

Is the Natural and Necessary Question Objective or Subjective?

Post by "Cassius" of November 21, 2022 at 10:42 AM

One of the topics that came up in our zoom discussion of 11/20/22 was how Emily Austin sets forth the "detective" question in chapter 3 of "Living for Pleasure." Part of the issue discussed there is whether the question of whether someone is happy should be answered "subjectively" or "objectively."

In my mind I relate this to the "natural and necessary" question as to the desires. Is the question of "natural and necessary" to be answered "objectively" (everyone should shoot for the same things in life) or "subjectively" (the question of whether a think is natural or necessary for that person is largely subjective to be answered by that person alone and not by reference to a pre-existing list that applies to everyone.

One thing that bears on this is how Epicurus qualifies the question in the letter to Menoeceus:

Quote

We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; *and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.*

So while it might be tempting to say that things like air, water, food, etc. are what he is referring to as the "natural and necessities" it is not at all clear whether those are necessary and sufficient for happiness as well as life itself.

Another thing that bears on this for me is how this is expressed in Torquatus:

Quote

Hence only the Wise Man, who prunes away all the rank growth of vanity and error, can possibly live untroubled by sorrow and by fear, content within the bounds that nature has set. Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus's doctrine as to the different classes of the desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and

limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.

I used to focus on the "nothing could be more useful or conducive" as a meaning "this was a unique and innovative idea of Epicurus - to analyze things according to whether they are natural and necessary - that no one had suggested before.

Now I am thinking that we ought to consider at the same time (1) the question Austin has raised about the subjective or objective measures of happiness, and (2) the observation that Aristotle (and presumably others) had apparently been talking about an objective lists of things (including money, etc) that are necessary for a happy life.

And if we combine those two observations then maybe what Torquatus was referring to as innovative and important about Epicurus was not that he was the first or most important person to suggest that we needed to think about the categories of "natural and necessary," but that instead he innovation was that Epicurus was saying that the "natural and necessary question itself is largely subjective rather than objective." If so, that would help explain why we don't seem to have Epicurus (or other later Epicurean writers who are better preserved) dwelling on list of specific and objective "things" that are needed for happiness. Maybe the point we need to understand in the natural and necessary question is not that we need to prepare a specific checklist like Aristitotle and be sure we check the boxes, but rather we need to recognize that "the principle of the classification" is not looking to gods or to ideal forms for the list, but simply looking to whether the "desires [can be] gratified with little trouble or expense or ... are easily procured and limited in amount ... or whether they are such that no bound or limit can be discovered."

Which would not be to say that we should only pursue the desires that are easiest to obtain, but which would be to say something like:

When deciding what to pursue, don't look for an objective list that applies to everyone as such a list existed and was handed down by God or by Platonic forms. Look instead simply to your own circumstances, evaluate how hard it is going to be to obtain those desires, and measure your decision on whether to pursue them by asking whether the reward to you will be worth the cost to you.

As it is, many of us seem trapped in the Aristotelian model and think that there must be a list that everyone has to check off in order to be happy. The way out of that trap is to realize that no such single list exists. And so we should reject the "objective" natural and necessary analysis that Aristotle and other pre-Epicurean Greeks had suggested, and instead substitute the Epicurean natural and necessary model, which is primarily subjective.

Post by "Charles" of November 21, 2022 at 10:59 AM

I've always maintained that the desires are subjective barring the most basic of essentials of survival. This is something that's often misleading, and newer learners of the philosophy struggle with, both as a teaching method and for didactic self-application. In order to teach the desires and their categorization examples are given for each category, I think this might be a key culprit in this pattern.

What's necessary for some may not be necessary for others and what is unnatural may be natural to someone else whether by personal preference, health, or even culture.

Post by “Cassius” of November 21, 2022 at 11:11 AM

I agree Charles.

Also, glancing back at my first post in the thread I want to add make clear that part of the reason for posting is to note that as people here get time to read Nichomachean ethics or works by Plato or others, it would be bring out and discuss any discussions that sounds like "natural and necessary" to which Epicurus could be responding / commenting.

