x , and even a black and white film will employ every pixel - but will the quality of the experience be better in full color? I think it probably will be.

Does this not fall into the fallacy of there being a "hierarchy" of pleasures? I understood it as all pleasure being equally, well, pleasurable - no "fancy pleasures", as Elayne put it.

[Cassius](#)

I'm still a little confused. I understand that the intention is that we should simply maximise pleasure and minimise pain. However, I am struggling to follow the logical steps on this particular issue (pursuing unnecessary pleasures). Perhaps I'm getting too caught up on this classification?

When it comes to the "absence of pain" thing - I get that PD3 is a counterargument to Plato on pleasure having no limit. That's not what I'm confused about here (though there's another quote with a similar meaning that I still feel unsure about, but that's a discussion for another thread).

What I'm confused about is this classification. Am I understanding correctly that the

“necessary” in “necessary and natural desires” refers to being necessary for human well-being and happiness, and “unnecessary” to being unnecessary (but still pleasurable)? If that’s the case, why is it not enough for us to simply pursue and fulfil the necessary desires in order to reach this ideal (and largely hypothetical) state of 100% pleasure 0% pain? I understand in a practical sense that a minimal and ascetic life like this would be rather dull (and thus painful), but then I don’t understand the “necessary” and “unnecessary” terminology.

I hope I’m adequately explaining my confusion! Let me know if you’re unsure about what I mean.

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 3:28 PM

These are good questions so keep them coming.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Does this not fall into the fallacy of there being a “hierarchy” of pleasures? I understood it as all pleasure being equally, well, pleasurable - no “fancy pleasures”, as Elayne put it.

That's a very reasonable question and this is my answer. All pleasure is pleasure because we find it desirable, so in that sense all pleasure is a pleasurable feeling. (Check DeWitt's section on "The Unity of Pleasure" for this.) When there are only two options, there is no basis for saying that there is a "Fancy pleasure" which is better than "pleasure."

But all pleasurable feelings are not identical, as they vary in intensity, duration, and parts of the body affected (this list is from [PD09](#)).

So while there is no hierarchy in which a particular pleasure is "best" and at the top of the pyramid, there are differences among pleasures, and we have to decide which will be most pleasurable to us under differing circumstances. Not all people find ice cream equally pleasing, nor do we ourselves find the same ice cream equally pleasing all the time.

I think the key issue here is that pleasure is a feeling given to us by nature and we don't get to 100% control what we find pleasurable. Certainly we have some influence over that, but in the end pleasure is a feeling and a feeling is not an opinion - it just is what it is, like what our eyes or other senses give to us. What's the alternative? Well, gods could tell us what is pleasing, or there could be ideal forms of pleasure. Epicurean physics rejects those, so we are left with moment-by-moment processing of senses and feelings as prolepses as our ultimate contact

with reality.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

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There is the different category of necessary for survival vs necessary for happiness, but I don't think that is what you are asking.

As for why it is not enough to do what you are suggesting, I think Epicurus would tell you that you have to decide that for yourself. Maybe it is enough, and it does get you to 100% pleasure. But that 100% pleasure does not tell you what mix of pleasures that you are engaged in, and I think this is where you are mixing the concepts of "the greatest pleasure" with "What should I be doing right now?"

It is conceptually clear that 100% pleasure is the best way to express the general goal. It is not conceptually clear - in fact the opposite - that everyone will be doing exactly the same thing when they are at 100% pleasure. As you said as to yourself, you would regret not pursuing what pleasures are possible to you. In the same way the combination of pleasures that a minimalist might say is 100% pleasure and totally satisfactory for him might be 80% pain and totally unsatisfactory for me. What is necessary for one person to reach 100% pleasure is likely to be totally inadequate for someone else.

100% pleasure represents the conceptual goal that we put together through analysis, but Nature never tells us "Well done my good and faithful servant - now you can stop because you are at 100% pleasure."

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 3:35 PM

I think you're well on your way to seeing that the decision to classify all of experience into either pleasure or pain is at the heart of Epicureanism - it is "philosophy." And that is why

there's probably no more significant analysis in Dewitt better than:

Quote from "Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240 - Norman DeWitt (emphasis added)

Quote

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.

Epicurean philosophy isn't magic. Epicurus extended the definition of pleasure to include all that is not painful as a way of refuting the arguments of the other schools that it makes no sense to set "Pleasure" as the ultimate goal because "pleasure" is insatiable and can never be satisfied. If he had not done so, he would never have been able to say that Pleasure can be satisfied, and that it is indeed possible to reach the best life.

It's a choice to see and understand things in a way that rejects the supernatural and makes sense of the evidence and the faculties that we have as a basis for how to live one's best life. The best life comes down to a life of pleasure because there are no supernatural gods or ideal forms that command us to live other than as nature has provided through pleasure and pain.

And the best way to reduce that best life into a single goal (which all philosophers want to do, and everyone else wants to do so they have an understandable goal) is to identify that single goal as "Pleasure." At that point it's up to you to go out and apply it and live your life.

Post by "Rolf" of May 2, 2025 at 3:48 PM

Thanks Cassius. Your replies are helpful but I feel we're still not hitting the core of my misunderstanding here. Let me put it this way:

Let's say I have adequate food, drink, shelter, and friends. I am able to consistently meet my necessary desires. But I am a person, as you described, who is *not* satisfied (ie. At 100% pleasure) with only these basic needs met. So I must unnecessary desires in order to hit that 100% pleasure mark: Watching a movie, going dancing, eating a donut. Does that not make these desires "necessary" in the sense that they're necessary for my happiness (ie. 100% pleasure)?

I fear I'm getting tangled up in thought here and missing something obvious. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 4:15 PM

I agree with that analysis and I think that's probably why there's the separate reference to desires necessary for life and necessary for happiness.

Further, I agree with you that the natural and necessary analysis is not as clear in our texts as it should be, and it's not something I focus on. I think Torquatus gives a reasonable explanation as to why it exists, as a tool of analysis, but it strikes me as rather obvious and so not something I find that important. The getting to 100% and then the rest being variation is important for logical reasons, but to me this natural / necessary division is not as much philosophical as it is practical advice. It's good practical advice too - if you need need help to see that the harder pleasures to obtain come at higher cost.

I don't think you're missing something obvious however. This analysis is a prime tool used by the Stoics to argue that Epicurus was a minimalist, so it's a major thing to fight over. Yes it can be read to mean "you should be satisfied when you have just enough to keep you alive." But was it interpreted by Epicurus himself that way? No, so it's either not meant in that way, or Epicurus was a hypocrite. I don't think he was a hypocrite, so I think it was meant in the practical way of meaning "Watch out if you go for the more difficult pleasures in life, because that may cause more pain that it's worth. There's a lot of pleasure available in things that are easier to get, but jt's up to you to decide what's best for you. And he of all people - driven as he was - would have known that if you forgo something that you really want to do then that regret can be among the most painful.

So part of the problem also is that we don't have much elaboration on this point in the texts, but in my view we have more than enough to know how **not** to interpret this passage.

Post by "Rolf" of May 2, 2025 at 4:26 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Ah, that makes sense. It's less of a hard-and-fast philosophical tenet and more of an example of how to look at things - a tool, as you say. I suppose at the end of the day Epicurean ethics comes down to using prudence to maximise the ratio of pleasure to pain, with much of the rest being tools to help one do this. Would you agree with this evaluation (oversimplified as it may be)?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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That's a good point. Knowing of these arguments against Epicureanism and the Epicurean responses to them really helps me to understand the philosophy.

On that note, I'd probably say to such as a stoic that it is important to remember that boredom and regret, too, are pains. They must be factored in when deciding on which pleasures to pursue.

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 4:31 PM

Something else:

In discussing DeWitt's analysis of extending the meaning of pleasure to all that is not painful, I think DeWitt drives the ball right up to the goal line, but I am not sure he scores the touchdown.

Likewise, I think that Cicero allows Torquatus to explain the point of absence of pain in a relatively complete way, and we'd be much worse off if we didn't have this, but he still doesn't let Torquatus drive the point home with force. He never lets Torquatus give a fully adequate closing argument on why men who say they are without pain are at the height of pleasure, or why the host pouring wine is at an equal state of pleasure as the guest drinking it.

My view of the situation is that in order to drive the point home forcefully, you have to vigorously argue the "why" of the Epicurean perspective, and that goes back to the main fight - with supernatural religion.

DeWitt could explain Epicurus' position and say that men would be better off if they thought this way, but in his time and place as a college professor he could launch the kind of frontal attack against religion that Frances Wright did in the final chapter of "A Few Days In Athens."

And Cicero wasn't going to do Epicureans the favor of preserving their full arguments in his own work. You have to piece it together from "On the Nature of the Gods" and "On Ends" and others.

Some people who come to the realization that Epicurus was simply extending the name of pleasure to all life that is not painful are going to think that Epicurus was "cheating" or "playing word games" and they are going to walk away disappointed.

I think that's why so many people also find Lucretius disappointing - they want more ethics and less atoms.

But I think the truth is that Lucretius' presentation IS Epicurean philosophy at its core, because when you try to talk someone who is not an Epicurean into being an Epicurean, you don't start off with pleasure and pain. You start off with explaining that the universe is not supernatural, and that there are no absolute truths, and THEN you go on to show that pleasure and pain are all that nature gives us to decide how to live.

The point I am trying to make is that Epicurus did what he did for a very good reason - because the world then and now is populated by charlatan priests and philosophers who are trying to use their supposed privileged knowledge to manipulate other people. And the proper response to that is to go right back at them, as did the Epicurean in Lucian's essay who stood up to Alexander the Oracle Monger, And equally or more bad are the Academic Skeptics who say that no knowledge is possible in the first place and we have to just drift through life never being confident of anything except that the person who stands up for himself is a danger to skepticism.

