

Given The Stress That Many Greek Philosophers' Placed On "Virtue" or a perfect view of "The Good" As The Ultimate Goal, To What Extent Would An Epicurus Have Considered That Approach An "Unnatural and Unnecessary Desire?"

Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2024 at 4:51 PM

This post is to discuss the question in the title. As we have been seeing in Book Two of On Ends, Cicero (relying on the Platonist tradition, which appears to have been amplified by the Stoics), considered Virtue to be an end that is absolutely complete in itself.

It seems possible that one objection that Epicurus would have had to this approach (and I think we can see this illustrated in Lucian's "Hermotimus" dialogue, is that such perfection is unattainable and damaging to consider as the goal in place of "pleasure."

Therefore I think it is legitimate to ask, when Epicurus or the Epicureans talked about avoiding the pursuit of unnatural and unnecessary desires, whether this category of desires includes the pursuit of Platonic ideals of "Virtue" which are absolute and complete in themselves? Is it possible that this category includes more than just the things we normally discuss, such as fame and money and power, but also the extreme pursuit of "virtue" as mesmerized those who eventually emphasized that approach to an extreme in Stoicism?

Here are some cites:

Quote from Letter to Menoeceus

[127] For if he says this from conviction why does he not pass away out of life? For it is open to him to do so, if he had firmly made up his mind to this. But if he speaks in jest, his words are idle among men who cannot receive them.

We must then bear in mind that the future is neither ours, nor yet wholly not ours, so that we may not altogether expect it as sure to come, nor abandon hope of it, as if it will certainly not come.

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.

[128] The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness.

Quote from On Ends Book One - Torquatus

The great disturbing factor in a man's life is ignorance of good and evil; mistaken ideas about these frequently rob us of our greatest pleasures, and torment us with the most cruel pain of mind. Hence we need the aid of Wisdom, to rid us of our fears and appetites, to root out all our errors and prejudices, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment of pleasure. Wisdom alone can banish sorrow from our hearts and protect its front alarm and apprehension; put yourself to school with her, and you may live in peace, and quench the glowing flames of desire. For the desires are incapable of satisfaction; they ruin not individuals only but whole families, nay often shake the very foundations of the state. It is they that are the source of hatred, quarreling, and strife, of sedition and of war.

Nor do they only flaunt themselves abroad, or turn their blind onslaughts solely against others; even when prisoned within the heart they quarrel and fall out among themselves; and this cannot but render the whole of life embittered. 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.

[Quote from Lucian's Hermotimus](#)

Lycinus. You must be of good cheer and keep a stout heart; gaze at the end of your climb and the Happiness at the top, and remember that he is working with you. What prospect does he hold out? when are you to be up? does he think you will be on the top next year—by the Great Mysteries, or the Panathenaea, say?

Hermotimus. Too soon, Lycinus.

Lycinus. By next Olympiad, then?

Hermotimus. All too short a time, even that, for habituation to Virtue and attainment of Happiness.

Lycinus. Say two Olympiads, then, for an outside estimate. You may fairly be found guilty of laziness, if you cannot get it done by then; the time would allow you three return trips from the Pillars of Heracles to India, with a margin for exploring the tribes on the way instead of sailing straight and never stopping. How much higher and more slippery, pray, is the peak on which your Virtue dwells than that Aornos crag which Alexander stormed in a few days?

Hermotimus. There is no resemblance, Lycinus; this is not a thing, as you conceive it, to be compassed and captured quickly, though ten thousand Alexanders were to assault it; in that case, the sealers would have been legion. As it is, a good number begin the climb with great confidence, and do make progress, some very little indeed, others more; but when they get half-way, they find endless difficulties and discomforts, lose heart, and turn back, panting, dripping, and exhausted. But those who endure to the end reach the top, to be blessed thenceforth with wondrous days, looking down from their height upon the ants which are the rest of mankind.

Lycinus. Dear me, what tiny things you make us out—not so big as the Pygmies even, but positively groveling on the face of the earth. I quite understand it; your thoughts are up aloft already. And we, the common men that walk the earth, shall mingle you with the Gods in our prayers; for you are translated above the clouds, and gone up whither you have so long striven.

Hermotimus. If but that ascent might be, Lycinus! but it is far yet.

Lycinus. But you have never told me how far, in terms of time.

Hermotimus. No; for I know not precisely myself. My guess is that it will not be more than twenty years; by that time I shall surely be on the summit.

Lycinus. Mercy upon us, you take long views!

Hermotimus. Ay; but, as the toil, so is the reward.