Post by “Don” of November 21, 2022 at 11:46 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

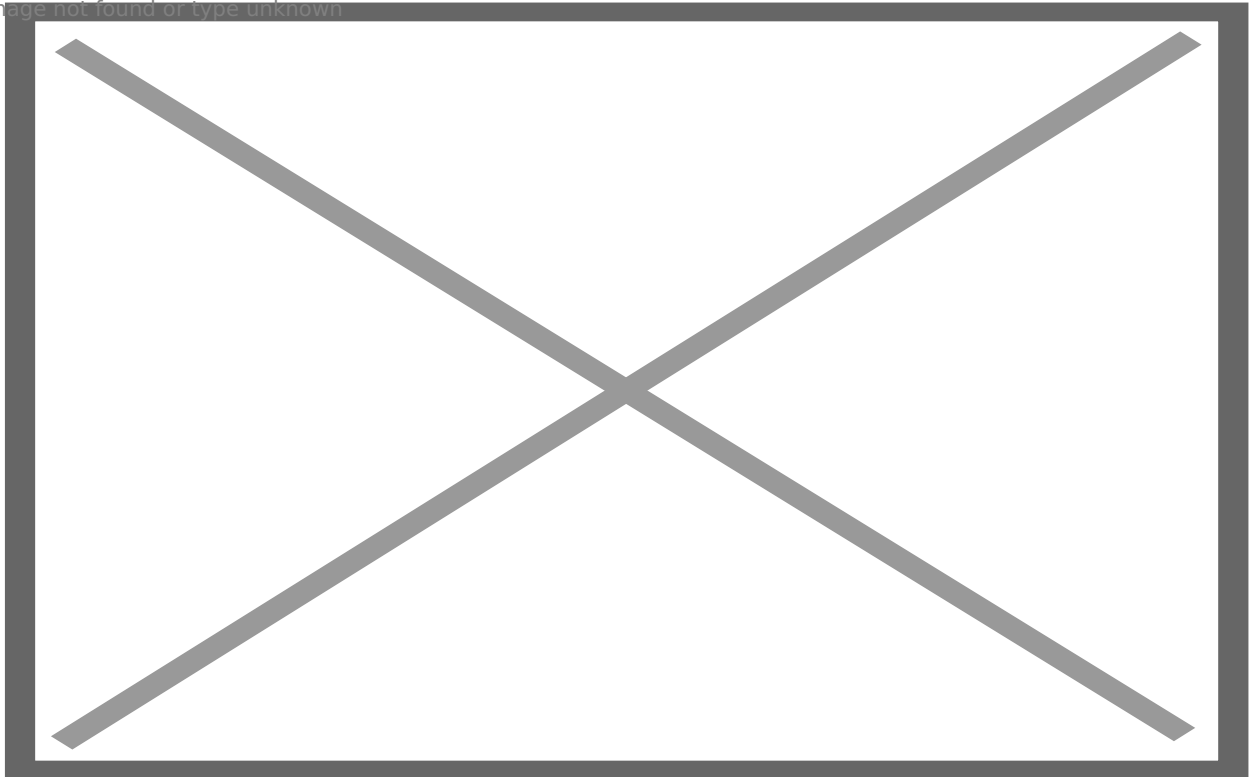
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As it is, many of us seem trapped in the Aristotelian model and think that there must be a list that everyone has to check off in order to be happy. The way out of that trap is to realize that no such single list exists. And so we should reject the "objective" natural and necessary analysis that Aristotle and other pre-Epicurean Greeks had suggested, and instead substitute the Epicurean natural and necessary model, which is primarily subjective

I would say the "list" has both objective and subjective aspects. For example, Epicurus states that friendship is an immortal good. He obviously thinks friendship is necessary for a pleasurable life. That's objective to me. How many friends, what you do with your friends, etc.: That can be subjective. Are you naturally outgoing? Maybe you want lots of friends and to do adventurous things. More introverted, maybe less friends are necessary and you do quieter things. We're all combinations of introvert and extrovert with varying needs and desires. But friendship, as an example, is necessary. That's even born out by psychological research. Loneliness is extremely detrimental to one's health.

