

Godfrey's Epicurean Outline

Post by "Cassius" of December 25, 2018 at 7:06 PM

I am making this as a general "thinking out loud" comment and not to make any specific point, but when you write:

"enjoy all natural pleasures as long as you don't stress out over money..." and "Autarky is achieved by avoiding unnatural desires"

This reminds me again of what is said in "On Ends" that:

"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."

This is of course Cicero talking hundreds of years later, but I continue to think that the emphasis should be on "the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little....."

To me that makes perfect sense and is consistent with everything we know about the practical reasoning of Epicurus. But a problem I think occurs when we think that we can too easily know BEFOREHAND and "without context" what a "natural" or a "necessary" desire is. OK "necessary" would appear to be fairly reasonable, in that there are clear necessities of life like food and water and shelter. But even there, I see no bright line at where to stop. And what in the world does "unnatural" mean in terms of bright lines? We know that all pleasures are "good" because they are pleasing, but what is an "unnatural" pleasure?

To me, it seems the analysis must originally have focused on how easy or how hard a desire is to attain. Labeling something as "unnecessary" or "unnatural" outside of a particular context seems to me to be a perilous course tending toward formalistic rules which would violate the spirit of much of the rest of the philosophy. And in fact there is in my observation no reliable statement from Epicurus or Lucretius giving a list of what goes into what category. I understand there may be some notes in Diogenes Laertius or perhaps other places, but nothing that looks authoritative to me.

So my suspicion is that while the natural / necessary categorization may in fact originate with Epicurus, I don't see it working as an exception to the general rule of "What will happen to me if I make this choice or avoidance."

Godfrey all of this wasn't spurred just by your comment, this is a continuing subject that interests me and comes up frequently. It just seems to me that trying to classify things as unnatural or unnecessary is a lot less productive an exercise than some people want to make it appear.