

What Is The Relationship Between "Hedonic Calculus" Analysis" and "Natural and Necessary Desire" Analysis?

Post by "Cassius" of January 21, 2026 at 9:25 PM

In tonight's Zoom we went at length into the question posed in the title to this thread, but I need to explain the background. First, it appears that there is a division of opinion about whether "Hedonic Calculus" analysis is more fundamental and primary, or whether "Natural and Necessary Desire" analysis is more fundamental and primary. In other words,

1. Does one analysis come before, or override, or overrule the other?
2. Do you start with one analysis and then bring the other into play only if a possible activity "passes the test" of the other one first?

One reason this question arose is that in section 33 of Part V of Tusculan Disputations, Cicero discusses Epicurus' position on several ethical questions. Some of this review is plainly sarcasm, but much of it seems to be accurate. (And for purposes of this analysis let's refer to the LOEB/KING translation, which Bryan tells us is more accurate than the Yonge translation, as discussed in another recent thread.)

Here's the section. I think most of us will agree that except for the snide remarks implying inconsistency by Epicurus, what's stated here is actually a pretty good summary of the Epicurean position. The point of this thread is not to attack Cicero's analysis but to raise another question.

Cicero goes first to the Natural and Necessary analysis and indicates its usefulness.

Then, in the sentence that begins "The whole teaching of Epicurus about pleasure is that pleasure is, he thinks, always to be wished....."

The reason for this post is in part because this section section is almost a stand-alone / restart-from-the-beginning statement of Epicurean ethics, and Cicero doesn't really explain the linkage between what he has just given in the "natural and necessary analysis" to this new "hedonic calculus" analysis.

It was suggested at the meeting that the reason for Cicero placing natural and necessary first here is that Cicero is wanting to emphasize a more "moral" view of Epicurean pleasure as part of Cicero's own plan of arguing in favor virtue. That may or may not be the reason, or may be a part of the reason, but the way Cicero presents the order of the argument here helps highlight a question that we've talked about many times before, and takes us back to the questions posed above:

1. Does one analysis come before, or override, or overrule the other? Does Epicurus mean for our analysis to be: "Start by asking whether desires are natural, necessary, or neither. If you can determine that a desire is neither natural nor necessary, STOP -- there is no need to ask whether it might lead to more pleasure or less pain by pursuing it."
2. If so, then the conclusion is that Epicurus teaches us to always apply first the natural/necessary test, and only consider the hedonic calculus if the proposed activity "passes the test" of the natural/necessary filter.

There was significant dissent to that position in our meeting, with some observing that if that perspective were correct, then one is not really following Epicurus if they don't understand and apply the natural / necessary filter BEFORE worrying about hedonic calculus.

Please give us your thoughts!

XXXIII. You are, I take it, aware that Epicurus has distinguished different kinds of desires, not perhaps with over-much exactness, still in a way that is of service:⁵ in part, they are, he says, natural and necessary, in part natural and not necessary, in part neither one nor the other; scarcely

anything is required to satisfy the necessary pleasures for the stores of nature are available;¹ and the second kind of desires is he thinks neither hard to satisfy nor indeed hard to go without; the third kind he thought should be utterly rejected, because they were completely meaningless, and so far from counting as necessary, had not any relation to nature either. At this point his disciples enter on a long argument, and those pleasures, which belong to kinds they despise, they belittle in detail, yet all the same look out for a plentiful supply of them.² For low pleasures upon which they dwell at length are, they say, easy to satisfy, general, within reach of all, and should nature demand them, the standard of value should, they think, not be birth, position or rank, but beauty, age, shape, and slenderness is by no means difficult at the call of either health or duty or reputation, and in general this kind of pleasures is desirable, should there be no obstacle, but is never of benefit.³ The whole teaching of Epicurus about pleasure is that pleasure is, he thinks, always to be wished and sought for in and for itself because it is pleasure, and that on the same principle pain is always to be avoided for the simple reason that it is pain, and so the wise man will employ a system of counterbalancing which enables him both to avoid pleasure, should it be likely to ensure greater pain, and submit to pain where it ensures greater pleasure; and

all pleasurable things, although judged of by the bodily senses, are notwithstanding transmitted on again to the soul;¹ and for this reason while the body feels delight for the time that it has the sensation of present pleasure, it is the soul which has both the realization of present pleasure conjointly with the body and anticipates coming pleasure, and does not suffer past pleasure to slip away: thus the wise man will always have an unbroken tissue of pleasures, as the expectation of pleasures hoped for is combined with the recollection of pleasures already realized.