

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

Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2026 at 12:01 PM

Ok here's something of major significance from Plato. Recently [Joshua](#) brought up in a recent podcast that there's something of importance to derive from comparing Epicurus' views on individual happiness vs those of Plato in regard to the state. We didn't pursue that very far, but we need to take a look at it again. This article on Plato's Republic talks about the natural / necessary category scheme originating with Plato, and that Epicurus' division is a modification of Plato.

Maybe the great usefulness that Torquatus references of this division comes from correcting the errors of Plato! 😊 Anyway here is the cite and the text:

(As I cite this I am not sure if this link is to a book that includes Plato's text and this is the commentary section, or what.)

<https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0229/ch12.xhtml>

Here's the key section:

Quote

## Interlude: Necessary versus Unnecessary Appetites

Appetite governs the democratic soul, as it does in the oligarchic soul, but here Socrates makes a philosophically interesting distinction between kinds of appetites or desires. The democratic soul is governed by unnecessary desires, the sort the oligarch steadfastly and cautiously refused to indulge, while necessary desires govern the oligarchic soul. Socrates alluded to the distinction (without explaining it) when describing the oligarch, whom he called 'a thrifty worker who satisfies only his necessary appetites' (8.554a). And indeed, the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires is implicit in the difference between the rustic and the luxurious ideal cities. The latter comes about because the citizens have 'overstepped the limit of their necessities' (2.373d), which suggests that in the rustic city, which Socrates regards as 'the true city [...] the healthy one' (2.372e), the citizens satisfy only their necessary appetites, whereas satisfying the unnecessary appetites fuels the luxurious

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4914-what-is-the-relationship-between-hedonic-calculus-analysis-and-natural-and-neces/?postID=38556#post38556>

city. So how do necessary and unnecessary desires differ?

Plato gives a two-pronged definition of necessary desires: 'those we cannot desist from and those whose satisfaction benefits us [are] rightly called necessary for we are by nature compelled to satisfy them' (8.558e). This 'and' should be an 'or', however, since a desire that meets either criterion will count as necessary. Consider bread. As a basic element in the Greek diet, we can think of it as proxy for food generally. A desire for bread is necessary on both counts: first, we cannot desist from it—we cannot not want it, as a desire for food comes with our animal nature. Someone without this desire—e.g., someone suffering from anorexia, which etymologically is the absence (the privative an-) of desire (orexis)—would be very badly off and in an unnatural, unhealthy state. Second, satisfying a desire for bread is good for us, and indeed we enjoy it. While bread makes life possible, good bread makes life enjoyable. So, too, do the delicacies we put on the bread make life more enjoyable, but we can learn to do without them. Remember that it was the absence of delicacies that Glaucon decried in the first, rustic ideal city back in Book II (2.372c), claiming the city was fit only for pigs. So a desire for delicacies will also count as a necessary desire, since it is natural for us to desire something to put on the bread. Only an appetite that fails both counts will be unnecessary. Though Socrates does not say so, presumably this will vary from person to person: you may be able to enjoy a cocktail before and a glass or two of wine with dinner, but for an alcoholic, even a couple of drinks starts them on the road to self-destructive drunkenness. So wine—also a Greek staple—is necessary for some of us but unnecessary for others.

Though the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires is needed for Socrates to distinguish between the oligarchic and democratic souls, the democratic person rejects it, taking all desires to be equally worthy of pursuit: the democrat 'puts all his pleasures on an equal footing' (8.561b). The democratic person does not deny the distinction in a conceptual way, holding it to be incoherent or non-existent. Instead, they deny that the distinction is a suitable basis for action and choice, 'declar[ing] that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally' (8.561c). They do not think that necessary desires are better than unnecessary desires or that there is any reason to blush at pursuing what those frugal oligarchs regard as 'unnecessary [desires] that aim at frivolity and display' (9.572c). Where their fathers pursued only necessary desires, the young democrats reject this frugal austerity (and thus the order and discipline their focus on necessary desires gave rise to) and seek to indulge the desires that characterize the ne'er-do-well drones.

Although the democrat seems uninterested in thinking philosophically about Plato's way of distinguishing necessary and unnecessary desires, we might find it worthwhile to do so, to see if there are independent reasons to reject it or at least to reformulate it, as it seems awkward to regard a desire for delicacies as necessary, since, as Socrates himself points out, we can learn to give them up. So we do not get too far afield, let us

consider briefly the taxonomy of desires Epicurus (bce 341–270) proposed. First, a word of warning: though the word ‘epicurean’ has some resonance with ancient Epicureanism (which took pleasure alone to be good in itself, the view we identified in an earlier chapter as hedonism), Epicurus actually took the absence of pain and disturbance to be what pleasure truly is. For him, the pleasure that constitutes the good is not a full belly but a tranquil mind.

Where Plato fuses necessary and natural desires, calling some desires necessary because they are natural, Epicurus distinguishes between what is natural and what is necessary. For Epicurus, a necessary desire is one whose non-satisfaction causes physical pain. When we do not eat, we experience the pangs of hunger. Thus a desire for food—for bread, as Socrates put it—counts as necessary. While every necessary desire is natural, for Epicurus, not all natural desires are necessary. The desire for bread is both natural and necessary. But desires for relishes, while natural, are not necessary. Think of a favorite dish. I love the Pha Ram Long Song at Ruam Mit Thai in downtown St Paul; its deliciousness makes my life better, but I can clearly live without it: it is a natural but unnecessary desire. If I show up only to find that the restaurant is no longer open on Sundays, I should react with mild disappointment: ‘Oh, dang it! I was really looking forward to that. Oh well.’ I will ask my companions where we should go instead. If, on the other hand, I am not disappointed but really angry that the restaurant is closed and am still muttering ‘I cannot fricking believe it!’ hours later, sulking and ruining dinner for everyone because I did not get what I wanted, then my desire is not only unnecessary, it is also unnatural. Excessive psychological distress at a desire’s not being satisfied is not natural: there is something wrong with me. So the difference between natural but unnecessary desires and unnatural and unnecessary desires is not a difference in objects desired but rather in the desirer themselves. I should be able to eliminate my desire for x when x is difficult to obtain—or if x is bad for me. Epicurus thinks that the source is usually ‘a groundless opinion’—some false belief that I cannot be happy unless I have this particular Thai dish or that flavor of ice cream or that I get a promotion, etc. In fact, for Epicurus eliminating such desires is one of the keys to happiness. No gourmand himself, Epicurus thought that

Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips. To habituate oneself, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune.<sup>5</sup>

Epicurus’ taxonomy of desire seems an improvement on Plato’s largely because he separates naturalness and necessity, which Plato conflates. Plato’s way of distinguishing necessary and unnecessary seems awkward and even mistaken—but if so, it is not a fatal mistake but rather one that is easily repairable.

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