

Latest Thoughts On Natural and Necessary Classification of Desires - Adding A FAQ entry

Post by “Cassius” of November 19, 2025 at 9:31 PM

Tonight we had a spirited discussion on several options for interpreting this doctrine. I see that we don't have FAQ entry on this and now would be good time to construct one.

We clearly have some divergent opinions on how to interpret this one so I'll prepare a FAQ entry listing the various contenders for most likely interpretation.

If you have current thoughts on how to distill this doctrine down into a succinct form that provides reasonably clear guidance to a new reader, please post in this thread and I'll update the FAQ as we go forward.

Everyone pretty much asks the same question, something like this:

How do I know what desires fall into the various categories of natural and necessary desires, and are there hard and fast rules about how to apply the resulting categorization of a particular desire I am considering?"

Post by “Matteng” of November 29, 2025 at 4:50 AM

A strict rule based decision making I find difficult, we need always sober reasoning/prudence to judge/feel the consequences and the context to make good choices/avoidances.

But for orientation I see it currently like this table:

Epicurean Necessary Desires — with Urgency Level

Level	Greek term	Transliteration	Meaning	Urgency
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1	πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν	pros auto to zēn	necessary to live at all (food, water, shelter, sleep)	Highest urgency — must be secured first
2	πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν	pros tēn tou sōmatos aochlēsiān	necessary for bodily untroubledness (calm body, no disturbing pains)	Medium urgency — needed for stability and tranquility
3	πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν	pros eudaimonian	necessary for happiness / flourishing (friendship, ataraxia, knowledge)	Low urgency but highest value

- Level 1 (survival) must be handled first — you cannot philosophize or rest if starving.
- Level 2 (aochlēsia) becomes important once survival is secure — it removes bodily noise.
- Level 3 (eudaimonia) is the least urgent but most important — it completes the good life.

→ Epicureans may sacrifice survival (Level 1) to protect Level 3 (friendship, integrity), because Level 3 has the highest value, even if it is least urgent.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 29, 2025 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

A strict rule based decision making I find difficult, we need always sober reasoning/prudence to judge/feel the consequences and the context to make good choices/avoidances.

This is well said and definitely bears repeating.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 29, 2025 at 5:36 PM

How do I know what desires fall into the various categories of natural and necessary desires, and are there hard and fast rules about how to apply the resulting categorization of a particular desire I am

considering?"

- natural and necessary - desire for something for survival, for health of the body, for happiness of the soul
- natural yet unnecessary - desire for something which is difficult to get or causes much more pain
- unnatural and unnecessary - desire for something which is an "empty" concept which has no limit, and does not contribute to a happy life - such as power, great wealth, or immortality.

This works as a type of remedy, by reasoning through one's desires. It is common sense to know what is necessary for survival and health of the body. For happiness we must rely on the knowledge and experience of wise people (elders) and likely Epicurus gave clear guidance in his writing (which we no longer have). We do see in the [Principal Doctrines](#) that friendship is necessary for happiness.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 30, 2025 at 8:43 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

- natural and necessary - desire for something for survival, for health of the body, for happiness of the soul
- natural yet unnecessary - desire for something which is difficult to get or causes much more pain
- unnatural and unnecessary - desire for something which is an "empty" concept which has no limit, and does not contribute to a happy life - such as power, great wealth, or immortality.

I'm just re-reading over this list and each definition, and realizing that things like cream-puffs and rootbeer floats would fall into the first category if they are easy to get, but they would fall into the second category if they were unavailable for you to make/purchase. (And if rootbeer made you breakout in hives it would also fall into the second category).

So then in essence this list has slightly different definitions than what has been said in other places on the forum, and it is also different from what is in Austin's book "Living for Pleasure"...



Thoughts?

Post by “Patrikios” of November 30, 2025 at 10:52 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

So then in essence this list has slightly different definitions than what has been said in other places on the forum, and it is also different from what is in Austin's book "Living for Pleasure"... 🤔 .

Thoughts?

[Kalosyni](#) I see these categories as diagnostic tools for self-examination; where the **purpose** of classification is to reveal whether a desire leads us toward or away from tranquility. As [Matteng](#) indicated, we should use sober reasoning to ask how does my pursuit of X affect my ataraxia?

