

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 3:28 PM

These are good questions so keep them coming.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Does this not fall into the fallacy of there being a "hierarchy" of pleasures? I understood it as all pleasure being equally, well, pleasurable - no "fancy pleasures", as Elayne put it.

That's a very reasonable question and this is my answer. All pleasure is pleasure because we find it desirable, so in that sense all pleasure is a pleasurable feeling. (Check DeWitt's section on "The Unity of Pleasure" for this.) When there are only two options, there is no basis for saying that there is a "Fancy pleasure" which is better than "pleasure."

But all pleasurable feelings are not identical, as they vary in intensity, duration, and parts of the body affected (this list is from [PD09](#)).

So while there is no hierarchy in which a particular pleasure is "best" and at the top of the pyramid, there are differences among pleasures, and we have to decide which will be most pleasurable to us under differing circumstances. Not all people find ice cream equally pleasing, nor do we ourselves find the same ice cream equally pleasing all the time.

I think the key issue here is that pleasure is a feeling given to us by nature and we don't get to 100% control what we find pleasurable. Certainly we have some influence over that, but in the end pleasure is a feeling and a feeling is not an opinion - it just is what it is, like what our eyes or other senses give to us. What's the alternative? Well, gods could tell us what is pleasing, or there could be ideal forms of pleasure. Epicurean physics rejects those, so we are left with moment-by-moment processing of senses and feelings as prolepses as our ultimate contact with reality.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

What I'm confused about is this classification. Am I understanding correctly that the "necessary" in "necessary and natural desires" refers to being necessary for human well-being and happiness, and "unnecessary" to being unnecessary (but still pleasurable)? If that's the case, why is it not enough for us to simply pursue and fulfil the necessary desires in order to reach this ideal (and largely hypothetical) state of

100% pleasure 0% pain? I understand in a practical sense that a minimal and ascetic life like this would be rather dull (and thus painful), but then I don't understand the "necessary" and "unnecessary" terminology.

There is the different category of necessary for survival vs necessary for happiness, but I don't think that is what you are asking.

As for why it is not enough to do what you are suggesting, I think Epicurus would tell you that you have to decide that for yourself. Maybe it is enough, and it does get you to 100% pleasure. But that 100% pleasure does not tell you what mix of pleasures that you are engaged in, and I think this is where you are mixing the concepts of "the greatest pleasure" with "What should I be doing right now?"

It is conceptually clear that 100% pleasure is the best way to express the general goal. It is not conceptually clear - in fact the opposite - that everyone will be doing exactly the same thing when they are at 100% pleasure. As you said as to yourself, you would regret not pursuing what pleasures are possible to you. In the same way the combination of pleasures that a minimalist might say is 100% pleasure and totally satisfactory for him might be 80% pain and totally unsatisfactory for me. What is necessary for one person to reach 100% pleasure is likely to be totally inadequate for someone else.

100% pleasure represents the conceptual goal that we put together through analysis, but Nature never tells us "Well done my good and faithful servant - now you can stop because you are at 100% pleasure."