

Pleasure, Desire and Limits

Post by “Godfrey” of July 17, 2022 at 9:25 PM

In the Zoom call last week, we discussed pleasure being conflated with desire. I'm posting here to continue that discussion. My general premise is that people trying to discredit Epicurus have consistently conflated the two, which leads to getting caught up in endlessly discussing types of pleasure and ultimately ends with the attempt to rank pleasures.

In reviewing the [Principal Doctrines](#), there seems to be a clear distinction between pleasure and desire. [PD03](#), [PD05](#), [PD08](#), [PD09](#), [PD10](#), [PD12](#), [PD18](#), [PD19](#), [PD20](#) discuss pleasure; [PD10](#), [PD11](#), [PD15](#), [PD26](#), [PD29](#), [PD30](#) discuss desires. This quote by Stefano Maso, from a post of Nate's, got me thinking about *limits* of pleasures, pains and desires:

*"...it is important to understand the ethical basis of Epicurus' doctrine, and, in particular, its therapeutic proposal.... Epicurus pithily expressed it [the tetrapharmakos] as follows: **“Were we not upset by the worries that celestial phenomena and death might matter to us, and also by failure to appreciate the limits of pains and desires, we would have no need for natural philosophy”** (KD 11 = LS 25.B.11; cfr. KD 1-4, 10, 20, and Ep. Men. 133).*

*It is interesting to note that the tetrapharmakos also rests on a doctrine of the “limit”... This doctrine applies to everything that exists and is perceived within the cosmos. Take atoms: we have isolated atoms that eternally fall and never combine with others; but we also have atoms that combine into endless, more or less changeable structures. The gods constitute the ultimate “limit” of this changeability, for they are eternally stable atomic compounds. They never change because, by definition, they are intangible: they never collide with other atoms or other compounds. Take death: by definition, it never has anything to do with life. It constitutes the “limit” of life. **Take pain and, in parallel, pleasure: each constitutes the other's “limit.”***

*Based on this doctrine of the “limit,” Epicurus infers that we must not fear the gods, because they are imperturbable and, hence, take no interest in us or interfere with other atomic compounds (Ep. Men. 123-124). We must not fear death, because when it exists, we do not; and as long as we are alive, we cannot perceive it (Ep. Men. 124-127). We must not fear pain, because it may be more or less intense: if it is light, it is so easily endurable that at its limit it can be perceived as pleasure; if it is extreme, a loss of sensibility occurs and we no longer feel it (KD 4). **Finally, we must not fear pleasure, in the sense that we must not fear the dissatisfaction that affects those who give themselves over to the pursuit of the most intense and prolonged sort of kinetic pleasure, as did the Cyrenaics....***

Do Pigs Value Katastematic Pleasure? (Summer 2022 K / K Discussion)

[PD11](#) (KD11) was of particular concern to me after our Zoom discussion because it mentions both pains and desires. The concern brought up in the discussion was that this was somehow advocating for an "absence of pain" position. After digesting this quote, I don't think that that's the case, although I don't think of it in the terms Maso uses in his final sentence above.

My take is this: Epicurus takes the natural goal of life to be pleasure, the natural evil to be pain. Increasing pleasure decreases pain, and vice versa. Failure to understand natural science increases pain (fear) and by the same token proper understanding increases pleasure. Failure to understand the limits of pains and desires increases pain and decreases pleasure. There's no need to worry about the limit of pleasure in this context (which Epicurus already defined in [PD03](#)) and therefore he doesn't mention it. How to understand the limit of pain? He describes this in [PD04](#): as per Maso, pain is limited by pleasure. *Pain and pleasure naturally limit each other.*

But what about the limit of desires? Reading the PDs and the Letter to Menoikeus, it becomes clear that *desires can be unlimited*, which differentiates them from both pleasure and pain. This is why the categories of desires are important to understand. These categories are a tool to help us to *impose our own limits on our desires*, which have no natural limit other than the "natural and necessary" desires. This then becomes one of the key methods to increase pleasure and reduce pain.

Post by “Don” of July 17, 2022 at 9:52 PM

Nice summary, [Godfrey](#) . I would agree with all of your points.

And I also agree that getting the distinction between desires and pleasure clear in one's mind is crucial. I particularly like your point about desires being potentially limitless while pleasure/pain each have a natural limit (the elimination of the other feeling: No pain = all pleasure simply because if one is filled ****with**** pleasure, there's no room for pain. It's the ***filling up with pleasure*** that's important, not the "removing pain.")

