

"Natural and Necessary" As A Sliding Scale

Post by "Cassius" of March 29, 2019 at 7:14 AM

Fragment 108 of the Wall of Diogenes of Oinoanda reads, according to Martin Ferguson Smith: "Fr. 108: [One] must [regard] wealth [beyond] what is natural [as of no more use than water] to a container that is full [to] overflowing. We can look at the other people's possessions [without envy] and experience [purer] pleasure than they can; for [we are free from cravings]."

I suggest that it is important to be careful with fragments taken out of context, and which are partly or wholly "reconstructed" - the portion within the brackets is partly or wholly missing. Martin Ferguson Smith is one of the greatest living scholars of Epicurus, but how certain is he that his reconstruction is correct?

Asserting that wealth beyond what is "natural" is no more use than water to a container that is overflowing does ring true to references to "natural and necessary" in the letter to Menoecus and in "On Ends," but the purpose of my posting this is to ask you to think about what that really means, precisely.

And without intending to be flippant or disrespectful to anyone, as we consider what "wealth [beyond?] what is natural would mean, I suggest you ask yourself:

"How many slaves are natural / necessary to have?"

Because all of us today would quickly answer "zero" --- and yet we know that Epicurus himself had numbers of slaves, as we know with certainty from his will, in which he freed some but not all (it is unclear how many he had in total).

Are we just to write off Epicurus' slaves as evidence that he was a total hypocrite? I suggest we can discount that as a serious possibility because total hypocrites don't usually attain the status of one of the most respected philosophers of the ancient world. If that is not the answer, then there is some kind of sliding scale at work in the terms "natural and necessary" in general and "wealth [beyond?] that which is natural" in particular.

How do you think that sliding scale might be generally described in a way that is useful to everyone?

Post by "Cassius" of March 29, 2019 at 9:59 AM

The slavery example is good to shock people out of complacency and to illustrate that the way we think today is not necessarily the only way to think. We know from [PD10](#) that something one person thinks is monstrous is not bad in itself, but only in its effects, which may vary. But lest we get caught too far into an unproductive debate on slavery or any particular hot-button issue which polarizes people, the most productive path for us is to see that natural and necessary are not an absolute, and ask "how do we apply the natural and necessary desire" analysis to ourselves today?

Post by “michelepinto” of March 29, 2019 at 3:03 PM

There is a study that shows that it is difficult to be happy when one is very poor, and that happiness grows with wealth. But only up to a certain threshold. When you are too rich, the curve of the simplicity begins to fall.

This shows how Epicurus was right.

Sorry I'm a bit of a run and I can't find a link to what I mentioned now.

However, I believe that it is very important and interesting to discuss what is natural and necessary for us.

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2019 at 3:04 PM

This was posted elsewhere by one of our members here:

I recently bought a copy of Philodemus's On Property Management. I have not read the whole thing yet, and there are a lot of interesting points that might be good for this discussion. For now, though, I'd like to give a short summary of the attitude towards wealth that Philodemus presents so far in what I have read: "The wise man will never be bound by wealth in such a way as to endure, in order to preserve it, toils that are great and are not such as to be exchanged for any quantity of wealth. For what makes its use painless and the enjoyment deriving from it pure must be this, the fact that for sages no heavy care about how it will be possible to preserve it is attached to the possession of wealth, not even when circumstances become most critical."

About a paragraph later, he adds: "As to greater wealth, if it comes in a harmless and easy manner, then it is to be welcomed; but to suffer on account of that very thing should not be

tolerated"

OK one more: "the right management of wealth lies in this: in not feeling distressed about what one loses and in not trapping oneself on treadmills because of an obsessive zeal concerning the more and the less."

One of the points he made was that the amount of work required to provide some of the luxuries of wealth take very little extra effort above and beyond what is required to provide for our necessities and they provide enough ease and comfort to make it worth that effort - even if they are, in fact, luxuries. There is no overall prescription in the writing about how much one should own or not and Philodemus refers to both the wealthy and moderate lifestyle. The take-away for me seems to be that the amount of wealth is not what is important so much as the attitude we have towards it. Thus fragment 108 quoted above is meant more as a prescription for a diathesis rather than a prescription for our actual level of wealth that we work towards. Diogenes of Oinoanda was, after all, a wealthy man, was he not?

Thoughts?