So in the end I see "natural and necessary desire analysis" as a good suggestion for living pleurably, but surely most people of any background religious or otherwise can understand that point, so, as I see it, it's not uniquely Epicurean or central to the philosophy.

But you are right to struggle with it because you need to be comfortable that you have an explanation for where it fits in.

Otherwise, just like "pleasure is the absence of pain," you'll end up with an absolutely harmful construction of Epicurean philosophy that I would advise you to run from as fast as you can. Because buried in the "always be satisfied with only what you need to stay alive, and never try for anything more" viewpoint is Buddhism and Stoicism and JudeoChristianity and worse.

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 4:36 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

at the end of the day Epicurean ethics comes down to using prudence to maximise the ratio of pleasure to pain, with much of the rest being tools to help one do this. Would you agree with this evaluation (oversimplified as it may be)?

Yes I would agree that that is good summary of the situation. The conclusion is that it's not supernatural gods/ideas that tell us the best way to live, but the faculty of pleasure, and the rest is either the leadup to the conclusion (through study of nature / atomism) or the way to pursue pleasure practically. That's what all the virtue stuff is - virtue is the necessary tool for living pleurably, but it's a "tool" not a set of absolute standards.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

On that note, I'd probably say to such as a stoic that it is important to remember that boredom and regret, too, are pains. They must be factored in when deciding on which pleasures to pursue.

Yes boredom and regret are pains. But given that the Stoics don't consider pain to be important and that only virtue is important, I don't know that any argument on pleasure ever makes much headway with them.

Post by "Titus" of May 2, 2025 at 4:40 PM

The following lines were first to be meant as a commentary on one of Cassius' statements in our last Sunday Zoom Meeting, but they perfectly fit into this discussion!

"Developing one's best potential" or something similar was a statement of Cassius at the end of our Zoom meeting. Perhaps it's an American perspective to seek for the highest, the best, the ultimate and has to be seen in its cultural context. Or I just don't get him right.

But I'm critical of this phrase as it appears to my ears. According to my understanding, Epicureanism isn't about living a frugal life and achieving tranquility under a state of painlessness. Furthermore, it's searching for pleasure, trusting one's senses, feelings, conceptions of the world. Bringing them together to "dance", as Cassius wrote in his poem "Thus Purred Catius' Cat". According to my understanding, pleasure is both epistemological (a canonical term) and teleological. It's based on our very conditions as human beings and defines also the aims of our life. It is the beginning and the end of the happy life.

In a world where every sensation that isn't painful is pleasant, we just have to open our senses and to see how many pleasurable experiences are at our hands. It enables us to enjoy and enrich ourselves with all that tiny little good influences around us. Good food (especially food!), a nice breeze under a blue sky, a vibrant talk with a friend while walking a thriving urban landscape or a magnificent peace of nature. There are so many good things around all the while, hence I'm not seeking for more, for the better, for the Everest. I am just satisfied and happy. I don't need to be a dollar millionaire, although everybody around me will tell me otherwise. Instead of living a life based on the very foundations of the human nature - as Epicurus emphasizes over and over again in the fragments that are available to us - they worry about abstract things which have no connection to happiness in the first place but are grounded in empty desire. I know, there is this relativism going on, teaching a broad definition of pleasure that is so common that there is ultimately no need for any philosophical insight anymore. I'm not talking about the little obsessions that people are striving for but e.g. about people in their 60s who worry as wealthy persons more about money as they did when they were young and had no money. They think wealth will give them security (and finally immortality!), all the while they should pursue their fundamentals: Learning philosophy, understanding the good life. They end up fighting with their relatives for the bigger share of the inheritance of their parents, ironically they are themselves already in cognitive decline. Otherwise they would recognize they give up precious relationships which build up a cornerstone of happiness. This isn't an extraordinary example but an usual experience you will find all over the place. 10 or 20 years later they end up in a nursing home, money and power then doesn't matter anymore but "moral" strength would, the capacity to stand firm, having a philosophy that guides them through the last mile. Diogenes of Oinoanda, having reached old age is the extraordinary man who reflects his past life, rejoices in the pleasures and the superior understanding of the universe he has achieved. He is at the top, having reached the heights where no snow falls and pure light is shining. This is the man I would like to be!

I like Epicurus' categorisation of desires. According to my understanding, a common misunderstanding is to assume that unnecessary desires are just something that is unnecessary and can be pursued whenever it seems they do not harm. The problem is, I suggest, that the just natural but unnecessary category already covers what most of us think of as "unnecessary": Something that is related to our natural basis and because of that it is able to give us joy, but it's nothing that is necessary for survival. I am totally okay with that.

The neither natural nor necessary category is there because it relates to events and experiences in life that just nourish abstract ideas and notions about the world. The example of some senior citizens, seduced by greed for money and hunger for endless life, instead of recognizing their limits is something that has a very strong impression on me.

I know Cassius' is fighting the image of the minimalist frugal Epicurean who lives on bread and water but I would like to see more sensitivity as to why there is a category of "unnecessary desires" in the first place.

Post by “Rolf” of May 2, 2025 at 5:11 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

It enables us to enjoy and enrich ourselves with all that tiny little good influences around us. Good food (especially food!), a nice breeze under a blue sky, a vibrant talk with a friend while walking a thriving urban landscape or a magnificent peace of nature. There are so many good things around all the while, hence I'm not seeking for more, for the better, for the Everest. I am just satisfied and happy.

Beautifully written, Titus.

[Quote from Titus](#)

I know Cassius' is fighting the image of the minimalist frugal Epicurean who lives on bread and water but I would like to see more sensitivity as to why there is a category of "unnecessary desires" in the first place.

I agree - I could definitely benefit from deeper discussion of the necessary/unnecessary split. That said: I forget where I read this, but I've heard it said that necessary desires are those that cause pain when not fulfilled (eg. Hunger, tiredness), while unnecessary desires do not cause pain when not fulfilled (eg. A fancy meal). Correct me if I'm wrong on this.

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 5:34 PM

Let me give my take on "Why not the best?" and why I don't see it as distinctly American:

I am reading Greek philosophy as engaged in just that search: "What is the best way of life?" because why would someone want other than the best that is available to him? If there is in fact a god, or life after death, I certainly want to conform to that god and live forever in bliss. I think most people of any nationality would see things that way, though I concede there may be some who don't.

But then the question is "What IS the best way of life, and that is where the debate about gods and life after death and ideal forms and the rest comes in.

Epicurus says that the best is "a life of pleasure." and so we go from there learning how best to pursue the life of pleasure.

But the starting point is identifying the goal before talking about how to achieve it, and most of the philosophical warfare is over "what is the goal?"

Post by “Godfrey” of May 2, 2025 at 5:43 PM

Not sure if this is helpful but, for me, natural/unnecessary desires are the "sweet spot" of living as an Epicurean.

At some point a person has reasoned through what is unnatural for them and ruled those things out for themselves as something to pursue. Similarly, at some point a person has (hopefully) secured their natural and necessary desires for the foreseeable future. The natural/unnecessary desires, then, are everything that's left, and these are the desires that we work with every day. Do I want to do something extravagant, just for the fun of it? This is a practical opportunity to examine my desire and evaluate how it might affect me in terms of pleasure/pain. Am I embarking on a large project? Say, perhaps, a home remodel. How can I maximize my pleasure in this instance, both in terms of the experience and the outcome. Am I deciding between two jobs? Do I want wine with dinner? Paper or plastic?

As Epicureans (or Epicurists) we don't just set up our lives and proceed on autopilot. And working with natural/unnecessary desires is one way to intentionally live day to day with the philosophy to consistently and responsibly maximize our pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 5:50 PM

I would say that both Titus and Godfrey are working well within the "practical" paradigm that makes sense.

The danger is (and this is the way that I read Rolf's question) is that it is easy to take the discussion and arrive at Rolf's question: "Why should I seek more than bread and water and a cave?"

That's where a strict and over-literal interpretation of the texts could lead someone to answer "You wouldn't."

And the starting point of discussing the philosophy is getting past those foundational issues. Neither Godfrey nor Titus have for a moment (as far as I know) entertained the idea of living in a cave. Both are highly accomplished people who would not trade their past lives for life in a cave.

But for those who ask the logical philosophical question (and I think everyone should, as would any child being taught Epicurean philosophy) there needs to be a logical answer, and that answer most generally is "You would pursue more than the life in the cave because X, Y, and Z., as exemplified by Epicurus himself, who certainly did not stay in a cave all his life."

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2025 at 8:24 PM

We talked about this part but not sure we ever quoted it:

Quote

[127]We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 3, 2025 at 1:16 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Neither Godfrey nor Titus have for a moment (as far as I know) entertained the idea of living in cave.

Well I do have a man cave, but I'd prefer not to live in it....

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2025 at 5:00 AM

At this point in the conversation I would point back to Rolf's original question:

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I can acknowledge that I enjoy unnecessary pleasures and wish to pursue them, but logically speaking, why exactly should we not aim to fulfil only our necessary desires?

Titus and Godfrey, in your answers, did you address this question specifically? Do you agree that you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach 100% pleasure (or happiness)? If you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach the target, why would you pursue any others than those which are easiest to obtain?

[Quote from Titus](#)

I know Cassius' is fighting the image of the minimalist frugal Epicurean who lives on bread and water but I would like to see more sensitivity as to why there is a category of "unnecessary desires" in the first place.

I think that's a good question, and to make it even broader, why does any part of this categorization exist in the first place? Is it a logical part of explaining "the nature of things" like atomism or a position on gods or life after death or that pleasure is the goal of life? Or is it a "tool" question such as the analysis of virtue, to be applied properly only after the others are adequately understood?