Post by “Joshua” of November 30, 2025 at 12:35 PM

Here is a sample of the relevant texts:

Quote

PD26. Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled when the object is hard to procure, or they seem likely to produce harm.

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. Wherever, in the case of desires which are physical, but do not lead to a sense of pain if they are not fulfilled, the effort is intense, such pleasures are due to idle imagination; and it is not owing to their own nature that they fail to be dispelled, but owing to the empty imaginings of the man.

Men. 127. 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.

Diog. Oen Fr. 32. Each (virtue?) therefore means of (?) ... just as if a mother for whatever reasons sees that the possessing nature has been summoned there, it then being necessary to allow the court to asked what each (virtue?) is doing and for whom [We must show] both which of the desires are natural and which are not; and in general all things that [are included] in the [former category are easily attained]

Diog. Oen Fr. 34. Let us first discuss states, keeping an eye on the point that, when the emotions which disturb the soul are removed, those which produce pleasure enter into it to take their place.

Well, what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears —of the gods, of death, and of [pains]— and, besides [these], desires that [outrun] the limits fixed by nature. These are the roots of all evils, and, [unless] we cut them off, [a multitude] of evils will grow [upon] us.

Diog. Oen NF 131 = YF 189. Vain desires, like those for fame and such things, are not only vain, but, as well as being vain, also difficult to fulfil. It is not unlike drinking much, yet always being thirsty. To be master of Pella, but [to have troubles for company, is vain].

Diog. Oen Fr. 153. Of the desires some are vain, others natural. Now those that are natural seek after such things as [are necessary] for our nature's enjoyment, [while those that are vain] What [need to mention the] fabulous treasures of Croesus and his gold ingots or the rivers running with gold for him? What [benefit], father Zeus, [did he derive] from these [richness]?

DRN Book IV, ~1084. For therein there is hope that from the same body, whence comes the source of their flame, the fire may in turn be quenched. Yet nature protests that all this happens just the other way; and this is the one thing, whereof the more and more we have, the more does our heart burn with the cursed desire. For meat and drink are taken within the limbs; and since they are able to take up their abode in certain parts, thereby the desire for water and bread is easily sated. But from the face and beauteous bloom of man nothing passes into the body to be enjoyed save delicate images; and often this love-sick hope is scattered to the winds.

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And here is how I would synthesize all of this information;

The test of whether a desire is necessary is in determining whether a feeling of pain results if that desire is not satisfied. If pain results, the desire is necessary. If pain does not result, the desire is unnecessary.

The test of whether a desire is natural is in determining whether there is a fixed limit in nature to which the object of desire is subjected. If there is a fixed limit in nature, the desire is natural. If there is not a fixed limit in nature, the desire is unnatural. Cassius is fond of quoting the dictum that *hard cases make bad law*, and we should probably be cautious when we approach the boundary between natural and unnatural desires. Remember, the purpose of this exercise is not to achieve a perfect score, or to make the grade, or to get on Santa's (or St. Peter's) nice list; the purpose is to secure a life of pleasure and to minimize, so far as it's reasonable to do so, the presence of pain.

Epicurus typically defines these terms in the negative, as in Principal Doctrine 26, and his advice to students on ethical questions is also offered in negative terms, as it is in Vatican Saying 51;

Quote

VS51. You tell me that the stimulus of the flesh makes you too prone to the pleasures of love. Provided that you do not break the laws, or good customs, and do not distress any of your neighbors, or do harm to your body, or squander your pittance, you may indulge your inclination as you please. Yet it is impossible not to come up against one or other of these barriers, for the pleasures of love never profited a man and he is lucky if they do him no harm.

You have to do the math yourself, for yourself!

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 30, 2025 at 3:37 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The test of whether a desire is necessary is in determining whether a feeling of pain results if that desire is not satisfied. If pain results, the desire is necessary. If pain does not result, the desire is unnecessary.

[Joshua](#) would you want to add the word "bodily"?

So it would be:

The test of whether a desire is necessary is in determining whether a feeling of **bodily** pain results if that desire is not satisfied. If **bodily** pain results, the desire is necessary. If **bodily** pain does not result, the desire is unnecessary.

But where does this leave us with regard to health and happiness of the soul?

Post by "Cassius" of November 30, 2025 at 3:41 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

You have to do the math yourself, for yourself!

... because only YOU can measure the pain or pleasure that results from any action.