On the desire side, one can continue to lust for power no matter how much power you already have. You can desire more money, no matter how much money you already have. There is no natural limit to those kinds of desires. In one sense, that's why they're empty/void, ***nothing*** can fill them up!

Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2022 at 8:58 AM

Thank you for starting this thread Godfrey! I think there's a lot of useful thought there and I agree with your direction.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

But what about the limit of desires? Reading the PDs and the Letter to Menoikeus, it becomes clear that desires can be unlimited, which differentiates them from both pleasure and pain. This is why the categories of desires are important to understand. These categories are a tool to help us to impose our own limits on our desires, which have no natural limit other than the "natural and necessary" desires. This then becomes one of the key methods to increase pleasure and reduce pain.

As Joshua might say, however, having identified that at least some desires can be unlimited, and that a limit has to be imposed upon them, we are, "only at the beginning" of the analysis.

Always referencing [VS63](#) that a life that is too frugal can be just as mistaken as a life that is too extravagant, the knowledge that we need to impose a limit on some desires only gets us started. Where is that limit? How do we determine where it is? Is it possible that there are any absolute rules on limiting desires, or is it all contextual? There are probably many other questions about the application of the question.

So once we all agree, as I presume we do, that at least some desires are limitless and it will produce a more pleasurable life if we self-impose our own limit, how do we go about doing that without falling into the trap of thinking that the answer as to how much to limit is simply "limit all desires as much as possible?"

Because that "limit all desires as much as possible, and don't even think about pursuing anything that is not absolutely natural and necessary" is the clear message I get from modern writers. I don't get that from the full body of Epicurus' work at all, but focusing on "limit all desires as much as possible, and don't even think about pursuing anything that is not absolutely natural and necessary" is an excellent way to limit enthusiasm for Epicurus to Buddhists and Stoics, two groups that I would maintain are polar opposites of Epicurus.

Post by “Don” of July 18, 2022 at 10:50 AM

Well, to play devil's advocate, we DO have to limit all desires in some sense. Eating food and drinking water are both natural and necessary but if we overeat or even drink too much water (hyponatremia), it's going to lead to pain.

And yes, I'm using water as an example to be provocative 😊

Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2022 at 11:07 AM

Right, we do limit desires, even the desire for life to accommodate us to our mortality.

The issue I think is how to articulate how much of anything to pursue.

The answer cannot be "no more than causes any pain" because we sometimes do chose pain as Epicurus said, for greater pleasure, and we seek not that which is longest but the most pleasant.

The great problem is that much Epicurean discussion makes it sound like Epicurus was a modern minimalist, whereas "the least in every aspect" is not necessarily or even likely to result in the greatest pleasure (UNLESS you get tripped up on the "go live in a cave" outlook on the things we have been discussing).

The trick is to give full effect to [VS63](#) in a way that applies generally as a philosophic guide.

Post by “Don” of July 18, 2022 at 11:43 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The answer cannot be "no more than causes any pain" because we sometimes do chose pain as Epicurus said, for greater pleasure, and we seek not that which is longest but the most pleasant

Excellent point!

Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2022 at 1:34 PM

Well so as not to leave this question up in the air for too long without giving my answer, I personally think the answer lies in the obvious as to pleasure and pain. The goal of life is to live as nearly as possible along the pattern described by Torquatus (which is so close to the letter to Menoecus that I see no reason to doubt it's reliability):

"Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

Advanced beings higher than ourselves may be able to actualize a life such as this combined with complete freedom from pain, but we as humans cannot. Therefore it is up to us to as best we can approach the goal at the cost of experiencing some pains. The precise mix of pleasures and pains open to us is contextual, and our appetites for pleasure and tolerance for pain are individual. In a universe without fate or supernatural gods or absolute perspectives or right and wrong, we each are left by Nature to pursue pleasure and avoid pain on such terms as we ourselves decide to be appropriate. At the end of the road our lives are over, and if we have a chance to reflect on our past before we die, we are going to want to think that we did the best we could under our own circumstances to have exerted all our mental and physical energies to have lived as well as possible.

It's interesting to note that in that summary there is no distinction between kinetic and katastematic - just the positive presence of numerous and vivid pleasures of every type of both body and mind. Nor is there any drawing out in detail of a description of absence of pain or absence of disturbance - other than the obvious role that these can be used to describe a life that is full of experiencing normal pleasures of all kinds without interruption. Nor is there any discussion of natural and necessary or limitations of desires - these are practical tools that we as humans must come up with and apply intelligently to our circumstances, but they aren't part of the philosophic definition of the ultimate goal. They are contextual and will differ in application from person to person and place to place and time to time.

