

# Against using the word "corrosive" for the "unnatural/unnecessary" category

**Post by "Kalosyni" of November 18, 2025 at 9:58 AM**

In the book "Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life" there is the usage of the word "corrosive" for the "unnatural/unnecessary" category of desires. We have likely discussed this before, but it is worth bringing up again.

I would recommend against using the word "corrosive" for several reasons:

1) It gives a situation a kind of static state that sounds difficult to remedy (once something is corroded it is difficult to restore it back to its original nature), where as the truth is that the human mind can shift rather quickly out of the "unnatural/unnecessary" when realizing the truth of something.

2) It sounds overly "dramatic" (envisioning leaking battery acid that corrodes metal). And it attributes an awful lot of power to desires, making them sound dangerous or "evil" (it almost has a "Christian puritanical" sound to it). But if you dig down to see what is going on then you will see that there are basic needs hiding deep below the surface (below the "unnatural" desire), but it is actually the strategy for meeting those needs isn't the best strategy. (Needs for safety, security, reassurance, or knowledge could be the deeper needs).

3) It doesn't accurately describe the biggest problem for things that are "unnatural" -- the main problem is that they are "empty" of happiness and pleasure (and that they cause more pain than pleasure).

---I think most people here on the forum would understand that "natural" is something that nature gives to animals or occurs naturally for animals. Where as, "unnatural" is something which is only an opinion with no basis in nature. Once we are clear about what these categories are, then we can decide how best to label them.

My own current take on the three categories of desires:

- 1) natural and necessary for well-being
- 2) nice to have but optional
- 3) empty, painful, or leading to unwanted consequences

---

**Post by "Cassius" of November 18, 2025 at 10:57 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4808-against-using-the-word-corrosive-for-the-unnatural-unnecessary-category/>

Isn't there also a related question about her choice of the word "extravagant" - i think she brought that up herself in her podcast interview.

My own take at the moment is that the key thing that distinguishes this category is that the desire in question cannot be satisfied - it has no limit. Yes we might consider them to be extravagant, yes we might consider their result to be corrosive. But it seems to me that the crucial first step is to focus on how to identify them in the first place. And there it seems to me that the various texts are pointing to their commonality being that they "have no limit" - they cannot be satisfied - and so as a result pursuit of them is doomed to failure from the very start.

What is to one person and in one situation "extravagant" is very different for another person in another situation, for whom it might be necessary. Drawing the distinction at "simply cannot be satisfied" such as for eternal life would appear to me both more practical and philosophical and consistent with the texts.

In the letter to Menoeceus Epicurus does not explain the principal of the classification:

*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.*

But Torquatus does in On Ends 1:45, and what he focuses on is not describing it with a negative adjective but pointing out the fact that it has no limit:

Rackham:

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.

Reid translation;

...and it is not possible to discover any boundary or limit to false passions.

---

**Post by "Adrastus" of November 18, 2025 at 1:02 PM**

I agree that using "unnatural" versus "natural" is a superior framework precisely because of what Cassius has quoted. The "Unnatural-ness" of Unnatural desires is that they lack limits and boundaries. They are "vain ideas" or ideals that stretch into infinity as we see in Principal Doctrine 15. Ideas unhinged and more often defying concern for Natural and Material things. I think equating this lack of boundaries for hedonistic, security and transcendental desires or fears being given the impious or unvirtuous label of "unnatural", while the "natural" being equated with satiation, satisfaction, limits, suavity, pleasant living seen as virtuous; is a powerful tool for the therapeutic quality of the philosophy that aids in achieving the states of mind and being like ataraxia and aponia, and ethical reasoning generally, within an Epicurean worldview.

I can't quite remember the argument given for using "corrosive" over "Unnatural" in the book but corrosive seems to hint at eating away at a "Good Form" (that is likely artificial rather than something coming "from nature"); rather than a type of transgression against Nature that limitless desires/fears drive us to and that drives bad Politics. I'm sure one could deconstruct away at "Natural" until it's rendered useless; but if we are interested in constructing a sense and definition of what is Natural equated with what should be pursued ethically and therapeutically, then I think Natural/Unnatural is a useful and historic term to build an ethical and soulful sense around.

---

### **Post by “Godfrey” of November 18, 2025 at 3:54 PM**

Personally, I kind of like "corrosive": these desires eat away at our well-being. But I would look at this similarly to the way that I look at the Tetracharmakon, which is as a mnemonic for people who are already comfortable of the ideas of natural, unnatural, necessary, unnecessary. In this case, "corrosive" just adds a little *oomph* to the concept.

---

### **Post by “kochiekoch” of November 18, 2025 at 4:06 PM**

Austin said she had to cut down the descriptions of the desires as she found them too unwieldy to put in her book. "Corrosive" I agree isn't the best shorthand for unnatural and unnecessary. I'm thinking that "Imaginary" would be a better choice, as the unnatural and unnecessary have no basis in nature and are inculcated by society. Although it's not as descriptive as the original unnatural and unnecessary, it would do in a pinch like trying to write a popular book. ☐

---

## Post by “Elli” of November 18, 2025 at 4:24 PM

Very interesting discussion about how we describe the 'unnatural' desires. I agree that the word *corrosive* overloads the meaning, as if we are talking about permanent damage, while Epicurus simply speaks of vain or harmful desires which require strict control to not become *φάυλες συνήθειες* (vicious habits). The problem is not that they 'corrode' something good, but that they are empty of genuine pleasure and lead to pain.

Epicurus himself is clear:

- 'We must not force nature but persuade it; we persuade it by fulfilling the necessary desires, the natural ones if they do not harm, and the harmful ones we must strictly check.' (ES 21)
- 'Let us utterly drive from us our bad habits as if they were evil men who have long done us great harm.' (ES46)

He does not speak of corrosion, but of persuasion, of control, and of removing vicious habits that bring no pleasure. Here in Greece, after all, the phrase 'corrosion of character' is something we mostly hear from certain robed priests who think the soul rusts like iron and needs anti-rust spray... 🤪

---

## Post by “Don” of November 19, 2025 at 8:24 AM

Austin herself admits the less than optimal choice of extravagant and corrosive. See (note 2)...

### Chapter 5

1. *Vatican Sayings* 63.
2. I have some misgivings about renaming the natural and unnecessary desires “extravagant” because that might mistakenly suggest that such desires are excessive or inappropriate. I eventually settled on “extravagant” in light of Inwood and Gerson’s apt translation of *πολυτελεῖας* at *Letter to Menoecus* 130 as “extravagance,” especially as theirs is the translation I suggest for readers of this volume.

Corrosive desires are corrosive to one's well-being. Take away something corrosive, and one can begin to heal.

She herself admits she couldn't go through the book repeating natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, not natural nor necessary over and over. I have no problem with her final compromise.