I can definitely see that there are many people who are convinced that reckless pursuit of power and fame and riches who need to revise their goals so as to drop those which are most destructive to them. But while we are helping them see the right way to approach that question, we need to avoid stating things in a loose way that is logically confusing to those who are closely trying to follow the logical consistency of the philosophy. We shouldn't fight our way out of claims of supernatural or absolute right and wrong only to turn around and fall victim to interpretations that there is a strict list of "natural" and "necessary" that applies to everyone.

Many of us have observed before that what is "necessary" and "natural" in one time and place is totally unnecessary and (again depending on your definition) unnatural in another.

So I suppose what I am saying ultimately is that the full explanation of the natural and necessary approach must include the observation that natural and necessary are relative to time and place and other circumstances, and are not to be interpreted as a call to absolute frugalism/minimalism. And that's how I read the Torquatus explanation, which points to the "principle of the classification" (some things are harder to get than others) as being the important thing) rather than assigning a specific absolute meaning to any category.

Post by “Rolf” of May 3, 2025 at 5:53 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Do you agree that you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach 100% pleasure (or happiness)? If you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach the target, why would you pursue any others than those which are easiest to obtain?

This is a good, concise way to sum up my point of confusion - thanks Cassius.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But while we are helping them see the right way to approach that question, we need to avoid stating things in a loose way that is logically confusing to those who are closely trying to follow the logical consistency of the philosophy.

I agree. I can understand the intention of the philosophy based on what I hear from you, the other fine people on this forum, and Emily Austin, among others. But I want to be able to follow the logical steps laid out by Epicurus himself, so that I may understand the philosophy more innately.

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2025 at 6:20 AM

For what it's worth, here's my translation of the pertinent section in the letter to Menoikeus:

127f. Ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἶσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί,

- Ἀναλογιστέον "consider..."
- τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν "of the desires, yearnings"
 - "Consider then of the desires, on the one hand, are the φυσικά "natural ones"
 - φυσικά (physikai)
 - English physical, physics
 - on the other, the κενά 'empty, fruitless, vain, void ones.'
 - κενά is also again the word used when Epicurus talks about atoms and void.

127g. καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον·

- "And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessities; on the other hand, the natural ones only."
 - ἀναγκαῖαι "necessary, essential; (if a plural noun as here) necessities"

127h. τῶν δ' ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι,

- "then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, there are those necessary for eudaimonia;

Those necessary for eudaimonia are open to interpretation but must be based on Epicurus's philosophy.

127i. αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

- ἀοχλησία "freedom from disturbance"
- σώματος genitive singular of σῶμα
- σῶμα "the body; one's material body or existence"

"then, those [necessary] for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those [necessary] for life itself."

There are some translations that interpret αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν to mean only things like clothing and shelter - those things that provide "freedom from disturbance" for the body, that is for one's physical existence. That isn't literally what is written so that is simply one interpretation. Those kinds of things - clothing and shelter - would seem to fall under the final category of those necessary for life. So, this category should catch those between eudaimonia and those necessary for life. This is an interesting category.

I would contend that those "necessary for life itself" are those essentials at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, air, etc. Again, clothing and shelter would seem to fall into this category.

PS. It's important to remember that this categorization tool deals with *desires* for something. I realize it's hard to distinguish between desires for specific pleasurable outcomes or activities and the pleasurable outcomes or activities themselves. I find it difficult myself. To provide a different way of reading that section with additional context adding in the word desires instead

of just "ones" and "those":

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain desires.' And of the natural desires, on the one hand, are the necessary desires; on the other, the desires which are only natural; then, of the necessary desires: on the one hand, those desires necessary for eudaimonia; then, those desires necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those desires necessary for life itself.

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2025 at 7:21 AM

Engaging conversation. At the risk of muddying waters, I'm not sure looking for the "logical" reasons behind Epicurus' categorization of desires is as fruitful as it may sound. My perspective veers more toward seeing Epicurus as an observational researcher of the natural world and synthesizing those observations into workable practical applications for real people. Breaking down desires is a way of making sense of the mental landscape in which we move. Epicurus experimented from time to time in trying to only satisfy his most basic necessary needs, wants, desires, paring down his desires to see what would give him pleasure in the case that all other opportunities were unavailable. "What, at a minimum, do I *need*?" I categorically dismiss the idea that he lived like this the majority of the time like an ascetic. I see his categorization as a tool for us to assess our own mental landscape and the choices that arise. His categories flow naturally in many ways from just looking at the numerous desires living beings have.

Post by “Titus” of May 3, 2025 at 8:22 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Titus and Godfrey, in your answers, did you address this question specifically? Do you agree that you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach 100% pleasure (or happiness)? If you can pursue only necessary pleasures and reach the target, why would you pursue any others than those which are easiest to obtain?

This is a very good question! And I have to admit that I probably misread the original question as I am concerned not with unnecessary desires but with with the category of "vain" desires.

I would like to say yes, but this is just a theoretical yes as I consider the classification of desires as a guidance tool for choosing priorities. In this sense, the category of natural and necessary desires is something that has to be of number one priority to us.

[Quote from Don](#)

127h. τῶν δ' ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι,

"then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, there are those necessary for eudaimonia;

Those necessary for eudaimonia are open to interpretation but must be based on Epicurus's philosophy.

127i. αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

ἀοχλησία "freedom from disturbance"

σώματος genitive singular of σῶμα

σῶμα "the body; one's material body or existence"

"then, those [necessary] for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those [necessary] for life itself."

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This is very fundamental. This is the basis on which our house is built on. It is of importance to secure ones existential needs and also to have a proper understanding of the universe and ones position within.

The category of just natural desires adds flavour to our lives and is to be pursued if the desires do not conflict with the necessity these desires are related to. Giving a classical example for a natural but not necessary desire is the decision to drink wine instead of water. This is to be approved as long as one doesn't slip into extensive drunkenness, which conflicts with the maintenance of our health or the undisturbedness of the body.

To remain close to your question, from my personal experience the category of natural desires, both necessary and unnecessary, is the proper basis for anything to stay focused on (for the 100%). Since I regard most of our desires to be related to natural stimuli, this doesn't lead to asceticism, at least to my understanding.

The "vain" category includes anything else, anything that isn't related directly to naturally arising desires. These are the desires we have to examine very critical.

Epicurus' classification of desires is a helpful tool, but we also have to recognize that it is quite abstract and has to be applied with caution.

Where do we place the desire to earn more money (and the related steps, e.g. building a business or pursuing a career). It is necessary and natural for our survival to have access to material resources. On the other hand, as I've displayed in my previous post, it can become excessive.

So where to place the desire to learn a specific profession or to follow a career path? I totally agree, that the short formula of the 3 categories of desires can fall short very often.

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2025 at 8:48 AM

I think these two statements are important, and I could probably find one from Godfrey and Kalosyni and others to the same effect. There are legitimately several approaches to Epicurus - including at least (1) clinician and another (2) as a "philosopher."

[Quote from Don](#)

At the risk of muddying waters, I'm not sure looking for the "logical" reasons behind Epicurus' categorization of desires is as fruitful as it may sound. My perspective veers more toward seeing Epicurus as an observational researcher of the natural world and synthesizing those observations into workable practical applications for real people.

[Quote from Titus](#)

I would like to say yes, but this is just a theoretical yes as I consider the classification of desires as a guidance tool for choosing priorities. In this sense, the category of natural and necessary desires is something that has to be of number one priority to us.

Again I think both are valid approaches and they are a large part of what we need to continue to do here at the forum. At the moment I'm thinking that it's important to emphasize both and not leave either unappreciated, similar to how both Menoecus AND Herodotus are important.

Clearly Epicurus thought enough of the natural and necessary distinction to refer to it in both the letter to Menoecus and the Principle Doctrines. If one wanted to debate priorities, one side could note that this formula comes before even the detailed discussion of pleasure in the letter to Menoecus, but on the other hand it comes rather late (29) in the [Principal Doctrines](#).

One could also argue that he who focuses only on the logic misses some of the practical usage, while he who focuses only on the practical uses is powerless against the forces of the world which deny him the practice of pleasure.

I think everyone here at the forum does a good job of keeping both in perspective, but I am equally confident that outside the forum, the elevation of the practical application to the preeminent role is a major problem that needs to be tackled. So I'll admit much of what I write tends to be aimed at preparing arguments for external audiences, or those who aren't familiar with Epicurus and who need to know what to prioritize in their initial reading. But in the end, both the focus on practice and the focus on theory are needed as they depend on each other.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 3, 2025 at 9:36 AM

[Rolf](#) A few thoughts (a little late)...

You would avoid pursuing "unnatural and unnecessary" pleasures such as power, fame, and great wealth because they are very difficult to obtain and the pursuit of them comes with great troubles and pains and the attainment of them also results in great troubles and pains.

As for "natural and necessary" (things which are necessary for survival and living a good and happy life - food, water, shelter, safety, clothing, friends, exercise, study of philosophy etc.) -- these should hopefully come about fairly easily and if they don't we buckle down and put in some effort and tolerate short term discomfort so that these will be satisfied).

And as for "natural and unnecessary" (things which are like "icing on the cake" of life - great variations of sensations and "luxuries") -- we realize that these are not the main focus of life but we do not shun them when they are readily available and easy to get, and knowing that we can best enjoy "luxuries/luxurious sensations" not through continuous enjoyment, but intermittently.

And especially with regard to "natural and unnecessary", this Vatican Saying:

VS 71: "Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?"

And we wouldn't invest a great amount of effort for obtaining the "natural and unnecessary" pleasures especially if it takes away time from friendships and all the necessary things for a good and happy life. (It is important to take note that we see that many people in the modern world put a lot of mental investment into thoughts of pursuing variations of sensation, so it seems like an acceptable thing to do, when in reality they are ignoring other important areas of their life).

