

# Should References to "Natural" Be Understood As Contrasting "Given By Nature" to "Given By Convention"?

Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2026 at 4:52 AM

This is a discussion that originated in the recent Zoom in which we were discussing the relationship between "hedonic calculus analysis" and "natural/necessary analysis." It's really a part of that discussion, but the question is of such significance that it deserves a thread of its own.

Thread

## [What Is The Relationship Between "Hedonic Calculus" Analysis" and "Natural and Necessary Desire" Analysis?](#)

In tonight's Zoom we went at length into the question posed in the title to this thread, but I need to explain the background. First, it appears that there is a division of opinion about whether "Hedonic Calculus" analysis is more fundamental and primary, or whether "Natural and Necessary Desire" analysis is more fundamental and primary. In other words,

1. Does one analysis come before, or override, or overrule the other?
2. Do you start with one analysis and then bring the other into play only if

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Cassius

January 21, 2026 at 9:25 PM

In that discussion, Bryan mentioned that he thought it was significant to observe that it is possible to be more specific as to what Epicurus and/or other Greeks meant when they were discussing whether a desire is "natural" or not. At least in my own mind I tend to have a hard time getting any specificity out of "natural" because I presume that the other position is "unnatural" or "not natural." If that's all we can say, that doesn't help much, as that simply uses the same term "natural" on both sides of the equation without bringing any explanation to the picture.

Bryan says that he believes it is clear from numbers of texts (I gathered included outside the Epicurean context) that what the Greeks were really saying is that they were contrasting "what

is established by nature" with "what is established by CONVENTION." In other words, they were saying that the opposite of natural is not just "unnatural" but "conventional." This would lead us to focus on understanding the things to be avoided as unnatural as those which originate "by agreement with others" or "in consensus among human minds" or other descriptions that emphasize that the issue is a product of reasoning rather than being directly given to us by nature, such as through the five senses (and presumably the feelings and the anticipations as well).

I said to Bryan during the meeting that if this could be established through citations that it would probably be very helpful to our American/modern understanding to do so. For that reason I am posting this thread to set up a place to see if we can do that.

Thanks go to Bryan as the real impetus behind this conversation.

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## Post by "Bryan" of January 23, 2026 at 10:50 AM

I will throw in a few related quotes:

"Epicurus {as reported by Colotes} acts with the purest effrontery when he claims to lay down the same first principles, but nevertheless does not say that "color is by convention" and thus the qualities sweet, bitter, etc. "  
[Plutarch (fl. 80 CE), Against Colotes, 1111A]

"Oh by the Gods! Through your disposition, you revealed to us that you were deserving -- not according to the conventions of civic freedom"  
[Philodemus (fl.c. 70 BCE), Treatises, P.Herc. 1418, col. 32]

"for one ought not to study nature according to empty axioms and conventional rules → but as apparent things call out"  
[Epicurus, Lives, 10.86c]

"...[*to such an extent produces linguistic*] conventions by [*your*] memory through [*the use of*] a term - oh, by gods! - that you see these [*conventions*] as an established thing... [*with you*] proceeding according to [*your*] judgements as [*practical*] situations arise in various ways: anyone could disturb [*those practical situations*] - for they are always empty..."  
[Epicurus, On Nature, Book 10, P.Herc. 1413/1416 fragment 5]

"...and You happened to be applying [*your choice of words*] at that time without the association of certain conventions [*which have been developed*] → [*thus*] you would not have made clear: the [*fact that*] judging every expression applies to a certain [*judgment\** - but you were] still seeing [*the public*] indiscrimination of words vs. [*practical*] situations, [*and*] You were fully

conceiving [this issue]" \* *i.e., most words naturally apply to an originally specific concept.*  
[Epicurus, On Nature, Book 28, P.Herc. 1417, fr. 13 (col. 2 inf.)  
| P.Herc. 1479, fr. 13 (col. 3 sup.)]

