

Thoughts on Categorizing Desires: Natural, Necessary, and Vain

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 7, 2022 at 9:55 AM

A recent [thread diving deeper into Principle Doctrines 26 and 30](#), had me thinking again to investigate if it is possible to categorize desires, so here is my attempt (suggest changes or additions please):

Natural and necessary for health of the body	Necessary for happiness and health of the mind	Vain and unnecessary
food/water	confidence in the means for future food/security	Insisting that one must have an exact type of food or other good which is unobtainable, dangerous, or very difficult to procure
shelter/clothing	self-sufficiency/liberty	choices which lead to a life of greater pains
human interaction (safety and procurement of necessities)	good friendship	choices which deplete funds needed for future security
exercise	mental engagement -- thinking, learning, and memory	
sexual release	relief from fear of death and the gods pleasant and pleasurable engagement of the senses	

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2022 at 10:37 AM

Very good start!

Post by “Titus” of October 7, 2022 at 4:43 PM

It's interesting how others perceive the famous approach of Epicurus how to categorize desires.

I would have categorized the natural and necessary desires in the way you do.

Generally speaking, the natural and not necessary desires are according to my perception extensions to the necessary desires, but still natural. Because they are based on our innate human condition, they just have to be avoided in the case of causing pain and damage.

The unnatural desires relate to everything else. Since almost everything can be related to a natural source, I would suggest this category is something more about abstract ideas and wants, as Diogenes Laertios relates them to the search for power and fame.

Power and fame are not bad themselves, but one usually loses focus on what is the well of our wellbeing. This is the reason why we should usually avoid them and be very critical to these conditions.

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2022 at 5:59 PM

I agree with that but especially in the context that it is always a matter of comparing the resulting pleasure to the resulting pain and never a strict out-of-context analysis

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 7, 2022 at 6:07 PM

Thank you [Titus](#) for your feedback. I decided not to use "natural but unnecessary" category to see if I could create something very direct and usable. Something only becomes "unnecessary" if it causes much pain or trouble -- so the prediction of the end result determines the decision to say that something is "unnecessary".

And this also means that there is not any absolute labels of a specific activity. This means that if someone chooses to run for a political office, then their choice to do so is because it will bring them more pleasure than pain. (Perhaps it was much more dangerous back in Epicurus' time, compared to now.)

Post by “waterholic” of October 9, 2022 at 11:31 AM

[Kalosyni](#) gave me an idea:

- Incremental changes in lifestyle combined with a trial & error (controlled experiment) can establish a personal table of preferences
- Record the degree of pleasure on a scale
- In case of pain, trace back to the pleasurable activity that caused it and calibrate for the future.
- Identify the biggest sources of long term pain at the moment of realisation. Keeping a record should make it obvious what the fundamental issues are.

A very simple personal record app will do it. Anyone came across something that already exists and fits the bill?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 9, 2022 at 1:25 PM

Would a note-taking app do the trick? I've been using Zettel Notes, but there must be dozens of them.

Post by “Titus” of October 11, 2022 at 8:51 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Thank you Titus for your feedback. I decided not to use "natural but unnecessary" category to see if I could create something very direct and usable.

Due to my short-reading 😊 , I just even recognized you 've introduced your own categorization (necessary for happiness and health of the mind) and skipped the "natural but unnecessary" category.

My anew reading leads me to new points. I remember Epicurus distinguishes the "natural and necessary" desires in another three categories, saying in Menoiceus

"and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life."

Probably, one could assume your two categories as part of this triad.

There's also the way of reading them related to aporia and ataraxia as your categories sum up many of the material features of them.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I agree with that but especially in the context that it is always a matter of comparing the resulting pleasure to the resulting pain and never a strict out-of-context analysis

I think this is one of the reasons, Epicurus is arguing in abstract terms rather than presenting a list made of concrete. But I also recognize these abstract terms being related to an idea of basic principles of the nature of man. While this may set a focus (e.g. keeping your body healthy, care for your personal relations) I agree it's a matter of ongoing comparing and evaluating pleasures and pains.

There's a fun fact story I would like to share. Approximately 10 years ago I read an academic article criticizing the pleasure calculus of Epicurus. The author argued, in the search for happiness one would have to constantly evaluate, which he condemned as quite unrealistic. How else would a customer visiting a supermarket make his choices?! 😄