Post by "Don" of July 18, 2022 at 2:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It's interesting to note that in that summary there is no distinction between kinetic and katastematic

True. There's no distinction, but...

[Quote from Cicero](#)

undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain

[Quote from Cicero](#)

strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness

To my reading, both of those are solid descriptions of ataraxia and aponia, ie, katastematic pleasure. So, katastematic pleasure is mentioned but the distinction itself between katastematic and kinetic was not important enough to mention.

Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2022 at 2:41 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

So, katastematic pleasure is mentioned but the distinction itself between katastematic and kinetic was not important enough to mention.

When one fills a glass with water, the glass is full of water without any air, and we no longer leave room for the people of sour disposition to say that it is "half-empty." If we want to squash the people of sour disposition fully (which we may need to do if their name is Plato) then we might usefully call the quality of being full "the state of zero-emptiness."

But I doubt if there is much call in life, short of dealing with obstinate manipulators like Plato, to dwell on terms like "zero-emptiness." Nonstandard terms tend to confuse regular common-sense people. And for good reason - why would people of good faith talk in riddles? The answer to that is that people like Plato are not acting in good faith, and they love word games as a way to deceive the man-on-the-street.

Sometimes we have to fence with Platonists and it is necessary to use nonstandard words to show how pleasure can be continuous.

But the price of playing footsie with Plato is you get quoted talking abstractly, and that can be taken out of context and used against you by tricky lawyers like Cicero.

Maybe Shakespeare had the best advice for how to deal with lawyers! 😊

At any rate, part of our legacy now for those who are students of Epicurus is to become familiar with the terms of this debate. From 50 BC on to today it has become necessary to learn to see Cicero's challenge can not only be defused, but turned around and used as a method of explaining how Epicurus meant what he said and said what he meant when he identified "Pleasure" as the guide and goal of life.

I keep forgetting to mention this, but I think the same answer here is the proper framework by which to understand the otherwise perplexing hypothetical of the statue of Chryssipus mentioned by Torquatus. We've got to be quick footed enough to know that something that can be both an excellent answer to Chryssipus but also a deadly mistake if mishandled in responding to Cicero. I place no blame on Torquatus but entirely on Cicero - had Cicero let him, Torquatus could have explained all this probably much along the lines we are doing now, and saved the world 2000 years of misunderstanding.

But that misunderstanding was exactly what Cicero was trying to accomplish.

Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2022 at 2:46 PM

Henry VI, Part 2 Act 4:

DICK. The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.

JACK CADE. Nay, that I mean to do. Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment, that parchment, being scribbled o'er, should undo a man? Some say the bee stings; but I say 't is the bee's wax, for I did but seal once to a thing, and I was never mine own man since.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2022 at 3:15 PM

First, an aside. The obvious occurred to me after posting #1 above, that being that separating pleasure and desire, and understanding desires as unlimited, provides an answer to the idea that pleasure can't be the good because it knows no limit. This of course in conjunction with [PD03](#).

Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2022 at 3:45 PM

Godfrey I can't get rid yet of a nagging concern that evaluating desire on its own separate from pleasure is going to lead to problems of its own, but I am more than happy to suspend that concern while this path is developing. With that caveat I would say yes you are right in this last point.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2022 at 4:10 PM

To drill further into desires....

To my understanding, and I think Philodemus supports this, desire was something that was dealt with in detail in Epicurean communities. Since it requires the setting of limits which are specific to each person and to each context, this would be the most effective, practical way to treat desires.

Theoretically, it would appear that one key to working with desires is to understand what Epicurus meant by "natural" and "unnatural". If I'm not mistaken, the unnatural desires are the only ones that he says have no limits.

[PD15](#) *The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity.*

[PD29](#) *Among desires some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination.*

[PD30](#) *Natural desires that afford no pain if they are not indulged, though they are eagerly pursued, arise from groundless opinion; and when they are not dispelled it is not because of their own nature but because of the man's groundless opinion.*

LM127 *...on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life. (Don's translation)*

LM130 *Additionally, we believe αὐτάρκεια is a great good. Not so that we are furnished with the use of a few things; but, if we were to have many things, we would be content with few things. Those in need who are genuinely convinced of this find extravagance more pleasant, and that every natural desire is easily procured, and an empty desire difficult to get. (Don's translation)*

I've run out of time and will have to leave this for now. The bones are here, but they still need parsing 🤔

Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2022 at 4:14 PM

[Cassius](#) I just saw your post. A quick answer would be that desires and choices and avoidances are all practically evaluated in terms of the goal of pleasure. But they aren't the same thing.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2022 at 4:21 PM

[VS71](#) *Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?*

Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2022 at 8:07 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Theoretically, it would appear that one key to working with desires is to understand what Epicurus meant by "natural" and "unnatural". If I'm not mistaken, the unnatural desires are the only ones that he says have no limits.