As to "happiness," I expressed my misgivings about that word at the 20th last night. The word used in the texts is eudaimonia by Aristotle, Epicurus, et al. Happiness has become a buzzword and comes along with lots of semantic baggage. The definition in positive psychology research seems to be "subjective well-being" which sounds right to me. It may be clunky, but it also is a better translation of eudaimonia in my opinion.

Image not found or type unknown



[What Is Happiness and Why Is It Important? \(+ Definition\)](#)

Do you think happiness is the same thing to you as it is to others? Find out!
positivepsychology.com

Post by "Cassius" of November 21, 2022 at 12:28 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I would say the "list" has both objective and subjective aspects.

I agree. The takeaway is probably that even though Epicurus' list can be looked at as having both objective and subjective qualities, the way the list is described and developed Aristotle's (and the others') list takes on a much more "objective" quality, while Epicurus' viewpoint is weighted toward pointing out the "subjective" qualities.

This would be one of the many differences that flows from Aristotle/Plato/Stoics seeing the universe as divinely ordered with everything emanating from a prime mover or god or divine fire. In contrast, Epicurus sees the universe as arising from the properties and qualities of the individual atoms and void, without a superimposed central intelligence creating it and ruling over it.

Do living beings need to look to a superior being higher than themselves for commandments on how to live life? Epicurus says "no" - there are no commandments, but it's also not "anything goes." There are "objective" facts of nature which we have to take into account in deciding how to live, such facts including:

1. No supernatural beings exist.
2. No consciousness / life / reward / punishment after death
3. No guidance from Nature as to what to choose or avoid other than (very broadly stated) the feelings of pleasure and pain.
4. No Platonic forms or Aristotelian essences or absolute virtue / right / wrong exist in the abstract that apply to everyone all the time and in all circumstances. ("Yellow" does not have an eternal unchanging existence apart from "things that are yellow.")

Those are among the facts that can be thought of as *De Rerum Natura* (or Humphries' "The Way Things Are") that no one can change, while most other "facts" are "subjective" - they are individual to our circumstances and are subject to constant change and have to be reevaluated every step along the way.

Post by “Charles” of November 21, 2022 at 12:57 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

For example, Epicurus states that friendship is an immortal good. He obviously thinks friendship is necessary for a pleasurable life. That's objective to me.

Despite recognizing its importance friendship is far less important to me than many of the other things in the philosophy to the point of bordering into subjectivity. Though the specifics of how important desires and pleasures may be kept to personal outlines or to one's own self it's always interesting to hear discussion about the different levels of importance each Epicurean assigns to their values.

Post by “Don” of November 21, 2022 at 4:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I would say that these can/should also be understood as necessary components of a pleasurable life, especially 1 and 2 as *really* understanding these leads to freedom from anxiety about god's judgment, punishment after death, fear of death, etc. Without that freedom from anxiety and fear, one can't have "subjective well-being."

Also, upon further reflection on the necessity of friendship: it seems to me that Aristotle was focused on the individual's place in the polis and one, he believed, couldn't truly achieve well-being outside that context. Epicurus, on the other hand, saw the individual's well-being as most important but that well-being was supported - flourished - by a community of friends that one could rely on. One was still a member of one's city-state and took part in the city's festivals but one's close circle of friends is what provided the most security.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 21, 2022 at 6:34 PM

Regarding the article above on happiness, which is from a positive psychology source....

Not long ago I read a book by Martin Seligman (one of the founders of positive psychology) about positive psychology, and I was surprised to learn that he was heavily influenced by Aristotle. Positive psychology appears to fall into the objective approach to happiness, which I found quite interesting at the time as I couldn't put my finger on what bothered me about it.

Post by “Don” of November 21, 2022 at 7:10 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I was surprised to learn that he was heavily influenced by Aristotle.

I would be curious what Seligman attributes to Aristotle in the development of positive psychology.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Positive psychology appears to fall into the objective approach to happiness, which I found quite interesting at the time as I couldn't put my finger on what bothered me about it.