Edit note, 1:14 pm ET - I am thinking further that another way to think about "natural and unnecessary" is the desire for things which are luxurious AND cost beyond one's means. And the purpose of excluding these is so that you can enjoy the satisfaction of what is easily at hand (you aren't endlessly longing for things beyond your means) and also to support a lifestyle of "self-sufficiency" (no need to sell your soul to the "devil" (a king or high ranking person, or in modern times climbing a corporate ladder) in an attempt to get luxurious things.

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.

Post by "Pacatus" of May 3, 2025 at 3:54 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

My perspective veers more toward seeing Epicurus as an observational researcher of the natural world and synthesizing those observations into workable practical applications for real people.

Don

How do you think this might relate to past discussions on here about the “practical Epicurean” and the “philosophical Epicurean” (my shortcut terms, the latter referring to folks who have the ability and inclination to delve more deeply into the texts and scholarly – which is not to say “academic” – analyses)? My sense of the general sentiment on here is that the former are predicted to fall away from Epicurean practice if not sufficiently philosophically educated.

Or: how to offer a helpful (“therapeutic”) Epicurean practice toward daily life to the former group without **undue** simplification (my emphasis)? Or is that not possible? (If not, then Epicureanism seems destined to remain an option only for a fairly narrow segment of the general populace.) What can we offer to the factory worker who labors overtime hours, or the farmworker bending her back to harvest our fruits and vegetables, or ... ? Anything? If so ... how? (If not ... then not.)

Just some questions for thought ... (Since you've already risked muddying the waters ... 😊)

Post by “Godfrey” of May 3, 2025 at 4:50 PM

I can't help but speculate that the formulation of the categories of desires is a reaction against asceticism and a defense against the enemies of pleasure. To me the categories are an improvement upon the philosophies that seek removal of all desires, which could be the very definition of asceticism.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 3, 2025 at 5:25 PM

Quote from Cassius

But it's a key issue to remember that variation is pleasure too, and Epicurus is not saying "and variation is not desirable."



Post by “Don” of May 3, 2025 at 6:06 PM

Great questions, [Cassius](#). I didn't want you to think I was ignoring you post. I'm currently on the road for work, and your points deserve some thoughtful response. I'll cogitate on the way home and post something later today or tomorrow.

And I have thoughts. Too be continued...

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2025 at 7:56 PM

No problem Don I figured you were preoccupied. Rolf has raised some good questions so credit to him for helping us look at this with fresh eyes.

Post by “Don” of May 4, 2025 at 12:06 AM

I just noticed that [Pacatus](#) was the one who asked me "How do you think this might relate to past discussions on here about the “practical Epicurean” and the “philosophical Epicurean”?" Mea culpa. I thought that was [Cassius](#). Let me address those questions first.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

How do you think this might relate to past discussions on here about the “practical Epicurean” and the “philosophical Epicurean”?

I wouldn't use the modifiers "practical" and "philosophical," but I don't want to disparage one group over another. That said, I'd characterize these two groups as "browsers" and "researchers." Or maybe "surface" vs "deep." Or maybe Cliffs Notes vs encyclopedic Epicureans. Or maybe horizontal Epicureans vs vertical Epicureans, those who only need/want a surface understanding as opposed to those who want to delve deeply into one philosophy. Both are (hopefully) looking for practical applications - for a way to more fully live their life; however,

the horizontal ones are skimming along the surface. The others not only want the "how" but the "why." Both groups undoubtedly come to Epicurean philosophy with preconceived notions (How can they not?), but the reason the skimmers *tend* to leave this particular forum is that those expectations and preconceived notions aren't borne out by deeper study. Those who think "I like Epicureanism because it validates my minimalism" or "Epicureanism sounds like Buddhism because he wants me to limit my desires to the bare minimum" don't get reinforced by further study. They retreat to a "surface" understanding of the philosophy because it's a safe place for them and satisfies their desire and basic curiosity. If someone is incurious for deeper understanding and wants a superficial understanding of the philosophy, we can't make them curious or make them study. We are working against a strong cultural headwind. They may just be looking for something to add to their eclectic cafeteria style of personal philosophy and may incorporate some personal understanding of Epicurus and move along to their next interesting philosophical topic.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

how to offer a helpful ("therapeutic") Epicurean practice toward daily life to the former group without undue simplification (my emphasis)? Or is that not possible? (If not, then Epicureanism seems destined to remain an option only for a fairly narrow segment of the general populace.)

Ah! So, the "former group" (what you called the "practical" Epicureans) has likely gotten what they want and moved on. It seems to me you're asking a bigger question: "What's in it (Epicureanism) for the person 'on the street'?" How can we make Epicureanism attractive to those not necessarily interested in "*Philosophy*"? Who could benefit from living for pleasure? Epicureanism will never *appeal* to everyone or maybe not even to a plurality of people. Even in the religion surveys, many people aren't "religious" but they still believe in an afterlife, a "higher power," and other supernatural ideas. They don't want to not believe in them, and Epicureanism is adamant that you can't be a supernatural Epicurean, either horizontal or vertical. So, our potential pool is limited. Now, If someone is genuinely curious and asked us "Why are you an Epicurean?" we should have a readily understood answer, succinct, clear, easy to understand.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

What can we offer to the factory worker who labors overtime hours, or the farmworker bending her back to harvest our fruits and vegetables, or ... ? Anything? If so ... how? (If not ... then not.)

The factory worker and the farm worker are human beings. They're not special. They just may have never considered Epicureanism as a way of looking at the world. What do we have to offer? A life free from fear of divine wrath and punishment after death, a life focused on being

in touch with how they're feeling and acting on that, a life where one's perspective focuses on happiness, satisfaction, being true to one's nature as a living being.

How would you see the factory worker or the farm worker or the body shop mechanic or the waitress or the check-out clerk at the grocery store or... name anyone... living their life differently if we successfully evangelized to them? For me, they would live it like anyone else trying to put Epicurean philosophy into practice. One's occupation doesn't define them as a living breathing human being.

That said, we are not evangelizers. We are not (I hope!) going to be out on street corners with sandwich boards or yelling at people. I've regularly passed people with giant signs and using bullhorns to tell me to "turn from your wicked ways." Maybe Epicureans *would* be on the street corner handing out leaflets? But where do we point them? It's not like there's a Epicurean Garden three miles down the street. To our forum? To [AxA](#)'s meet-up in Canada? To the podcast? One big hurdle we as students of Epicurus have is there's no wider in-person support community. We don't have "places of worship." We don't have a pop culture ecosystem like the Stoics.

I agree that we DO need an "elevator pitch" for the philosophy. The Tetracharmakos is too inside baseball. A good, solid reminder for students of the philosophy with some depth of understanding, but not an evangelizing tool. I'll try my hand from my perspective. Your mileage may vary...

Why are you an Epicurean? What does that even mean?

For me, the philosophy reinforces my conviction that we live in a material world and are not under the thumb or watchful eye of some god.

I take responsibility for my life and the choices I make. There are two choices I can make: I can choose to act in ways that are good for me in the long run, or I can act in ways that are going to be painful now or later.

From all available evidence, I believe this is the only life I'll have: from when I was born to the day I die. That's it. Any "afterlife" is only the memory of me that will live on in those that knew me.

Post by "Cassius" of May 4, 2025 at 6:25 AM

Good post Don.

[Quote from Don](#)

Maybe Epicureans would be on the street corner handing out leaflets? But where do we point them?

I wonder what the pamphlets that Cicero referred to in his day said at the end to address "Do You Want To Know More?"

Post by "Don" of May 4, 2025 at 7:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I wonder what the pamphlets that Cicero referred to in his day said at the end to address "Do You Want To Know More?"

I can never remember where that comes up in Cicero. Where is that?

As @Eikadistes has shown, there were Epicurean communities throughout the ancient world. And those are just the attested ones in the surviving texts and archeological record. Chances are, from my understanding, if you were reading an Epicurean "pamphlet," you had known Epicureans in your city or town.

Post by "Cassius" of May 4, 2025 at 8:38 AM

Quote

I always have trouble with DeWitt's footnotes since they are in such small text, but it's on page 30 of his book:

For this ambitious program of expansion the school was prepared as no Greek school had ever been or ever would be. Not only was every convert obligated to become a missionary; he was also a colporteur who had available a pamphlet for every need. "Are you bloated with love of praise? There are infallible rites," wrote Horace, "which can restore your health if only you will read a pamphlet three times with open mind," "Send him a pamphlet," cried Cicero in the senate-house, taunting the Epicurean Piso about the ambition of his son-in-law Julius Caesar. Could better evidence be cited to prove

that Epicureans were pamphleteers?

Post by "Don" of May 4, 2025 at 10:19 AM

Quote

Could better evidence be cited to prove that Epicureans were pamphleteers?

Uh, yeah. That's the "evidence" for Epicureans being "pamphleteers"?

Here's the context of the Horace quote:

Quote

THE FIRST BOOK OF THE EPISTLES OF HORACE.
EPISTLE I.

TO MAECENAS.

The poet renounces all verses of a ludicrous turn, and resolves to apply himself wholly to the study of philosophy, which teaches to bridle the desires, and to postpone every thing to virtue.

