

# Is the Natural and Necessary Question Objective or Subjective?

Post by "Cassius" of November 21, 2022 at 10:42 AM

One of the topics that came up in our zoom discussion of 11/20/22 was how Emily Austin sets forth the "detective" question in chapter 3 of "Living for Pleasure." Part of the issue discussed there is whether the question of whether someone is happy should be answered "subjectively" or "objectively."

In my mind I relate this to the "natural and necessary" question as to the desires. Is the question of "natural and necessary" to be answered "objectively" (everyone should shoot for the same things in life) or "subjectively" (the question of whether a think is natural or necessary for that person is largely subjective to be answered by that person alone and not by reference to a pre-existing list that applies to everyone.

One thing that bears on this is how Epicurus qualifies the question in the letter to Menoeceus:

Quote

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.*

So while it might be tempting to say that things like air, water, food, etc. are what he is referring to as the "natural and necessities" it is not at all clear whether those are necessary and sufficient for happiness as well as life itself.

Another thing that bears on this for me is how this is expressed in Torquatus:

Quote

Hence only the Wise Man, who prunes away all the rank growth of vanity and error, can possibly live untroubled by sorrow and by fear, content within the bounds that nature has set. 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.

I used to focus on the "nothing could be more useful or conducive" as a meaning "this was a unique and innovative idea of Epicurus - to analyze things according to whether they are natural and necessary - that no one had suggested before.

Now I am thinking that we ought to consider at the same time (1) the question Austin has raised about the subjective or objective measures of happiness, and (2) the observation that Aristotle (and presumably others) had apparently been talking about an objective lists of things (including money, etc) that are necessary for a happy life.

And if we combine those two observations then maybe what Torquatus was referring to as innovative and important about Epicurus was not that he was the first or most important person to suggest that we needed to think about the categories of "natural and necessary," but that instead he innovation was that Epicurus was saying that the "natural and necessary question itself is largely subjective rather than objective." If so, that would help explain why we don't seem to have Epicurus (or other later Epicurean writers who are better preserved) dwelling on list of specific and objective "things" that are needed for happiness. Maybe the point we need to understand in the natural and necessary question is not that we need to prepare a specific checklist like Aristitotle and be sure we check the boxes, but rather we need to recognize that "the principle of the classification" is not looking to gods or to ideal forms for the list, but simply looking to whether the "desires [can be] gratified with little trouble or expense or ... are easily procured and limited in amount ... or whether they are such that .... no bound or limit can be discovered."

Which would not be to say that we should only pursue the desires that are easiest to obtain, but which would be to say something like:

*When deciding what to pursue, don't look for an objective list that applies to everyone as such a list existed and was handed down by God or by Platonic forms. Look instead simply to your own circumstances, evaluate how hard it is going to be to obtain those desires, and measure your decision on whether to pursue them by asking whether the reward to you will be worth the cost to you.*

As it is, many of us seem trapped in the Aristotelian model and think that there must be a list that everyone has to check off in order to be happy. The way out of that trap is to realize that no such single list exists. And so we should reject the "objective" natural and necessary analysis that Aristotle and other pre-Epicurean Greeks had suggested, and instead substitute the Epicurean natural and necessary model, which is primarily subjective.