Speculating on how these limits might work, what I come up with is that:

- Natural desires are limited through the natural limits of pleasure and pain.
- Natural but unnecessary desires don't cause any pain. They may be vain, but it doesn't really matter since there's no pain involved.
- Unnatural desires are not subject to the natural limits of pleasure and pain. This is due to being unaware of or consciously ignoring the experience of one's pain caused by a specific desire.

Post by “Don” of July 18, 2022 at 11:02 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But I doubt if there is much call in life, short of dealing with obstinate manipulators like Plato, to dwell on terms like "zero-emptiness." Nonstandard terms tend to confuse regular common-sense People.

I assume we're talking about "katastematic" here.

If so, I'll say your statement is true, but...

1. It was not a "nonstandard term" during Epicurus's lifetime or during the founding and early centuries when the philosophy of the Garden was popular and widespread.
2. It doesn't have to be - nor should it be - the first thing that's talked about when introducing the philosophy to people.
3. We need to have a response to the academics who DO use this term extensively. Because, as we know, people will say, "Didn't Epicurus say this katastematic pleasure was the be-all and end-all of his philosophy?" We need to be able to use the word, understand it (even if we may have a different take), and be able to defend our position. I cede nothing to the academics who want to make Epicureanism into "Stoicism-lite" or "Platonic hedonism" or some minimalistic ascetism that can be safely ignored and marginalized! By Zeus! I refuse to allow academics who themselves sometimes can't even agree on a translation let alone an interpretation dictate the terms of this discussion!

I have no problem using "katastematic" pleasure and defending my Interpretation. I'll use academic research papers and academic authors, but I certainly don't have to agree with their conclusions. Add I'll do my best to describe my Interpretation to "common-sense people" and let them come to their conclusion. And I do hope I've been using (for the most part) common-sense language in my posts at least. (btw, Just to be clear, this is NOT a polemic directed against [Cassius](#) !! I just get a tad fired up sometimes. 😊)

Post by “Don” of July 18, 2022 at 11:17 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I can't get rid yet of a nagging concern that evaluating desire on its own separate from pleasure is going to lead to problems of its own,

Um, Epicurus did the same thing in distinguishing desire and pleasure. So ... Just throwin' that out there.

Pleasure is, by definition, good.

Desires can be natural, unnatural, necessary, unnecessary, or empty. Desires are NOT all good by any means.

They're of course connected. We have desires for pleasures. But pleasure is separate from desire.

Eating is pleasurable. However, the desire *to eat* can come in many permutations, some necessary, some unnecessary, even though eating is natural:

- I want to eat because I'm actually hungry.
 - I want to eat because I'm worried.
 - I have the munchies. I'm bored.
 - I want to eat because my friend is eating and I don't want them to eat alone even though I ate recently.
 - I want to eat popcorn because that's what I do at the movie theater even though I'm not hungry.
 - I want to eat at this one specific restaurant in Chicago but I can't travel there now. (Now, this one could turn into a pleasant memory!)
-

Post by “reneliza” of July 19, 2022 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Right, we do limit desires, even the desire for life to accommodate us to our mortality.

The issue I think is how to articulate how much of anything to pursue.

The answer cannot be "no more than causes any pain" because we sometimes do chose pain as Epicurus said, for greater pleasure, and we seek not that which is longest but the most pleasant.

The great problem is that much Epicurean discussion makes it sound like Epicurus was a modern minimalist, whereas "the least in every aspect" is not necessarily or even likely to result in the greatest pleasure (UNLESS you get tripped up on the "go live in a cave" outlook on the things we have been discussing).

The trick is to give full effect to [VS63](#) in a way that applies generally as a philosophic guide.

Is frugality defined in terms of desire though, or only in terms of *fulfillment* of desire? I would say the latter (using modern, regular-people language and understanding of these terms). I can have unlimited desire, and be painfully restrictive to the point of still being overly frugal. But this would lead to a very unhappy life.

Or I could have only the bare minimum (necessary) desires, but be open to pleasure whenever it's available even outside and beyond my desire and not be frugal at all.

Is [VS63](#) speaking against limiting desire, or is it speaking against avoiding the pleasure needed to satisfy your natural desires?