I'd be interested to hear more of your thoughts on that topic. I think positive psychology has some useful findings to share, but I'm sometimes skeptical of their data when it's from self-reported surveys.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 21, 2022 at 7:30 PM

Seligman's system is based on virtues, and subordinate to the virtues are personal strengths. He determined the virtues by having a team study philosophies from around the world and from various eras for commonality, and from that compiled a list of "universal" virtues. You fill out a questionnaire to find out which are your signature strengths from a list of 24 strengths. Your signature strengths are 3-5 that score highest on the questionnaire. So his method is a combination of objective and subjective, but starts with the objective and determines the subjective from there.

It's an interesting method, but for me it seemed useful more as a brainstorming tool, perhaps useful to get some personal insights just by means of a fresh point of view. It's too formulaic to be of much further use, at least for my taste.

Post by “Cassius” of November 21, 2022 at 7:42 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

He determined the virtues by having a team study philosophies from around the world and from various eras for commonality, and from that compiled a list of "universal" virtues.

That is exactly the kind of method of determining a standard that I have heard attributed to Aristotle.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 22, 2022 at 1:28 PM

On the topic of Positive Psychology, and this is different than Seligman (and much better imo) is this book: "Positivity" by Barbara Fredrickson:

[PositivityRatio.com - Home](#)

I own a copy, and need to reread it, to see if it has any "Epicurean" elements in it.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 22, 2022 at 1:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One of the topics that came up in our zoom discussion of 11/20/22 was how Emily Austin sets forth the "detective" question in chapter 3 of "Living for Pleasure." Part of the issue discussed there is whether the question of whether someone is happy should

be answered "subjectively" or "objectively."

Here is a quiz on emotions felt in the previous 24 hours:

[PositivityRatio.com - Self Test](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of November 23, 2022 at 4:35 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Here is a quiz on emotions felt in the previous 24 hours:

Positivity: 9

Negativity: 7

Ratio: 1.29

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 23, 2022 at 5:38 PM

[Pacatus](#), I did the test last night, and had somewhat different scores -- today was a better day -- and on that website (in post 13 above) it suggests taking the test every day for two weeks -- instead of registering I might just take a screenshot to hold onto my test result data.

Post by “Cassius” of December 1, 2022 at 4:50 PM

I may be posting this in the wrong place but I remember that at the very least Don and/or Godfrey and I were asking what precedent might have existed for the natural and necessary distinctions before Epicurus. A friend has today pointed us toward the following excerpts from Plato, for which I am very appreciative!

Republic 8: 558d-559d

Then he too rules his spendthrift pleasures by force—the ones that aren't money-making and are called unnecessary.

Clearly.

But, so as not to discuss this in the dark, do you want us first to define which desires are necessary and which aren't?

I do.

Aren't those we can't desist from and those whose satisfaction benefits us rightly called necessary, for we are by nature compelled to satisfy them both? Isn't that so?

Of course.

So we'd be right to apply the term "necessary" to them?

We would.

What about those that someone could get rid of if he practiced from youth on, those whose presence leads to no good or even to the opposite? If we said that all of them were unnecessary, would we be right?

We would.

1170

Let's pick an example of each, so that we can grasp the patterns there.

We should do that.

Aren't the following desires necessary: the desire to eat to the point of health and well-being and the desire for bread and delicacies?

Suppose so.

The desire for bread is necessary on both counts; it's beneficial, and unless it's satisfied, we die.

Yes.

The desire for delicacies is also necessary to the extent that it's beneficial to well-being.

Absolutely.

What about the desire that goes beyond these and seeks other sorts of foods, that most people can get rid of, if it's restrained and educated when they're young, and that's harmful both to the body and to the reason and moderation of the soul? Would it be rightly called unnecessary?

It would indeed.

Then wouldn't we also say that such desires are spendthrift, while the earlier ones are money-making, because they profit our various projects?

Certainly.

And won't we say the same about the desire for sex and about other desires?

Yes.

And didn't we say that the person we just now called a drone is full of such pleasures and desires, since he is ruled by the unnecessary ones, while a thrifty oligarch is ruled by his necessary desires?