Maecenas, the subject of my earliest song, justly entitled to my latest, dost thou seek to engage me again in the old lists, having been tried sufficiently, and now presented with the foils? My age is not the same, nor is my genius. Veianius, his arms consecrated on a pillar of Hercules' temple, lives snugly retired in the country, that he may not from the extremity of the sandy amphitheater so often supplicate the people's favor. Some one seems frequently to ring in my purified ear: "Wisely in time dismiss the aged courser, lest, an object of derision, he miscarry at last, and break his wind." Now therefore I lay aside both verses, and all other sportive matters; my study and inquiry is after what is true and fitting, and I am wholly engaged in this: I lay up, and collect rules which I may be able hereafter to bring into use. And lest you should perchance ask under what leader, in what house [of philosophy], I enter myself a pupil: addicted to swear implicitly to the ipse-dixits of no particular master, wherever the weather drives me, I am carried a guest. One while I become active, and am plunged in the waves of state affairs, a maintainer and a rigid partisan of strict virtue; then again I relapse insensibly into Aristippus' maxims, and endeavor to adapt circumstances to myself, not

myself to circumstances. As the night seems long to those with whom a mistress has broken her appointment, and the day slow to those who owe their labor; as the year moves lazy with minors, whom the harsh guardianship of their mothers confines; so all that time to me flows tedious and distasteful, which delays my hope and design of strenuously executing that which is of equal benefit to the poor and to the rich, which neglected will be of equal detriment to young and to old. It remains, that I conduct and comfort myself by these principles; your sight is not so piercing as that of Lynceus; you will not however therefore despise being anointed, if you are sore-eyed: nor because you despair of the muscles of the invincible Glycon, will you be careless of preserving your body from the knotty gout. There is some point to which we may reach, if we can go no further. Does your heart burn with avarice, and a wretched desire of more? Spells there are, and incantations, with which you may mitigate this pain, and rid yourself of a great part of the distemper. **Do you swell with the love of praise? There are certain purgations which can restore you, a certain treatise, being perused thrice with purity of mind.** The envious, the choleric, the indolent, the slave to wine, to women—none is so savage that he can not be tamed, if he will only lend a patient ear to discipline.

It is virtue, to fly vice; and the highest wisdom, to have lived free from folly. You see with what toil of mind and body you avoid those things which you believe to be the greatest evils, a small fortune and a shameful repulse. An active merchant, you run to the remotest Indies, fleeing poverty through sea, through rocks, through flames. And will you not learn, and hear, and be advised by one who is wiser, that you may no longer regard those things which you foolishly admire and wish for? What little champion of the villages and of the streets would scorn being crowned at the great Olympic games, who had the hopes and happy opportunity of victory without toil? Silver is less valuable than gold, gold than virtue. "O citizens, citizens, money is to be sought first; virtue after riches:" this the highest Janus from the lowest inculcates; young men and old repeat these maxims, having their bags and account-books hung on the left arm. You have soul, have breeding, have eloquence and honor: yet if six or seven thousand sesterces be wanting to complete your four hundred thousand, you shall be a plebeian. But boys at play cry, "You shall be king, if you will do right." Let this be a [man's] thus his forms? What does the poor man? Laugh [at him too]: is he not forever changing his garrets, beds, baths, barbers? He is as much surfeited in a hired boat, as the rich man is, whom his own galley conveys.

If I meet you with my hair cut by an uneven barber, you laugh [at me]: if I chance to have a ragged shirt under a handsome coat, or if my disproportioned gown fits me ill, you laugh. What [do you do], when my judgment contradicts itself? it despises what it before desired; seeks for that which lately it neglected; is all in a ferment, and is inconsistent in the whole tenor of life; pulls down, builds up, changes square to round.

In this case, you think I am mad in the common way, and you do not laugh, nor believe that I stand in need of a physician, or of a guardian assigned by the praetor; though you are the patron of my affairs, and are disgusted at the ill-pared nail of a friend that depends upon you, that reveres you.

In a word, the wise man is inferior to Jupiter alone, is rich, free, honorable, handsome, lastly, king of kings; above all, he is sound, unless when phlegm is troublesome.

Display More

I didn't see any indication here of the "certain treatise" being an Epicurean one.

As for Cicero:

[Cicero: In Pisonem \(2\)](#)

[25.] L [59] But, since we cannot alter the past, why does not this mannikin, this Epicurus of mud and clay, hasten to instil these sublime and philosophical doctrines into that great and illustrious commander his son-in-law **? Believe me, it is fame that bids that great man soar; he burns, he is ablaze with desire for a splendid and a well-earned triumph. He has not learnt the lessons that you have learnt. **Send him a tract** ; nay, if at this stage you can contrive to meet him in person, meditate what phrases you can use to quench and stifle the flames of his desire....

"Send him a tract (libellum)"? That's it? That could easily refer to [Principal Doctrines](#) or a section of *On Nature*.

libellus., a little book, pamphlet, esp. a book written in pages, and not in long rolls

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, libellus](#)

It is of paramount importance to remember that the ancient world didn't have printing presses and didn't distribute broadsheets like in Colonial America. All texts were manuscripts. Copying existed, of course, often copied by skilled enslaved people. But they weren't using bulk mail to blanket a community with flyers or pamphlets.

Post by “TauPhi” of May 4, 2025 at 12:40 PM

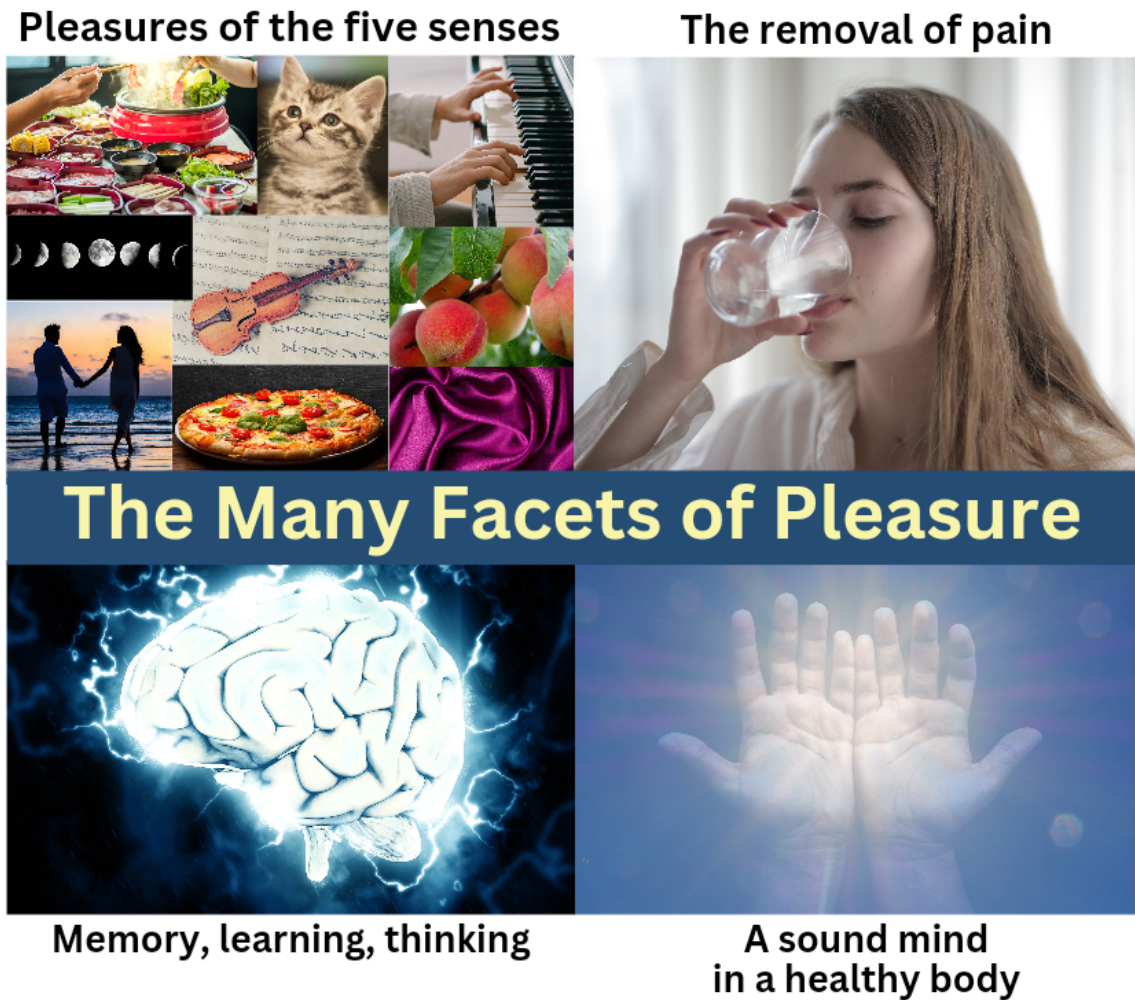
[Quote from Don](#)

Uh, yeah. That's the "evidence" for Epicureans being "pamphleteers"?

Clearly. On top of that, better evidence couldn't be cited to prove that Epicureans were also the inventors of laserjet printers. 😊

Post by "Kalosyni" of May 4, 2025 at 1:45 PM

Here is a graphic that I made some time ago.



Thinking to soon make one regarding "natural and necessary/unnecessary" and "unnatural/unnecessary".

Post by “Pacatus” of May 4, 2025 at 3:36 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

One's occupation doesn't define them as a living breathing human being.

Thanks for the thorough reply, [Don](#) .

I just want to say that, lest anyone think I was being elitist with my reference to factory workers *et al* – I spent pretty much all of my second decade, and some of the third, as pure “blue-collar” labor: washing dishes in a restaurant basement kitchen, a few years in a couple of canneries, and eight years of seven-day rotating shift work in a paper mill. So, of course, I know your comment here is right on. 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of May 4, 2025 at 4:02 PM

I'm a bit late but, to me, practical v philosophical isn't a useful distinction as they are ideally one in the same for an Epicurist. Maybe surface v in depth, dilettante v serious student or something along those lines provides a better comparison?

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 5, 2025 at 3:02 AM

Thinking about "natural and unnecessary"...(natural **but** unnecessary is another way to think about it):

You need a jacket to keep warm but it doesn't matter what it looks like.

