

The "Natural and Necessary List" Question

Post by "Cassius" of August 20, 2021 at 6:49 AM

Preliminary comments:

1) I would argue that it is not possible to draw up a specific table of natural and necessary items that would apply to all people at all times except for the most basic of things such as air, food, and water, and I would argue that is why we do not have anything like such a list from Epicurus.

2) I would argue that rather than being a list of target items, the issue involved in this is as stated by Torquatus in "On Ends" - " 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." The point of this being that thinking about the consequences and the costs of any action is the way to select among them, since there is in fact no absolute rule of conduct that will tell you what to do in any situation other than to consider the resulting pain and pleasure. Thus it might be helpful for us to think about lists in a general way, but it would be a big mistake to think that any single list can be an ultimate guide of conduct.

3) I would argue that Epicurus would have said, and in fact did say, that it is a terrible mistake to target the "bare minimum needed for happiness" as anyone's goal. As is recorded in Vatican Saying 63: "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess." "Frugality" and "simplicity" are in a sense like the virtues - the virtues can be useful as tools in pursuing pleasure, but they are not ends in themselves, and if set up as ends in themselves you make a terrible mistake about the purpose of life, thus leading Diogenes of Oinoanda to shout at you, as well as to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that *pleasure* is the highest end of life."

4) And to summarize these points the main issue is this: The generic and ultimate point of Epicurus is that the guide of life is "pleasure" and Epicurus is rigorously logical and practical in his approach. The goal of life is not "simple pleasure" or "worthy pleasure" or even "lasting pleasure" or "intense pleasure" -- and not "natural pleasure" or "necessary pleasure" either. Anytime you place modifiers along with "pleasure" you are limiting the goal and you are trying to force everyone into a single pattern which is not compatible with the Epicurean view of the universe, in which there is no god or absolute arbiter of conduct. Again as recorded by Torquatus in one of the most clear statements left to us: "What does Nature perceive or what

does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"
(And the answer to that question is clear - "nothing")

[The full quote is: "I will start then in the manner approved by the author of the system himself, by settling what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"]