

"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?