I am really fascinated by this discussion and am interested to see where it goes. I'm especially interested to go look deeper into the natural and unnecessary desires because how I think of it, a desire always causes at least some amount of pain if it's unfulfilled (though sometimes even more when it is fulfilled) What are some examples of natural and unnecessary desires in my life? Also, as a queer person I always get a bit itchy when people start using the word "unnatural" so this is another time when I have great appreciation for the level of individuality when it comes to what things are good to pursue in Epicureanism

Post by “Godfrey” of July 19, 2022 at 5:40 PM

This post was in my head before I read post #19, so it's not a reply but there's probably some overlap.

I've been stewing over where my thinking and posts on the desires are leading, and I'm beginning to form a conclusion. When a person is new to EP, they go through a process of working to understand the categories of desires. In so doing, they form a broad idea of how these apply in their life. Basically, what is natural and necessary for themselves, and what is pretty much out there for them so that it can reasonably be considered to be "unnatural", or causing unending distress for them.

After living with the philosophy for a while one no longer needs to give much thought to what for them is natural and necessary and what for them is unnatural and therefore unnecessary. At this point, where the rubber meets the road is in the day to day practice of choices and avoidances, and the majority of these would now constitute working with the category of natural and unnecessary desires. The big choices have been made.

This leads me to think that the critical category for the practicing Epicurean is natural and unnecessary. Practically speaking, how might I maximize my pleasure in doing a particular activity? Or is a particular activity something to pursue, or might it cause me unending distress. Take playing golf as an example. Personally, getting serious about golf would probably cause me great distress. But playing a non-competitive game with friends, in a spectacular natural setting, could be very pleasant.

Reaching a point where one has answered the big questions and is living in the "sweet spot" of working with natural and unnecessary desires sounds to me like the Epicurean "good life".

The philosophical implication of this is that the absence of pain crowd have made two category errors. The first is to confuse pleasure and desire, and the second is to focus on the natural and necessary category. Those living the philosophy are living in the natural and unnecessary category.

Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2022 at 6:28 PM

Godfrey as a means of furthering the discussion, can we take the analysis and direction so far and apply it to a specific - such as:

How would you apply what you have so far to the question

"Should I (or anyone else) want to build a rocket and fly to the moon?"

Post by “Cassius” of July 19, 2022 at 6:43 PM

For example, in generally considering that question under a pleasure pain framework, I would simply ask: What is your best estimate of all the expected pleasures and pains to come from that project? Will it be worth it to you in the form of pleasure over pain? If so, go ahead!

How would your suggestion as to separating out the "desire" part of it apply?

Post by “Godfrey” of July 19, 2022 at 8:00 PM

I'd separate out the desire quite easily: I don't have any desire to build said rocket, so any consideration of doing so is strictly hypothetical. I don't need to think about it and I can spend my time pursuing my natural and necessary and my natural and unnecessary desires.

If for some reason I found that I had the desire to build said rocket, I wouldn't need to give it much thought. I'm retired, and at this point in my life there's very little possibility that I could complete such a project. I'd just intuitively consider it, for me, to be unnatural. In point of fact any decision would pretty much be subconscious. If I were to analyze why, I would find that the potential pain that I'd experience in doing such a project would be far beyond any pleasure that I might experience.

I think that the key here is that I've already considered, very generally, what I feel is unnatural for me. Because of this it's almost become a personal prolepsis: I have a preconception (which may or may not actually be a prolepsis 🤔) as to what is unnatural for me. Running for president, becoming a billionaire, solving the great problems of physics are other things that I find in my unnatural category if I rummage around.

Now imagine, if you will, that I'm a 40 year old rocket scientist. First I can ask myself, "would I like to do this?" (do I have a desire to do this?) If I don't, end of story. If I do, then I can ask myself why I'd like to. What are my motivations? Am I motivated by the money I might make? By the fame it might bring? By the excitement of the challenge &c.... Then I can analyze each of those motivations (desires) in terms of the pleasure and pain involved.

At least for the moment, I think this comes down to two basic points:

1) The goal is always pleasure. If we get away from that, we'll lose our way. (PD22) In evaluating desires, the end goal is pleasure. But desire and pleasure are different. Examining and understanding our desires helps us to attain pleasure.

2) Understanding our categories of desires in a sense becomes our personal value system. This system runs in the background and simplifies our life by directing our thoughts and actions to what is most important to us.

Post by “Cassius” of July 19, 2022 at 8:24 PM

I understand and agree how that applies to you yourself.

But in the interest of generalizing this to a philosophical level that gives a guideline to express to others generally, how does that work at a general level?

I would distill all of what you wrote down to "In my case, building a rocket to fly to the moon would not lead to a favorable pleasure/pain balance, so that's not something I would choose to do."

