

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

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2024 at 5:05 PM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

I perceive that in some minds, this statement of only two criteria sounds like Epicurus was referring to "the pleasures of the moment" and "the pains of the moment." ... etc...

Fully agree with all this in your number 2 paragraph. Well stated, Cassius. My understanding is that the "pleasures/pains of the moment" considerations are more inline with the Cyrenaic position.

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

All the discussion of "natural" and "necessary" is *\*contextual\**, and cannot be reduced to universals that apply to all people at all times and all places. Even breathing can be postponed if by holding your breath to swim out of a cave you save your life. As Torquatus said, the classification has a principle, that things which are most natural and most necessary are generally going to be the easiest to obtain, and therefore can generally be obtained with the least resulting pain, but that is **\*\*not\*\*** a general statement that nature universally demands that you eat bread and drink water and live in a cave. It is only a general consideration that can serve as a guide when you don't have enough information to be confident that what you can do will be achievable, but over time you learn to know what is and is not possible, so you move out of the cave and you start eating more than bread and drinking more than water, unless circumstances demand it.

I don't think "natural" and "necessary" are as contextual as you're trying to make out. The literal translation of the pertinent Menoikeus section (127-128) is:

## Quote from Epicurus - Letter to Menoikeus, 127-8

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the *natural desires*; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are *the necessary ones*; on the other, the ones which are *only natural*; then, of *the necessary ones*: on the one hand, those *necessary for eudaimonia*; then, those *necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body*; then *those necessary for life itself*. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and

rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

The 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones' uses KENAI which is a form of the same exact word Epicurus uses for the void in "atoms & void."

My reading is:

## 1. Natural Desires

### A. Natural \*and\* Necessary Desires

i. Necessary for Eudaimonia

ii. Necessary for "Freedom from Disturbance in the Body" (πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν)

iii. Necessary for Living Itself (πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν)

### B. Only Natural Desires (αἱ φυσικαὶ μόνον)

## 2. Empty, Fruitless "Void" Desires

I find that "the ones which are only natural" interesting. I'm not sure how to interpret that, honestly.

To get back to Cassius' commentary, specifically: "All the discussion of "natural" and "necessary" is \*contextual\*, and cannot be reduced to universals that apply to all people at all times and all places. Even breathing can be postponed if by holding your breath to swim out of a cave you save your life."

A distinction has to be made between natural/necessary behaviors and "desires." It is a universal that we mammals find breathing, eating, sleeping, and shelter necessary to continue living. Of course, we'll postpone breathing when swimming out of a cave because we can't breathe water and we desire to continue living if at all possible. I don't see that as an example of a contextual desire.

*"things which are most natural and most necessary are generally going to be the easiest to obtain, and therefore can generally be obtained with the least resulting pain, but that is \*\*not\*\* a general statement that nature universally demands that you eat bread and drink water and live in a cave."*

Your water/cave metaphor seems to be a bit of a non sequitur here. If you're living in a cave, it is going to require quite a bit of effort to obtain bread and make sure you have sufficient water stored away... unless you're living directly beside a spring and have bread delivered to you... in which case you'll need a baker who's willing to trek up the mountain... but then you'll need... and so on.

My understanding is that nature provides sufficient amounts of what we need to live - if we were to be in dire straits - which is why Epicurus, from time to time, limited his food and drink to see how much he could live on and still be satisfied. Then, after his fasting experiment, went back to living "normally" until his next experiment.