We certainly did.

Let's go back, then, and explain how the democratic man develops out of the oligarchic one. It seems to me as though it mostly happens as follows:

Post by "Cassius" of December 1, 2022 at 5:40 PM

Here's the [Perseus.tufts.edu](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...Asection%3D558d) link for the full context: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...Asection%3D558d>

[558c] if only he says that he loves the people!1" "It is a noble2 polity, indeed!" he said. "These and qualities akin to these democracy would exhibit, and it would, it seems, be a delightful3 form of government, anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequals alike!4" "Yes," he said, "everybody knows that."

"Observe, then, the corresponding private character. Or must we first, as in the case of the polity, consider the origin of the type?" "Yes," he said. "Is not this, then, the way of it? Our thrifty5 oligarchical man

[558d] would have a son bred in his father's ways." "Why not?" "And he, too, would control by force all his appetites for pleasure that are wasters and not winners of wealth, those which are denominated unnecessary." "Obviously." "And in order not to argue in the dark, shall we first define1 our distinction between necessary and unnecessary appetites2?" "Let us do so." "Well, then, desires that we cannot divert or suppress may be properly called necessary,

[558e] and likewise those whose satisfaction is beneficial to us, may they not? For our nature compels us to seek their satisfaction.

[559a] Is not that so?" "Most assuredly." "Then we shall rightly use the word 'necessary' of them?" "Rightly." "And what of the desires from which a man could free himself by discipline from youth up, and whose presence in the soul does no good and in some cases harm? Should we not fairly call all such unnecessary?" "Fairly indeed." "Let us select an example of either kind, so that we may apprehend the type.¹" "Let us do so." "Would not the desire of eating to keep in health and condition and the appetite

[559b] for mere bread and relishes¹ be necessary?" "I think so." "The appetite for bread is necessary in both respects, in that it is beneficial and in that if it fails we die." "Yes." "And the desire for relishes, so far as it conduces to fitness?" "By all means." "And should we not rightly pronounce unnecessary the appetite that exceeds these and seeks other varieties of food, and that by correction² and training from youth up can be got rid of in most cases and is harmful to the body and a hindrance to the soul's attainment of

[559c] intelligence and sobriety?" "Nay, most rightly." "And may we not call the one group the spendthrift desires and the other the profitable,¹ because they help production?" "Surely." "And we shall say the same of sexual and other appetites?" "The same." "And were we not saying that the man whom we nicknamed the drone is the man who teems² with such pleasures and appetites, and who is governed by his unnecessary desires, while the one who is ruled

[559d] by his necessary appetites is the thrifty oligarchical man?" "Why, surely."

"To return, then," said I, "we have to tell how the democratic man develops from the oligarchical type. I think it is usually in this way." "How?" "When a youth, bred in the illiberal and niggardly fashion that we were describing, gets a taste of the honey of the drones and associates with fierce¹ and cunning creatures who know how to purvey pleasures of every kind and variety² and condition, there you must doubtless conceive is the beginning

[559e] of the transformation of the oligarchy in his soul into democracy." "Quite inevitably," he said. "May we not say that just as the revolution in the city was brought about by the aid of an alliance from outside, coming to the support of the similar and corresponding party in the state, so the youth is revolutionized when a like and kindred¹ group of appetites from outside comes to the aid of one of the parties in his soul?" "By all means," he said. "And if, I take it, a counter-alliance² comes to the rescue of the oligarchical part of his soul, either it may be from his father

Post by "Godfrey" of December 2, 2022 at 3:36 AM

At first glance it appears that Epicurus made a significant improvement by adding the third category of "unnatural." Having just necessary and unnecessary, for me, makes choices and avoidances rather black and white. The third category allows more room for personal nuance.

With two categories I think the tendency would be toward choosing the necessary and avoiding the "unnecessary" desires. This feels to me like a rigid sort of virtue ethic. With the three categories, the middle one (natural and unnecessary) becomes what I like to think of as the "sweet spot" where we make our most interesting choices. This is what puts the "pleasure" in "pleasure ethics."