The Normativity of Nature in Epicurean Ethics and Politics

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Appeals to nature are ubiquitous in Epicurean ethics and politics. The foundation of Epicurean ethics is its claim that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good and pain the sole intrinsic evil, and this is supposedly shown by the behavior of infants who have not yet been corrupted, "when nature's judgement is pure and whole." Central to their recommendations about how to attain pleasure is their division between types of desires, so that we know which desires we should seek to satisfy and which ones to reject: the natural and necessary ones, the natural but non-necessary ones, and the vain and empty ones. Elsewhere, the Epicureans talk about the "natural goods" of political power and fame, and they contrast "natural wealth" with wealth as "defined by empty opinion." Finally, in their politics, Epicurus claims that the "the justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor to be harmed."

We may usefully raise two questions regarding these various appeals to nature. The first is: what is it for these things to be natural, i.e., what notion of "natural" or "nature" is at play here? (Furthermore, is there a *single* notion being used across these appeals, and if not, how are they related?) The second is: what normative work does a thing's being natural do? That is, what reason, if any, does a desire's being natural give me for pursuing the object of that desire and trying to fulfill that desire, as opposed to not doing so and trying to eliminate it, and similarly for the other appeals to nature?

This paper will have four main parts, each associated with one of the appeals to nature mentioned above: (1) the cradle argument and the appeal to our natural pursuit of pleasure as proof of pleasure's goodness, (2) the division between natural and non-natural desires, (3) the

"natural goods" of wealth, political power, etc., and finally (4) the justice of nature being a pledge neither to harm nor be harmed.

1. The cradle argument and the goodness of pleasure

The Epicurean cradle argument is reported in several places. The fullest account comes at the start of Torquatus' account of Epicurean ethics in Cicero's *De Finibus* 1.30:

> Every animal as soon as it is born seeks pleasure and rejoices in it, while shunning pain and avoiding it as much as possible. This is behavior that has not yet been corrupted, when nature's judgement is pure and whole. Hence [Epicurus] denies that there is any need for justification or debate as to why pleasure should be sought and pain shunned. He thinks that this truth is perceived by the senses, as fire is perceived to be hot, snow white, and honey sweet.[1]

At *PH* 3.194, Sextus Empiricus basically repeats Torquatus' observation that pleasure is naturally worth seeking because animals seek it out as soon as they are born and are not corrupted. Two other variations of the argument illuminate the contrast between uncorrupted infants and adult humans:

> [Epicurus] uses as a proof that the goal is pleasure the fact that animals, as soon as they are born are satisfied with it but are in conflict with suffering by nature and apart from reason [*logos*]. So it is by our experience all on its own that we avoid pain. (DL 10 137)

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[1] Translations of *De Finibus* are from Annas and Woolf (2001). Translations of other texts are from Inwood and Gerson (1997). The following abbreviations will be used to refer to ancient texts: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* = *NE*; Cicero, *De Finibus* (On Ends) = *Fin*.; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) = *Nat. D.*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* = DL; Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* (Principle Doctrines) = *KD*; Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* (Vatican Sayings) = *SV*; Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* = *Ep. Hdt.*; Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* = *Ep. Men.;* Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) = *DRN*; Plato, *Republic* = *Rep.*; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Learned* = *AM*; Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* = *PH,* Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's* Physics = *in Phys;* Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* (Household Management) = *Oec*.

> Some of the Epicureans are accustomed to saying that an animal flees pain and pursues pleasure naturally and without instruction. For when it was just born and was not yet a slave to matters of opinion, just as soon as it was struck by the unfamiliar cold air, "it wept and wailed." And if it has a natural impulse to pleasure and a natural avoidance of painful exertion, then by nature painful exertion is something that is worth avoiding and pleasure is something naturally worth choosing. (Sextus Empiricus, *AM* 11.96)

Two themes are prominent in these passages. First, the fact that we "naturally" pursue pleasure shows that it is good: and here it seems that this pursuit is "natural" in the sense that we engage in it without tutoring or other learning. The second theme is that we should look to infant behavior to discover what we naturally pursue because it shows what we pursue before we are "corrupted."