Lycinus. That may be; but about these twenty years—have you your master's promise that you will live so long? Is he prophet as well as philosopher? Or is it a soothsayer or Chaldean expert that you trust? Such things are known to them, I understand. You would never, of course, if there were any uncertainty of your life's lasting to the Virtue-point, slave and toil night and day like this; why, just as you were close to the top, your fate might come upon you, lay hold of you by the heel, and lug you down with your

hopes unfulfilled.

Hermotimus. God forbid! these are words of ill omen, Lycinus; may life be granted me, that I may grow wise, and have if it be but one day of Happiness!

Lycinus. For all these toils will you be content with your one day?

Hermotimus. Content? Yes, or with the briefest moment of it.

Lycinus. But is there indeed Happiness up there—and worth all the pains? How can you tell? You have never been up yourself.

Hermotimus. I trust my master's word; and he knows well; is he not on the topmost height?

Lycinus. Oh, do tell me what he says about it; what is Happiness like? wealth, glory, pleasures incomparable?

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Post by “Joshua” of February 26, 2024 at 6:22 PM

Is the desire to live virtuously--and I take that to mean, to live morally--necessary? It is not necessary for the continuance of life, but it *might* be necessary for happiness; is that the meaning of [PD05](#)?

Quote

[PD05](#). It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.

Set that to one side. What about the other part; is it *natural*? If it's necessary, it must be natural. If it's unnecessary, it *could* be natural. I suppose that it is quite natural, even if I'm not sure whether it's necessary.

Then, is the desire to be *perfectly* virtuous necessary? Let's test that theory;

Quote

[PD30](#). Those natural desires which entail no pain when not gratified, though their objects are vehemently pursued, are also due to illusory opinion; and when they are not got rid of, it is not because of their own nature, but because of the person's illusory opinion.

If one fails in their desire to live with perfect virtue, does their failure entail pain? Disappointment, perhaps, but surely not pain. So it is unnecessary; it might be natural, but it is certainly unnecessary.

	Virtue	Perfection of virtue
Natural?	Yes	Probably Not
Necessary?	Probably No	

My personal opinion; the desire for the *perfection* of virtue is both unnatural and unnecessary. It is in the same class as the desires for power, fame, luxurious riches, and eternal life. These desires are empty; we pursue them in the false belief that they will provide a position of security in which to enjoy pleasure, but they not only fail in providing this security, they actively thwart our attempt to obtain it.

Post by "Bryan" of February 26, 2024 at 6:41 PM

I think it is a simple "putting the cart before the horse."

(Demetrius Laco, On Textual and Exegetical Problems, col. 67, McOsker translation) [Man is said to be "by nature" a procurer of fo]od, since he does so by unperverted instinct; to be "by nature" susceptible to pain, since he is so by compulsion; "by nature" to pursue virtue, since he does so to his advantage; and we say that the first utterances of names were "by nature"...

So here we have acting "by nature" means acting:

[1] by our unperverted instinct (eg, pursuing food and speaking)

[2] by our compulsion (eg, avoiding pain)

and also,

[3] for our advantage (eg, pursuing virtues)

Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2024 at 6:45 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

My personal opinion; the desire for the perfection of virtue is both unnatural and unnecessary. It is in the same class as the desires for power, fame, luxurious riches, and eternal life.

Yes that is exactly the direction I would take this. And to the extent that Epicurus might have been saying this in the context of deep philosophical discussion, such as the letter to Menoeceus, rather than in the context of a "here's how you should choose your career" discussion, then the target of these comments might have been at least as much his philosophical opponents as it was those who couldn't control their urges for sex or food.

Post by “Don” of February 26, 2024 at 10:48 PM

Quote from Cassius

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From my perspective, you're asking the question incorrectly.

The Good (τἀγαθόν tagathon lit. The Good), using Aristotle's definition from *Nicomachean Ethics* - and the one I have no doubt to which Epicurus was responding - is "the Good is That at which all things aim."

If you are not aiming at pleasure - since that is "That at which all things aim" - you're going about life all wrong. If you're aiming at "virtue" as your telos, your ultimate goal, you're missing the mark. I don't think he would have called aiming at virtue an "unnatural and unnecessary desire." I think he would have called it an empty belief. If you believe you should be living for virtue, you are under an erroneous empty belief. You're aiming for the instrument and not the goal. Virtues are steps on the ladder, at the top of which is pleasure. If you're only looking at the steps, you never get to the top of the ladder. The "desire" to see virtue as "The Good" is

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simply based on a mistaken belief.