Unnecessary for it to be a new jacket.

Unnecessary for it to be "in fashion" or a particular style.

Unnecessary for it to be a certain type of fabric or color.

And, a blanket could keep you warm if you don't have a jacket, but a jacket is easier to wear because it won't fall off.

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2025 at 6:35 AM

So Epicurus would tell everyone to buy a single black jacket when they reach 18 or full height, and never buy another one until that one falls into rags? As a matter of principle, why would anyone using the NNUU formula do more than that?

Because you like different colors? That's unnecessary.

Because you like different styles? That's unnecessary.

Because you don't like to look at worn threadbare clothing? That's unnecessary.

And on and on...

How does the classification itself lead to any other result?

My point is that the classification itself standing alone is useless or even harmful, just like "pleasure is the absence of pain" can be destructive, without other overriding information.

In one case, the additional information that is needed is that there are only two feelings, which means that the absence of one is the presence of the other. In this case, the additional information is that all pleasure is desirable and worthy of choice if it brings more pleasure than pain, therefore you will never think of limiting yourself only to desires that are "necessary and natural," especially since you also know that there are no supernatural gods or ideal forms that require everyone to follow a prescribed list of what is "natural" or "necessary" for them.

New jackets in many (but not all) cases are going to bring more pleasure than pain. Thus the "principle of the classification" (as Torquatus says) explains that "unnatural and unnecessary" can be expected to cost more in pain.

I'd say the classification system was not intended to be a hard and fast rule philosophical rule, but a tool, almost like a price predictor or cost estimator - a way of predicting how much pain to expect from an action so that you can then decide if the pleasure will be worth it. The future isn't certain and we disdain fortune-telling, but that doesn't mean we don't need a practical way of predicting what will happen from pursuing alternative choices.

And as a rule of prediction, it works very well - "nothing could be more useful..." per Torquatus. So it's very productive to use the classification system to predict the costs of your pleasures. But the overriding rule is to seek out more pleasure than pain using the cost estimator, not to use the cost estimator as an end in itself.

So I would also analogize this classification system to "virtue," which is necessary to consider in order to obtain happiness, but which is not the end in itself. Both "virtue" and this classification system can be very destructive if taken out of context and put into the place of the end rather than of the means.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 5, 2025 at 8:45 AM

I don't think I'll be able to feel settled about this until I feel that "natural and unnecessary" has been adequately defined.

We know that Epicurus was 1) influenced by, 2) transformed and adapted, and 3) argued against, some aspects of the philosophical ideas that were popular during his time in ancient Greece.

Does anyone know which section of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics talks about "unnecessary desires" ? [Bryan Don Joshua](#)

According to an internet search:

"Aristotle also identified unnecessary desires, which he viewed as those that go beyond the essential and contribute to excessive consumption, luxury, and unhappiness. These desires are often associated with material possessions and status, rather than genuine human needs."

Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2025 at 9:04 AM

I want to add this: The only way it would make sense to conclude that you would never pursue anything other than natural and necessary desires would be to believe that as a matter of natural law or some other necessity or flat guarantee, that pursuing anything other than natural and necessary desires is guaranteed to lead to more pain than pleasure.

It does not appear to me that there are any grounds of necessity on which that can be argued to be the case, or that there are any such that statements in Epicurean philosophy. In contrast, the starting point is the statement that all pleasures are desirable, but some will bring more pain than pleasure. It seems to me a stretch to say that there is any flat list that always must be followed to the exclusion of the general rule, even if there are generalizations, such as excessive pursuit of sex or romantic love, that can be made as a warning against that course.

The only way there could be such a flat list would be if there were supernatural gods, or ideal forms, or some other mechanism that guaranteed such a result. Otherwise it's up to us to analyze our own circumstances to determine what is likely to result for us.

Kalosyni's search for an explicit definition is a good way of looking at the problem, but I think part of the answer will be that while all sorts of explanations can be given, a major part of any

correct explanation is that no explicit flat list that applies to everyone can be given.

Note: Just in case I am not being clear with the term "flat list," I mean "flat" in the sense of evenly and explicitly applying to everyone at all times in all places and in all circumstances. So a "flat list" would be an explicit list of do's or "don'ts" that always applies without any exception whatsoever.

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2025 at 11:23 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The only way it would make sense to conclude that you would never pursue anything other than natural and necessary desires would be to believe that as a matter of natural law or some other necessity or flat guarantee, that pursuing anything other than natural and necessary desires is guaranteed to lead to more pain than pleasure

That is very insightful and something I've certainly never thought of! Well done.

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!

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2025 at 1:14 PM

One thing I will say about it is that it strikes me that there is a connection between thinking it is a good idea to (1) categorize all feelings into two categories and (2) categorize all desires into four categories. There's no necessity that we do either, and we could have chosen to come up with many categories, but it makes good sense to reduce them as far as reasonably possible, and it provides a useful framework for analysis.

I would see this as Epicurus being both practical and philosophical at the same time.

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2025 at 4:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One thing I will say about it is that it strikes me that there is a connection between thinking it is a good idea to (1) categorize all feelings into two categories and (2) categorize all desires into four categories.

Another insightful idea! You are on a roll, my friend! I like that direction.

Post by “AxA” of May 5, 2025 at 9:21 PM

Tonight's discussion helped me to see the impossibility of neatly categorizing the desires. These three “categories” really might be best seen as a spectrum, from the natural/necessary end of being easy to obtain with a huge pleasure payoff, to the unnatural/unnecessary end of being impossible to obtain with a very dubious pleasure payoff.

Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2025 at 9:25 PM

i put together this chart to assist in conversation in our Monday zoom discussion about this topic. My summary of each answer is brief and no doubt grossly inadequate to what the speaker had to say, but I think the variation in answers might be good food for thought as the discussion continues. No doubt each person was thinking something different, especially as I

explained the question, but the fact that the result of the Yes/No question was almost evenly split indicates that the answer does not seem to be obvious to everyone..

As Tau Phi asked me, my own answer to the first two columns would be "Pleasure / No," but like everyone else I would have explanation for each answer (and that's what we are discussing in this thread.).

<h2 style="text-align: center; color: #008080;">The Rolf Question: Why Pursue Unnecessary Desires?</h2>			
<p style="background-color: black; color: white; padding: 2px;">Why pursue (natural) unnecessary desires, if necessary desires are all that are needed for happiness? If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain (ie. 100% pleasure 0% pain), aren't unnecessary desires merely variation?</p>			
	What Is The Goal of Life?	Can You Reach This Goal By Pursuing Only Natural and Necessary Desires? (Yes/No)	If your answer is Yes, Why (Generally / Philosophically) Would You Pursue Any Other Desires?
Kalosyni	Pleasure, Happiness	No	Some mental pleasures and happiness take a lot of time and effort
Martin	Pleasure	No	He wants the necessary but he then focuses on the remainder.
Alex	Have Fun	Yes	You would because they are fun – they are an optional bonus
Steve	Pleasure / Wellbeing	Yes	Because eventually you will need variation to stay at the goal.
Tau Phi	Satisfaction / Happiness	No	He wants experiences so as to know himself; he would not be content with only <u>NN</u>
<u>Sanantonio</u>	PLEASURE	Yes	Yes because it is pleasurable.
Raphael	Contentment and Creativity (Pleasure)	No	Restrictions are painful and can lead to guilt.
<u>DaveT</u>	To Be Happy	No	Happy people pursue more than the necessary; limitations are Platonic/Stoic; its normal and natural to go beyond <u>N+N</u>

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 5, 2025 at 9:46 PM

Thinking further about the question "What is the goal of life?"

...more directly: "What is my goal in life?" -- I would add more such as well-being, satisfaction, peace of mind, and pleasant abiding...in addition to pleasure (enjoyment) and happiness.

Post by "Don" of May 5, 2025 at 9:56 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"What is my goal in life?" -- I would add more such as well-being, satisfaction, peace of mind, and pleasant abiding...in addition to pleasure (enjoyment) and happiness.

I would tend to concur with you, [Kalosyni](#) . My only tangent or adjacent thought on that is that all those (well-being, satisfaction, peace of mind (ataraxia?), and pleasant abiding) are, in fact, ALL pleasure per "absence of pain = pleasure" and "the feelings are two." So, the "goal of life" is pleasure, writ large.

The problem that enters in is that there are so many ways to define pleasure above the "pleasure/pain" dichotomy. I think that's why Epicurus can write (paraphrased) "the health of the body and the tranquility of the mind is the goal (telos) of a blessed life" and "pleasure is the goal (telos)" and "if indeed eudaimonia is present, we have everything; if eudaimonia is not present, we do anything to have eudaimonia."

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 (φυσικάί physikai)
 1. desires that are both necessary and natural (καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ 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 (αἱ 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 αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ καὶ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ καὶ epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3913/ ἀναγκαῖαι, δὲ αἱ 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).

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2025 at 11:04 PM

Don that has me thinking too about another comment that was made tonight, I think by Tau Phi to Kalosyni, that in her example of thinking about a "jacket," that -- even for the same person - a "jacket" might one day be natural, might another day be necessary, and another day (possibly) be unnatural or unnecessary.

In other words, that virtually any single concrete desire we could name (excepting only extreme examples like "world dictator" or the like) might migrate between the categories based on

circumstances.

If so (and i think it's yes) what does that do to the attempt to make the categories into a hard and fast list?

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2025 at 11:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If so (and i think it's yes) what does that do to the attempt to make the categories into a hard and fast list?