It is exactly wrong to do what the Benthamites tried to do and reduce the calculation purely to mathematics.

However, so long as you realize that the mathematics is only an aid, and cannot be applied as the final factor, I would say that lining things up statistically does make some sense as a tool of analysis.

So I'd still maintain that in any difficult decision it probably does make sense to sit down and try to enumerate the options as a spreadsheet. If you don't, you're not making your best effort to think things through. But you have to remember that the assignment of units of pain and pleasure is entirely relative to you.

Therefore I would not say "don't even try to add them up because it can't be done."

I would say "plotting out the possibilities in detail is the only rational way to proceed, but you have to remember that there is no "necessity" in ethical decisionmaking. You can't treat your projection as applicable to anyone else or even to yourself at a later time. A moment by moment analysis is all that is possible,

Post

[A Draft Epicurean Pleasure Maximization Worksheet](#)

Feelings cannot be reduced to numbers, and there are important limitations in the use of a "worksheet" as an aid in evaluating choices and avoidances. However it may be helpful to some people to visualize an illustration of the weighing process that some term the "hedonic calculus." Here is a draft example for your consideration and comment. Scores included here are of course fictional and for example only. A version of the spreadsheet in xlsx format is attached for downloading.

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Cassius

July 11, 2019 at 10:25 PM

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 30, 2025 at 3:49 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

You can't treat your projection as applicable to anyone else or even to yourself at a later time. A moment by moment analysis is all that is possible,

A thought experiment that can help clarify things is asking yourself:

For any given choice, ask: Will what I do and the outcome matter to me next week, in one month, in a year, or 10 years from now?

What you choose to eat for breakfast hardly matters (unless it is really unhealthy). But some choices absolutely matter in the long term.

Post by “Joshua” of November 30, 2025 at 4:39 PM

Quote

would you want to add the word "bodily"?

I'm not sure, but perhaps not? I might consider friendship to be a necessary desire, and loneliness to be the contrary pain, for example. In fact, now that I look at it I notice that the two [Principal Doctrines](#) on friendship are sandwiched between Epicurus' commentary on the desires.

Post by “Cassius” of November 30, 2025 at 6:31 PM

PD26. Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled when the object is hard to procure, or they seem likely to produce harm.

Joshua is right to point to this one, which is relatively clear. And I think he's right to say that the test is not limited to "bodily" - unless someone is speaking in the sense that everything is "bodily" in the end - but that's not the sense being discussed as far as I can tell.

I think Torquatus makes clear and there's no reason to doubt him that mental pains and pleasures can often be more significant to us than bodily pains and pleasures. Dying for a friend would be an extreme decision but one that seems to clearly involve mental over bodily considerations.

And in the end I don't think that's even a close issue. While maintenance of the body is necessary in order for us to do anything, most of the biggest decisions that have the most affect our course of life are not primarily for the sake of the "body" at all.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 1, 2025 at 8:01 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

How do I know what desires fall into the various categories of natural and necessary desires, and are there hard and fast rules about how to apply the resulting categorization of a particular desire I am considering?"

[Cassius](#) Perhaps reformulating the question for clarity?

How do I know what desires are 1) natural and necessary; 2) natural but unnecessary; 3) unnatural and unnecessary ? And are there any rules on how to apply the categorization onto each particular desire I am having? Are there any additional methods or tools for making good choices and avoidances?

Then, can also include aphorisms such as: [VS71](#). Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 1, 2025 at 8:09 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Joshua is right to point to this one, which is relatively clear. And I think he's right to say that the test is not limited to "bodily" - unless someone is speaking in the sense that everything is "bodily" in the end - but that's not the sense being discussed as far as I can tell.

I think Torquatus makes clear and there's no reason to doubt him that mental pains and pleasures can often be more significant to us than bodily pains and pleasures.

The problem with including both bodily and mental pain, is that mental pain can arise from false views of reality. Lucretius warns about the pains that come from intense romantic infatuation. And there are other false views which can give mental pains...such as thinking that the stomach "needs" unlimited filling by variations of taste. So that means that using mental pains to determine when something is necessary doesn't always work.

And that is why I think we need a list of things that are necessary for the happiness of the soul. If you didn't have a single friend you could survive and your life would be very quiet, but you would lack a feeling of joy (joyousness/rejoicing).