

Should References to "Natural" Be Understood As Contrasting "Given By Nature" to "Given By Convention"?

Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2026 at 11:53 AM

I am still looking for further sources on CONVENTION but in looking at history of discussion of natural and necessary I see this (of immediate interest is the part on the CYNICS and the use of CONVENTION in this context). But this isn't a direct citation....

Plato (c. 429-347 BCE)

In the *Republic* (Book 8), Plato distinguished between necessary and unnecessary desires, defining necessary desires as "those we cannot desist from and those whose satisfaction benefits us" This distinction appears in his discussion of different types of political regimes and character types, particularly when contrasting the oligarchic and democratic personalities.

However, Plato conflated naturalness with necessity treating natural desires as essentially the same as necessary ones. The distinction is evident when he discusses how the "rustic city" satisfies only necessary appetites, while the "luxurious city" arises when citizens "overstep the limit of their necessities."

The Cynics (5th-4th century BCE)

The Cynics, particularly Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope, emphasized living according to nature and rejecting conventional desires. They advocated that a life lived according to nature requires only the bare necessities for existence, and one can become free by rejecting needs that result from convention. Diogenes taught that happiness comes from being in accord with nature and living simply and self-sufficiently, while unnatural things like power, fame, and luxuries cause discord with nature and unhappiness. However, the Cynics focused more on practical demonstration than systematic philosophical categorization—their approach was to live out their philosophy rather than develop formal taxonomies.