

How to Live in Times of Upheaval: The Categories of Desire

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2024 at 6:36 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

For natural but not necessary desires and for desires for which the category is not obvious, e.g. because of individual preferences or circumstances, it is more useful to answer the question whether the expected pleasure is worth the expected pain from fulfilling the desire

I completely agree Martin. The question "whether the expected pleasure is worth the expected pain from fulfilling the desire" is the foundational starting point of every issue in the Epicurean ethics. "Natural" and "necessary" are circumstantial - even air and water and food are neither natural nor necessary at every moment of life. All can be postponed for at least a few moments in favor of some other activity that might be appropriate to preserve life or achieve a more ultimately successful life (successful in terms of the ultimate balance between pleasure and pain).

In this question for a text reference I personally always turn back to Torquatus' explanation of why the natural and necessary categories are helpful. Just like Torquatus gives useful explanations of other ethical issues that appear to us to be ambiguous, he does the same thing here by pointing out that the issue is whether a desire has a "limit" and can be gratified, or whether the desire is illogical to pursue because it can never be achieved: because "the principle of classification [is] 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."

Quote

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.

Desires that can never be met are bound to fail and lead to more pain than pleasure, but by prudently selecting desires for goals which can be met, we can logically hope to experience more pleasure than pain from the selection.

To interpret this doctrine to imply that Epicurus held : "We will be better off if we set the goal of only desiring to eat bread and water and live in a cave" - which a lot of writers are not just implying but clearly stating - is a perverse misinterpretation (to put it mildly).