But if we are looking for general statements to discuss philosophically, the unstated next sentence would be: "But if that's something that appeals to you and you believe after strong consideration that it would be worth it to you, then a philosophy based on Nature tells you to go ahead."

Which of course harks back to the general rule is that everyone is given by nature pleasure and pain to use to judge what to choose and what to avoid.

Now what I am reading between the lines is that in addition to that, you are suggesting that choices / desires can be considered as to whether they are natural or necessary. As Torquatus explains in On Ends, the principle of the classification is that the natural and necessary are easy to get, the others are not so easy. That observation does not serve as a limit but as a caution based on experience that if you choose the "unnecessary and unnatural" you can expect the cost in pain to be higher. However we often choose pain in order to produce a greater pleasure, so that's just a caution to be aware of, not a general limit or a general bar to the activity at all unless you choose to make it so.

I think that's a fairly complete overview of Epicurus' analysis, which sweepingly includes all kinds of pleasures and all kinds of pains into the calculation.

How would you introduce a "limitation of desires" analysis into that? I do think it can be done, but I don't think we've been clear about "how" yet at the generalized level.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 20, 2022 at 2:02 AM

First off, I would throw out Torquatus in this instance because, at least for me, this is the heart of Cicero's attempt to discredit Epicurus. He's over-complicating pleasure and over-simplifying desire.

All of the nuance is in Epicurus' writings. He's the one who brings up limits. The problem that arises with Cicero is that the feelings aren't adequate to create a personal value system: they're reactions. You can anticipate how you might feel, and that is integral to choosing and avoiding, but it's a piecemeal approach to ethics and Cicero and others have a field day with that.

Effective ethics aren't created piecemeal. But as Epicurus clearly shows, they're not handed down from above (any "above"). I'm thinking that the categories of desires are a framework that we each use to create our own ethical system. Epicurus, as I think was pointed out in the podcast recently, wasn't a dogmatist: he was teaching us how to think. And this is another example of him doing so. We each, in our given situation, are given this tool to categorize and prioritize what is important to us.

As for limits.... As I currently understand it, the natural and necessary desires are the basics. We need these to survive. It's pretty confusing from the remaining texts of Epicurus (and Cicero doesn't add anything useful here as far as I can tell) what the difference is between natural/unnecessary and unnatural (or unnatural/unnecessary). So to reason it out, how can we differentiate these two?

The natural relationship between pleasure and pain is that they limit each other. This is how we reach homeostasis: too much pleasure leads to pain, which we limit through pleasure, and so on in a continuous cycle. As for what is unnatural: we know the limit of pleasure from [PD03](#), but [PD11](#) points out that we need to know the limits of pains and desires. The physical limits of pains are spelled out in [PD04](#), but what are the mental limits? The natural limit of pain is through pleasure. But we humans have a unique ability to give ourselves unlimited mental pain, and this breaks the natural cycle of homeostasis and can be considered unnatural. This is probably where addiction lies, and addiction is now understood (correct me if I'm wrong) as desire run amok. If we've gotten to this point, we've broken the natural limit of pain and desire and must self-limit or find other means to limit such as hospitalization, rehab, having oneself tied to a mast and so forth.

To be in the "sweet spot" of a pleasurable life we must have our basic needs (natural and necessary desires) met, and we must know our personal unnatural desires. The pain from unnatural desires is just a result, to avoid that pain we have to understand and limit our desires. Then, when our basic needs are met and we are free from unnatural desires, we can embrace the natural and unnecessary desires as we like, and experience all variety of pleasures. So maybe Cicero got this part right when he described the perfect life of pleasure; he just neglected to put it in the proper context. Or he couldn't reason it out.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 20, 2022 at 3:16 AM

One clarification, which I may have mentioned previously. When I refer to the sweet spot of natural and unnecessary desires, I'm not saying that every desire in this category is meant to be chosen. What I'm thinking is that this is where the majority of our day to day choices and avoidances happen. The natural and necessary desires are, for the most part, choices. The unnatural desires are, for the most part, avoidances.

Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2022 at 4:14 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Then, when our basic needs are met and we are free from unnatural desires, we can embrace the natural and unnecessary desires as we like, and experience all variety of pleasures.

Godfrey from this formulation I infer you are eliminating all "unnatural" desires completely. How did you define or give examples for that category?

Post by “Don” of July 20, 2022 at 7:03 AM

At the risk of self-horn-tooting, here's my translation and commentary on the desires from my Letter to Menoikeus. Apologies for the length. See the PDF for more:

Translation:

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

Commentary:

127f. Ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί,

- Ἀναλογιστέον "consider..."
- τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν "of the desires, yearnings"
 - "Consider then of the desires, on the one hand, are the φυσικαί "natural ones"
 - φυσικαί (physikai)
 - English physical, physics
 - on the other, the κεναί 'empty, fruitless, vain, void ones.'
 - κεναί is also again the word used when Epicurus talks about atoms and *void*.

