

Is All Desire Painful? How Would Epicurus Answer?

Post by "Don" of May 9, 2025 at 4:51 AM

My mind goes back and forth, but one question and direction that hit me was...(I'm going to a little stream of consciousness here, so bear with me as I think through this, admittedly a little haphazardly)...

Is All Desire Painful? If one answers it is, doesn't Epicurus call us to avoid pain? I realize that sometimes we choose pain for a greater pleasure. However, if we are going to maintain that something as basic to human nature as "desire" (epithymia) is ALWAYS painful - and we know it's painful - isn't that a rationalization that we *should* limit desires to ONLY those that are natural and necessary? If ALL desires at ALL times are painful, why would we want to engage in activity that is guaranteed to bring us pain? Note, I'm not endorsing this rationalization. But if we maintain that "desire = pain" someone could make this argument.

I know we have to have a feeling about everything in our lives while we're living. We live. We feel. I've done this before to try to get our fixation off of one English word. Here are the 19 headwords for ἐπιθυμία in Woodhouse, S. C. (1910) *English-Greek Dictionary: A Vocabulary of the Attic Language*:

appetite idem, page 35.
aspiration idem, page 45.
bent idem, page 74.
caprice idem, page 112.
concupiscence idem, page 156.
craving idem, page 182.
desire idem, page 215.
hunger idem, page 410.
inclination idem, page 428.
itch idem, page 461.
longing idem, page 498.
lust idem, page 505.
passion idem, page 597.
predilection idem, page 634.
proneness idem, page 653.
vagary idem, page 942.
want idem, page 961.
whim idem, page 976.
wish idem, page 983.

If we begin to say desire is different from aspiration or wish, I don't know whether we can do that and keep to the spirit of the texts we have. That comb might be too fine. I'm thinking specifically of Epicurus' desire to plan for his community's and his friends' futures in his will. Did that aspiration/wish/desire bring him pleasure or pain? Was it painful to aspire/desire a good future for his friends and school?

Digression...

Note in VS21, Epicurus only talks of necessary, natural, and harmful desires. There's no talk of unnecessary or empty. Only desires which are harmful. Is he lumping "unnecessary" and "empty" together? I don't think so. I think his categorization (with doing absolutely no research into academic papers, etc.! so that caveat) categorization of desires was a work in progress. The slightly different wording in Menoikeus, the [Principal Doctrines](#), the Vatican Sayings, show that he revisited this idea for quite some time and we see that reflected in the various ways of talking about desires.

VS21. Nature must be persuaded (πειστέον), not overpowered (βιαστέον). And we will persuade nature by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the natural desires too if they cause no harm, but sharply rejecting the harmful desires. (Saint-Andre translation w/slight variation)

VS21. οὐ βιαστέον τὴν φύσιν ἀλλὰ πειστέον· πείσομεν δὲ τὰς ἀναγκαίας ἐπιθυμίας ἐκπληροῦντες, τὰς τε φυσικὰς ἂν μὴ βλάπτωσι, τὰς δὲ βλαβερὰς πικρῶς ἐλέγχοντες.

πειστέον = win over someone to an act or course of action sp. by speech or entreaty, oft. opp. compulsion or deception

NOTE the order in VS21: We are instructed to fulfill the NECESSARY desires and then the NATURAL desires " if they cause no harm" (ἂν μὴ βλάπτωσι). That "harm" is used throughout the latter PDs: [PD31](#) (to not harm one another or be harmed), [PD32](#) (With regard to those animals that do not have the power of making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed... making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed.), [PD33](#) (Justice ...is always a compact to not harm one another or be harmed), [PD35](#) (an agreement to not harm one another or be harmed).

I would also add that, from the letter to Menoikeus, the "unnecessary" desires are encompassed within the natural desires in VS21: "among the natural desires some are natural and necessary whereas others are merely natural"