"...indeed, to integrate [common terms into technical vocabulary] to a larger [extent] with what we ourselves want – but if at that time, thinking the same thing, we were speaking according to the interpretation [then] set-forth: in which [we said] that every human Error exists having no different shape than what is produced due to the multifaceted conventions of terms upon the preapprehensions and [upon] the appearances [of objects] , and... ...because of these things, We have split [them] into two... ...[with the] anticipations... ...every saying..."  
[Epicurus, On Nature, Book 28, P.Herc. 1479, fr. 12 (col. 3)]

"...He [*still*] laughs at this [*riddle*] in regards to [*its*] sophistry since he had not completely comprehended together in that response what also would have been adapted out of some convention of a term in this way \*- so as to fall into saying that it is possible for the same person to understand and also to not understand..."  
[Epicurus, On Nature, Book 28, P.Herc. 1417, fr. 13 (col. 9 inf.)  
| P.Herc. 1479, fr. 13 (col. 10 sup. – part 1)]

"We do not remove ourselves from the cause [*of the generation of movement*] – and [*we do not remove ourselves from*] what [*movement*] has been fully generated but by [*even*] doing one certain thing, We similarly clarify [*the nature of*] ourselves and [*of our*] composition. We do not instruct about it – indeed, We do not even rearrange many [*words*] in accordance with certain conventions without [*taking any*] mind of the terminology... ...for what is removed from a cause [*of movement*] by necessity [*is itself its own cause of movement*]..."  
[Epicurus, On Nature, Book 25, P.Herc. 1191 fr. 104, 105]

ὁ νόμος οἱ νόμοι	law	<b>NOMOS</b> <i>allotting</i>
ἡ νομοθεσία αἱ νομοθεσίαι	conventional rules	<b>NOMOTHEΣIA</b> <i>allotting place</i>
τὸ ἦθος τὰ ἦθη	disposition	<b>HOS</b> <i>custom</i>
ὁ ἐθισμός οἱ ἐθισμοί	convention	<b>EΘISMOΣ</b> <i>result of being accustomed</i>
ἡ ὄχλησις αἱ ὀχλήσεις	[feeling of] disturbance	<b>OCHLHΣIS</b> <i>process of a crowd of people</i>

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**Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2026 at 11:01 AM**

Thanks for those quotes Bryan!

Those lead me to ask: In this context does "convention" focus on "agreement between multiple people"? I could almost see these quotes referring to "the conclusions of reason" or even something indicated by prolepsis / anticipation, with the focus on the difference between "the reasoning process" and "the direct perceptions of the senses."

So when we hear convention should we hear "determined by agreement among people" or "determined through reason" or some combination of both?

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2026 at 11:53 AM

I am still looking for further sources on CONVENTION but in looking at history of discussion of natural and necessary I see this (of immediate interest is the part on the CYNICS and the use of CONVENTION in this context). But this isn't a direct citation....

### **Plato (c. 429-347 BCE)**

In the *Republic* (Book 8), Plato distinguished between necessary and unnecessary desires, defining necessary desires as "those we cannot desist from and those whose satisfaction benefits us" This distinction appears in his discussion of different types of political regimes and character types, particularly when contrasting the oligarchic and democratic personalities.

However, Plato conflated naturalness with necessity treating natural desires as essentially the same as necessary ones. The distinction is evident when he discusses how the "rustic city" satisfies only necessary appetites, while the "luxurious city" arises when citizens "overstep the limit of their necessities."

### **The Cynics (5th-4th century BCE)**

The Cynics, particularly Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope, emphasized living according to nature and rejecting conventional desires. They advocated that a life lived according to nature requires only the bare necessities for existence, and one can become free by rejecting needs that result from convention. Diogenes taught that happiness comes from being in accord with nature and living simply and self-sufficiently, while unnatural things like power, fame, and luxuries cause discord with nature and unhappiness. However, the Cynics focused more on practical demonstration than systematic philosophical categorization—their approach was to live out their philosophy rather than develop formal taxonomies.