127g. καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον·

- "And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessities; on the other hand, the natural ones only."
 - ἀναγκαῖαι "necessary, essential; (if a plural noun as here) necessities"

127h. τῶν δ' ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι,

- "then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, there are those necessary for eudaimonia;

Those necessary for eudaimonia are open to interpretation but must be based on Epicurus's philosophy.

127i. αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

- ἀοχλησία "freedom from disturbance"
- σώματος genitive singular of σῶμα
 - σῶμα "the body; one's material body or existence"
- "then, those [necessary] for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those [necessary] for life itself."

There are some translations that interpret αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν to mean only things like clothing and shelter - those things that provide "freedom from disturbance" for the body, that is for one's physical existence. That isn't literally what is written so that is simply one interpretation. Those kinds of things - clothing and shelter - would seem to fall under the final category of those necessary for life. So, this category should catch those between eudaimonia and those necessary for life. This is an interesting category.

I would contend that those "necessary for life itself" are those essentials at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, air, etc. Again, clothing and shelter would seem to fall into this category.

PS: the "on the one hand... On the other hand" are meant to literally translate the Greek μὲν... δε... It is clunky and awkward in English but I wanted to get across that they were there in the

original. They do not have to be, nor should they be, translated this literally in all cases.

Post by “reneliza” of July 20, 2022 at 8:56 AM

I wonder if the “unnatural” desires are meant to be things that don’t bring you pleasure even when they are satisfied, or those that can never be met, but instead expand further and further as you get closer (like desire for wealth or fame that only grows as you reach the previous goals you’d set)

That does seem to fit with the vain or void terminology - which I vastly prefer to talking about “unnatural desires” (my understanding is that, at least in the letter to Menoecus he didn’t use the term that would be an inversion - or direct opposite of “natural” and that “unnatural” is more of a translation choice because it seemed like they were meant to be opposites in that way - Don’s post seems to affirm this as well, but please correct if I’m wrong)

Post by “reneliza” of July 20, 2022 at 9:04 AM

Also - there seems to be a difference between reaching a goal, feeling pleasure from that, and then asking “What’s next?” And reaching a goal and blowing right past it because “It’s not enough”

Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2022 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I wonder if the “unnatural” desires are meant to be things that don’t bring you pleasure even when they are satisfied, or those that can never be met, but instead expand further and further as you get closer (like desire for wealth or fame that only grows as you reach the previous goals you’d set)

That leads me back to this point:

[Quote from Don](#)

The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

To some extent the observations that food water shelter etc are needed for life is so obvious that it doesn't seem to me to be useful for much more than what Epicurus says -- touchstones for contemplation of the issues. Those minimal levels stand at one end of the spectrum, while "master of the world" is at the other. No one should seriously suggest that either of those extremes is appropriate, but they serve the purpose of helping organize the presentation. To that extent they are useful, but to the extent that "minimalism" has assumed a life of its own in the modern world, we have to be careful that neither extreme is held up to be the ultimate goal in itself. Very few people that I am aware of seriously attempt to implement either extreme, but from reading some commentaries one would get the idea everyone who drinks anything but water is a "bad Epicurean."

Post by “reneliza” of July 20, 2022 at 12:11 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

There are some translations that interpret αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν to mean only things like clothing and shelter - those things that provide "freedom from disturbance" for the body, that is for one's physical existence. That isn't literally what is written so that is simply one interpretation. Those kinds of things - clothing and shelter - would seem to fall under the final category of those necessary for life. So, this category should catch those between eudaimonia and those necessary for life. This is an interesting category.

I would contend that those "necessary for life itself" are those essentials at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, air, etc. Again, clothing and shelter would seem to fall into this category.

PS: the "on the one hand... On the other hand" are meant to literally translate the Greek μὲν... δε... It is clunky and awkward in English but I wanted to get across that they were there in the original. They do not have to be, nor should they be, translated this literally in all cases.

I do like thinking of it in terms of Maslow, but it seems to me that “necessary for life itself” roughly corresponds to the base of the pyramid, the physiological needs, and then the “freedom from disturbance” would be the next level, the safety/security needs (these two levels combine to form the “basic needs”)

In Maslow’s hierarchy, the next level is social/belonging. I wonder how well these correspond to the “necessary for eudaimonia” category. The categories needed for life itself and for freedom from disturbance at least seem to be more universal than most things within Epicureanism. Is this also true for the desires that need to be satisfied for eudaimonia? Is this category just the desire for aponia and ataraxia, or is it more specific and personal than that?