There can be no "hard and fast" list of any of the myriad desires because it's (like much of Epicurus' philosophy) all very contextual. Granted, there are some desires that can be labeled necessary: The desire to breathe, the desire to eat, etc. BUT even there consider this:

We ALL have the desire to breathe. What happens when this desire occurs if you're trying to hide from someone who wants to kill you? You're holding your breath to remain undetected. The desire to breath is overridden by the context of your desire to remain hidden and safe. I realize that's an extreme example, but I think it illustrates the point.

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2025 at 11:14 PM

I think a corollary of this is that we have to ask what is our *motivation* for our desires. We have to look from where desires arise.

Take for example, running for political office. Is the motivation for that desire grounded in right belief or arising from empty vain belief? Is the motivation to work for more safety and security for one's community (and hence oneself) or to amass power to self-aggrandize or use power to manipulate others (which would/should make you always fearful of reprisal or other harm)?

Post by “Don” of May 6, 2025 at 7:17 AM

FWIW, For my own review and for anyone else curious, I'm going to review the words Epicurus used in his categorization of desires:

"Desire" ΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΑ epithymia : desire, yearning; craving, want, wish

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐπιθυμῖα](#)

"Natural" ΦΥΣΙΚΟΣ physikos: natural, produced or caused by nature, inborn, native

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φυσικός](#)

"Necessary" ΑΝΑΓΚΑΙΟΣ anangkaios : necessary; necessary (physically or morally); indispensable (NOTE: That last connotation puts a little different spin on "necessary")

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀναγκᾶς](#)

"Empty" ΚΕΝΟΣ kenos : empty, fruitless, void; vain, pretentious (NOTE: this is the same word Epicurus uses in "atoms and *void*" Think of empty space, no ground. Beliefs or desires that are kenos have nothing valid underpinning them or supporting them. They're a house built on sand to bring in a biblical metaphor.)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, κενός](#)

So, it seems like there are:

- Natural desires
- Natural and necessary desires
- Natural and not necessary desires
- Empty desires (neither natural nor necessary?)

Post by "Cassius" of May 6, 2025 at 7:53 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Think of empty space, no ground. Beliefs or desires that are kenos have nothing valid underpinning them or supporting them. They're a house built on sand to bring in a biblical metaphor.)

If this is the same word used in regard to atoms, then let me ask this question:

Does "empty space" necessarily have a completely negative connotation in the way we are

often interpreting it? Were it not for empty space, the universe could not exist as it is - the atoms would have no place through which to move.

I'm not yet suggesting it - though I might - that being "empty" might not be a 100% negative concept in Epicurus' thinking. It's not like the atoms are "at war" against the void - they are both needed to make the world work, and without void the atoms would be able to do nothing. And if empty were looked at as a concept that has some positive benefit, then maybe that observation would need to be extended to the ethical side as well.

Post by "Don" of May 6, 2025 at 8:14 AM

I'm going to push back hard on this line. Yes, it's the same word but with different connotations.

The Void is empty. Yes, it allows for movement by atoms, but the important thing is that it's empty. It's the emptiness that allows the unimpeded movement.

Empty beliefs, metaphorically, are devoid of any substance. There's nothing that supports them. They arise not from philosophical understanding but from misunderstanding or disregard of the goal of life.

I'll let Epicurus take it from here...

U116. I summon you to unceasing joy and not to *empty and trifling virtues*, which destroy your confidence in the fruits of what you have. ἐγὼ δ' ἐφ' ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς παρακαλῶ καὶ οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρετὰς κενὰς καὶ ματαίας καὶ ταραχώδεις ἐχούσας τῶν καρπῶν ἐλπίδας.

U202. He who follows nature and not *groundless* opinions is completely self-reliant. With regard to what is enough by nature, everything he owns is a source of wealth; whereas with regard to unlimited desires, even the greatest wealth is poverty. ὁ οὖν τῇ φύσει παρακολουθῶν καὶ μὴ ταῖς κεναῖς δόξαις ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτάρκης· πρὸς γὰρ τὸ τῇ φύσει ἀρκοῦν πᾶσα κτησίς ἐστι πλοῦτος, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἀορίστους ὀρέξεις καὶ ὁ μέγιστος πλοῦτός ἐστι πενία.

U221. A philosopher's words are *empty* if they do not heal the suffering of mankind. For just as medicine is useless if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy is useless if it does not remove suffering from the soul. κενὸς ἐκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὅφ' οὐ μὴδὲν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται· ὥσπερ γὰρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδὲν ὄφελος μὴ τὰς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως οὐδὲ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μὴ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος.

U422. We need pleasure when in pain because of its absence; but when we are not experiencing such pain, and are perceiving stably, then there is no need for pleasure. For it is not the needs of nature which, from outside us, create harm, but desire driven by *groundless*

opinions. τότε χρειαίαν ἔχομεν τῆς ἡδονῆς, ὅταν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ παρεῖναι αὐτὴν ἀλγῶμεν· ὅταν δὲ τοῦτο μὴ πάσχωμεν ἐν αἰσθήσει καθεστῶτες, τότε οὐδεμία χρεία τῆς ἡδονῆς· οὐ γὰρ ἡ τῆς φύσεως ἔνδεια τὴν ἀδικίαν ποιεῖ ἕξωθεν, ἀλλ' ἡ περὶ τὰς κενὰς δόξας ὄρεξις.

U423. What brings unsurpassed joy is the removal of a great evil; and this is the nature of the good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about chattering *emptily*. τὸ γὰρ ποιοῦν ἀνυπέβλητον γῆθος τὸ πάραυτα πεφυγμένον μέγα κακόν· καὶ αὕτη φύσις ἀγαθοῦ, ἂν τις ὀρθῶς ἐπιβάλη. ἔπειτα σταθῆ, καὶ μὴ κενῶς περιπατῆ περὶ θρυλῶν.

U471. It is rare to find a man who is poor with regard to the aims of nature and rich in *groundless* desires. For a fool is never satisfied with what he has, but instead is distressed about what he doesn't have. Just as those who are feverish through the evil of their sickness are always thirsty and desiring the opposite of what they should, so those whose souls are in a bad condition are always poor in everything and through their greed fall into ever-changing desires. σπάνιον γε εὐρεῖν ἄνθρωπον <πένητα> πρὸς τὸ τῆς φύσεως τέλος καὶ πλούσιον πρὸς τὰς κενὰς δόξας. οὐδεὶς γὰρ τῶν ἀφρόνων οἷς ἔχει ἀρκεῖται, μᾶλλον δὲ οἷς οὐκ ἔχει ὀδυνᾶται. ὡσπερ οὖν οἱ πυρέττοντες διὰ κακοθήειαν τῆς νόσου ἀεὶ διψῶσι καὶ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, οὕτω καὶ οἱ τὴν ψυχὴν κακῶς ἔχοντες διακειμένην πένονται πάντων ἀεὶ καὶ εἰς πολυτρόπους ἐπιθυμίας ὑπὸ λαίμαργίας ἐμπίπτουσιν.

U485. Unhappiness is caused by fears, or by endless and *empty* desires; but he who is able to rein these in creates for himself a blissful understanding. ἢ γὰρ διὰ φόβον τις κακοδαιμονεῖ ἢ δι' ἀόριστον καὶ κενὴν ἐπιθυμίαν· ἅ τις χαλινῶν δύναται τὸν μακάριον ἑαυτῷ περιποιῆσαι λογισμόν.

U486. Pain does not consist in being deprived of things, but rather in bearing the avoidable distress caused by *groundless* opinion. οὐκ ἀπορεῖν τούτων πόνος ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ φέρειν μᾶλλον τὸν ἀνόνητον ἐκ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν πόνον.

Post by “Don” of May 6, 2025 at 10:47 PM

SIDEBAR: In looking at the Vatican Sayings above, I made the following delightful discovery.

Quote

U471. ...through their greed fall into **ever-changing** desires. ...καὶ εἰς **πολυτρόπους ἐπιθυμίας** ὑπὸ λαίμαργίας ἐμπίπτουσιν.

The word translated here as "ever-changing" is πολυτρόπους (polytropic).

My delightful discovery part is that πολυτρόπος is the first word used to describe Odysseus in the first line in Homer's *Odyssey*: ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ "Sing to me, O Muse, of the man of twists and turns,..."

πολυτρόπος has a myriad of interpretations, which is appropriate. It is literally formed of πολυ (poly) "many" + τρόπος (trópos) "a turn, direction, course, way; a way, manner, fashion; of persons, a way of life, habit, custom"

So, in VS471 the πολυτρόπους ἐπιθυμίας " 'polytropic' desires " conveys the meaning of desires that are ever-turning, always changing direction, taking many courses or directions. To me, it conveys a sense of never being satisfied, always changing ones mind as to what they want, and so on.

I can hear the objections like "We shouldn't just be satisfied. What happens to ambition?" and so on. I simply point to VS35. Don't ruin the things you have by wanting what you don't have, but realize that they too are things you once did wish for.

Post by “Joshua” of May 7, 2025 at 9:17 AM

Very interesting, [Don](#)! Lucretius refers to Homer himself as "ever-flourishing", *semper florentis*.

Post by “Bryan” of May 7, 2025 at 10:41 AM

For the threefold division, it seems that "empty" has a negative connotation in Epistemology and Ethics, but is neutral in Physics.

[Quote from Don](#)

VS423.

I think you want U423, and so for the rest.

Is that from a version that has the Greek and English already paired?

Post by “Don” of May 7, 2025 at 1:16 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

I think you want U423, and so for the rest.

Exactly! Thanks, [Bryan](#) ! I was switching back and forth between VS and Fragments. (Corrected above now)

[Selected Fragments, by Epicurus](#)

This one has the Greek and English side by side.