I know that I often think of things as being “necessary for happiness” which just....absolutely are not (things like romantic love, especially a specific relationship) as shown by me having happiness without having those things, so it seems like this category can get REALLY blurry if it’s left open-ended.

Post by “Don” of July 20, 2022 at 12:40 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

my understanding is that, at least in the letter to Menoecus he didn’t use the term that would be an inversion - or direct opposite of “natural” and that “unnatural” is more of a translation choice because it seemed like they were meant to be opposites in that way - Don’s post seems to affirm this as well, but please correct if I’m wrong)

You are correct. Natural and Empty in Menoikeus. I don't think the Greek word for unnatural is ever used. For example:

[PD29](#) Τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ <καὶ ἀναγκαῖαι· αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ> καὶ οὐκ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ οὔτε φυσικαὶ οὔτε ἀναγκαῖαι ἀλλὰ παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν γινόμεναι.

Don - Of the cravings, first there are those that are natural and required to live, then there are those that are natural but not required, and, finally, there are those that are neither natural nor required which come to be along with empty beliefs (beliefs devoid of merit).

That's as close as we get, I think.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 20, 2022 at 3:22 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Godfrey from this formulation I infer you are eliminating all "unnatural" desires completely. How did you define or give examples for that category?

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I wonder if the "unnatural" desires are meant to be things that don't bring you pleasure even when they are satisfied, or those that can never be met, but instead expand further and further as you get closer (like desire for wealth or fame that only grows as you reach the previous goals you'd set)

Thanks [reneliza](#) ! You've said this better than I would have.

There are other things that I notice I'm beginning to find addictive in that they're becoming an obstacle to pursuing other pleasurable activities. It could be that I'm finding less pleasure in the addictive activity as well. A current example for me is reading: reading one book or article tends to lead to another, then three more, and before I know it way more hours have gone by than I originally planned on. Another example is dark chocolate. For years, I would eat a square after one or two meals a day. It wasn't until I returned from a vacation where I didn't eat any chocolate that I realized that I wasn't really enjoying it much any longer.

Neither of these things are things that I would eliminate entirely. But in both cases I had become oblivious of the natural limit, in that they were no longer producing an excess of pleasure or were to some degree producing pain. Since I had become oblivious to my natural limits in these cases, I had to self-limit in order to reestablish awareness of my natural limit. Now I'm enjoying the occasional piece of chocolate again, and I'm finding the time to do the things that I was neglecting due to reading.

I interpret the dividing line, in terms of limits, as those that require a person to self-limit. But there are those that I just self-limit out of hand and stop thinking about, such as hunger for glory, then the ones that I need to self-limit just enough to return to my normal pleasure/pain equilibrium. The second kind become natural and unnecessary desires once I've successfully returned to normal functioning. If nothing else, this should make clear why Epicurus never categorized specific desires. 🤔

The passage where Epicurus gives a young man advice about sex might be a good example to look at, but I can't remember the source at the moment.

Post by "Pacatus" of July 20, 2022 at 4:17 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

At the risk of self-horn-tooting, here's my translation and commentary on the desires from my Letter to Menoikeus. Apologies for the length.

I don't think your tooting. 😊 I think everyone here appreciates your efforts at translation.

Post by “Pacatus” of July 20, 2022 at 4:26 PM

I'm pretty much a clunk on this, but it seems to me that unnatural desires would be ones that do not lead to any (natural) health in body or mind – and hence to no natural pleasure (or ataraxia, or eudaimonia – which I would render as something like happy well-being). Fame, extreme wealth, any kind of braggadocio one-upmanship. I might include some Stoic (quasi-Kantian?) admonitions to duty, and a self-righteous pat on one's own back.

I would think that “getting high” – by which I mean certain pleasurable “altered states of consciousness” is natural – but one where the means might end up causing more harm (pain) than sustainable pleasure. As will excess. [I just enjoyed an afternoon martini, relaxing on our shaded deck – and I enjoy the pleasurable “afterglow.” But I know that a 2nd martini now will dull everything, and undo the pleasure.]

Post by “Godfrey” of July 20, 2022 at 8:34 PM

This is I think where limits of desires come into play. The pleasure from the martini is good. At the point where it might lead to an excess of pain, it's not prudently choiceworthy. This is a natural limit. When you desire to drink several martinis, even though you're not enjoying them, your desire has tipped into unnatural/vain territory.