And

[Epicurus: Fragments - translation \(3\)](#)

423. What brings unsurpassed joy is the removal of a great evil; and this is the nature of the good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about chattering emptily. [note] τὸ γὰρ ποιοῦν ἀνυπέρβλητον γῆθος τὸ πάραυτα πεφυγμένον μέγα κακόν· καὶ αὕτη φύσις ἀγαθοῦ, ἅν τις ὀρθῶς ἐπιβάλῃ. ἔπειτα σταθῆ, καὶ μὴ κενῶς περιπατῆ περὶ θρυλῶν.

[U423]

Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" - their good - is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

Ibid., 8, p. 1091E: Thus Epicurus, and Metrodorus too, suppose {that the middle is the summit and the end} when they take the position that escape from ill is the reality and upper limit of the good.

Post by "Rolf" of May 7, 2025 at 1:32 PM

I'm on holiday right now and have yet to read through the whole thread, but I've been thinking about this conundrum and would like to add this quick thought: The classifications are like priorities. We should probably rarely, if ever, sacrifice natural necessary desires for unnatural necessary ones, when keeping long term pleasure in mind.

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2025 at 4:41 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

The classifications are like priorities.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

We should probably rarely, if ever, sacrifice natural necessary desires for unnatural necessary ones, when keeping long term pleasure in mind.

I started to just click "like" and move on, but on second thought I am not sure this - even with the rarely caveat - does not just restate the problem. *Are* these classifications priorities, or are they just predictions of the relative cost in pain?

I wanted to make an exception for "those things necessary to remain alive," but even that isn't absolute -- Don't we sometimes give our lives for a friend?

The "rarely, if ever" helps, but isn't that the question you are asking? What is the rule that allows you to know when those exceptions would apply, other than that this is a personal decision involving the way you personal estimate the final outcome in terms of net pleasure of all kinds over net pain of all kinds?

As a generalization I think we all can see that the classification makes sense. However you're asking the right question -- when do the exceptions apply, to to know that you have to know what *really* is the overriding analysis. I don't think we find the ultimate analysis here in this classification alone. The ultimate question is always going to be the external consideration of expected result that isn't stated in full just by stating the classes, or by stating that those desires which don't bring pain - if unfulfilled - are "empty."

Maybe another way of stating this is that the Epicureans never stated that the ultimate goal of life is "the pleasures achieved through natural and necessary desires." The goal is "pleasure," and the reason there can be no qualification is that everyone's situation is going to be different.

Is it possible to generalize? Yes, definitely. But generalizing is not the same as a hard and fast rule, even of "priorities." I think Don and maybe others have given good examples of the exceptions (such as "holding your breath to dive to get out of the cave" or whatever.)

Post by "Don" of May 7, 2025 at 7:14 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

those desires which don't bring pain - if unfulfilled - are "empty."

In part (or in full?), empty desires, from my perspective, are those that cannot - by definition - ever be satisfied. I want more money, I want more power, and so on. I'd be curious for others' examples. Power and money have their place. Philodemus talks about "natural wealth." But greed - without limits - can never be satisfied. That's an empty - think bottomless - desire.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

We should probably rarely, if ever, sacrifice natural necessary desires for unnatural necessary ones, when keeping long term pleasure in mind.

I don't think there are unnatural but necessary desires (per Epicurus' categories).

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2025 at 7:52 PM

Yes Don it's time to reinforce that and confirm that we count to three rather than four. I seem to remember Cicero questioning this in On Ends, and perhaps Aulus Gellius defends Epicurus, on the same point:

- 1 - Natural and Necessary
 - 2 - Natural but not Necessary
 - 3 - Necessary but not Natural ????????
 - 4 - Neither Natural Nor Necessary
-

Post by “Don” of May 7, 2025 at 8:06 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes Don it's time to reinforce that and confirm that we count to three rather than four. I seem to remember Cicero questioning this in On Ends, and perhaps Aulus Gellius defends Epicurus, on the same point:

- 1 - Natural and Necessary
- 2 - Natural but not Necessary
- 3 - Necessary but not Natural ????????
- 4 - Neither Natural Nor Necessary

If you have Cicero's citation handy, that would be handy.

That's one reason I like natural, necessary, and empty.

Epicurus' categories are not a strict permutation of the words *un-natural* and *un/necessary*.

Post by “Rolf” of May 7, 2025 at 8:15 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

don't think there are unnatural but necessary desires (per Epicurus' categories).

Ah sorry, I meant natural but unnecessary

Post by “Don” of May 7, 2025 at 8:43 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

don't think there are unnatural but necessary desires (per Epicurus' categories).

Ah sorry, I meant natural but unnecessary

Sorry as well for my assumption.

That said, [Cassius](#) and my comments about the number of categories is always a good topic.

Post by “Cassius” of May 7, 2025 at 10:03 PM

This is Torquatus in Book 1, Section 13. I need to find Cicero's criticism:

Quote

And the consequence of this is, to make life thoroughly wretched; so that the wise man is the only one who, having cut away all vanity and error, and removed it from him, can live contented within the boundaries of nature, without melancholy and without fear. For what diversion can be either more useful or more adapted for human life than that which Epicurus employed? For he laid it down that there were three kinds of desires; the first, such as were natural and necessary; the second, such as were natural but not necessary; the third, such as were neither natural nor necessary. And these are all such, that those which are necessary are satisfied without much trouble or expense: even those which are natural and not necessary, do not require a great deal, because nature itself makes the riches, which are sufficient to content it, easy of acquisition and of limited quantity: but as for vain desires, it is impossible to find any limit to, or any moderation in them.

Post by “Cassius” of May 7, 2025 at 10:05 PM

Cicero Book 2, Section 9:

Quote

IX. We must then discard pleasure, not only in order to follow what is right, but even to be able to talk becomingly. Can we then call that the chief good in life, which we see cannot possibly be so even in a banquet?

But how is it that this philosopher speaks of three kinds of appetites,—some natural and necessary, some natural but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary? In the first place, he has not made a neat division; for out of two kinds he has made three. Now this is not dividing, but breaking in pieces. If he had said that there are two kinds of appetites, natural and superfluous ones, and that the natural appetites might be also subdivided into two kinds, necessary and not necessary, he would have been all right. And those who have learnt what he despises do usually say so. For it is a vicious division to reckon a part as a genus. However, let us pass over this, for he despises elegance in arguing; he [pg 138] speaks confusedly. We must submit to this as long as his sentiments are right. I do not, however, approve, and it is as much as I can do to endure, a philosopher speaking of the necessity of setting bounds to the desires. Is it possible to set bounds to the desires? I say that they must be banished, eradicated by the roots. For what man is there in whom appetites³⁰ dwell, who can deny that he may with propriety be called appetitive? If so, he will be avaricious, though to a limited extent; and an adulterer, but only in moderation; and he will be luxurious in the same manner. Now what sort of a philosophy is that which does not bring with it the destruction of depravity, but is content with a moderate degree of vice? Although in this division I am altogether on his side as to the facts, only I wish he would express himself better. Let him call these feelings the wishes of nature; and let him keep the name of desire for other objects, so as, when speaking of avarice, of intemperance, and of the greatest vices, to be able to indict it as it were on a capital charge. However, all this is said by him with a good deal of freedom, and is often repeated; and I do not blame him, for it is becoming in so great a philosopher, and one of such a great reputation, to defend his own degrees fearlessly.

The Aulus Gellius defense of Epicurus is at the link below, but it does not concern natural and necessary desires.

[Gellius • Attic Nights — Book II](#)

Post by “Joshua” of May 8, 2025 at 12:17 AM

On the topic of desires, I do want to mention Ben Jonson's play [The Alchemist](#). When the master of a London townhouse travels for his health, the servant he leaves behind falls into company with rogues, and they devise a number of schemes to cheat, swindle, and con their way to fortune. In one of these cons, the mark is a man named Sir Epicure Mammon, whose deep longing for the easy riches he hopes will be procured with the acquisition of the alchemical *magnum opus* - the legendary Philosopher's Stone - leaves him prey to a farcical series of embarrassments.

Here is Sir Epicure waxing poetic as he describes the panoply of his desires;

For I do mean
To have a list of wives and concubines,
Equal with Solomon, who had the stone
Alike with me; and I will make me a back
With the elixir, that shall be as tough
As Hercules, to encounter fifty a night.

I will have all my beds blown up, not stuf;
Down is too hard: and then, mine oval room
Fill'd with such pictures as Tiberius took
From Elephantis, and dull Aretine
But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse
And multiply the figures, as I walk
Naked between my succubae. My mists
I'll have of perfume, vapour'd 'bout the room,
To lose ourselves in; and my baths, like pits
To fall into; from whence we will come forth,
And roll us dry in gossamer and roses.

And my flatterers
Shall be the pure and gravest of divines,
That I can get for money. My mere fools,
Eloquent burgesses, and then my poets
The same that writ so subtly of the fart,
Whom I will entertain still for that subject.
The few that would give out themselves to be
Court and town-stallions, and, each-where, bely
Ladies who are known most innocent for them;
Those will I beg, to make me eunuchs of:
And they shall fan me with ten estrich tails

A-piece, made in a plume to gather wind.
We will be brave, Puffe, now we have the med'cine.
My meat shall all come in, in Indian shells,
Dishes of agat set in gold, and studded
With emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths, and rubies.
The tongues of carps, dormice, and camels' heels,
Boil'd in the spirit of sol, and dissolv'd pearl,
Apicius' diet, 'gainst the epilepsy:
And I will eat these broths with spoons of amber,
Headed with diamond and carbuncle.
My foot-boy shall eat pheasants, calver'd salmons,
Knots, godwits, lampreys: I myself will have
The beards of barbels served, instead of sallads;
Oil'd mushrooms; and the swelling unctuous paps
Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off,
Drest with an exquisite, and poignant sauce;
For which, I'll say unto my cook, "There's gold,
Go forth, and be a knight."