This usage of "natural," where something is natural if it is congenital or built in to us, is not confined to our pursuit of pleasure. It is also the sense in which language and our preconception of the gods are "natural." For the Epicureans, all humans, without being taught, have a basic grasp of the gods, a conception which we get from "nature herself." (*Nat. D.* 1.43) And language is not entirely a matter of human convention. Instead, the origin of language is "natural" because early humans, like other animals, instinctively made different sorts of utterances in response to different sorts of stimuli, just as a stallion will make one kind of neigh when it is sexually aroused and a different sort of whinny when it is frightened. (*DRN* 5 1056–90) Epicurus says that these original "lessons of nature" were added to by the discoveries of reason, when people decided to add words to their language that were not part of the original stock of natural names. (*Ep. Hdt*. 75) But if this is the sense in which our pursuit of pleasure is natural, then the Epicurean appeal to the cradle seems deeply problematic, as it is unclear why

what is natural (in this sense) should be normative. That is, how can we legitimately infer what we *should* pursue on the basis of we *do* pursue without tutoring or argument?

The problem here can be brought out by comparing Epicurus to Aristotle and the way in which he grounds his ethics in our nature, especially in his function argument at *NE* 1.7. In it, Aristotle compares the human *ergon* (the human function or job) and the *erga* of artifacts. In the case of items that have functions, formal and final explanations—explanations which appeal to what something is and which appeal to goals or purposes—coincide. To be an eye is to be an organ which has the function of seeing. This function sets the *telos* of a functional item, and hence its good, because the good of something is its *telos*. Likewise, Aristotle believes that our theoretical reason has a function that it fulfills when it understands and contemplates the truths of cosmology and theology, and we can also perfect and express our rational nature in our practical and social lives. This functional understanding of nature is what allows Aristotle to appeal to our nature in order to discern what the human good is, an activity of the psyche that expresses complete human excellence, i.e., excellence as a rational and social animal.

Whether Aristotle's appeals to human nature in his ethics presupposes his "teleological biology," and if so in exactly what way, is controversial.[2] But for the purposes of illuminating what is going on with Epicurus, I do not need to stake out a definitive view on that question. Even Julia Annas, who thinks that Aristotle's ethics does not depend on his biology, attributes to Aristotle a strongly normative view of nature. She says that nature is "the goal or end of human development," which is not merely a description of how people *do* develop. Instead, it assumes that "we can distinguish between what forms an expression of a person's nature and forms a

[2] Defenses of such a dependence include Irwin (1980) and Leunissen (2015), while denials of it include Annas (1989), much of which is recapitulated in chapter 4 of Annas (1993a), pp. 142-158, and Nussbaum (1995).

corruption of it—between a natural and and an *un*natural development." Annas notes that this notion of nature is "strongly normative."[3]

The problem is that the Epicureans are at pains to deny *any* sort of normativity or teleology in their physics generally and in their biology specifically. According to Lucretius, organisms and their parts have no inherent purposes or functions, even though they are able to do various things (*DRN* 5 772–1090). Like Empedocles, the Epicureans think that just because the heart *does* pump blood, it does not follow that it is the *job* of the heart to do that. Instead, organisms that happened to have organs that allowed them to survive and reproduce, like a heart located in the chest rather than in the ankle, did survive and reproduce. That is why they are the ones around nowadays, whereas others died off. So how an appeal to nature is supposed to ground ethics is particularly enigmatic for the Epicureans.

The second theme of these passages, that we should rely on the judgment of infants about the goodness of pleasure because they naturally seek it "before they are corrupted," is also problematic. The obvious initial way to interpret these passages is that infants, who are not corrupted, seek what is actually good for us—pleasure—whereas people who are corrupted seek something other than what is good for us; i.e., something other than pleasure. One question immediately confronting such a view is why we should suppose that the untutored behavior of infants shows what is truly valuable for us to pursue. Aristotle, for instance, could plausibly complain that education and attending to arguments can give us better insight into what we should do. But let us leave this complaint aside for the moment.

The more central problem with this initial interpretation is that it does not square with the Epicureans' psychological hedonism, their view that *all* human behavior is ultimately motivated by the desire for pleasure. Although the point has been disputed, I believe that several passages

[3] Annas (1993a) 137. See pp. 138-141 for her fuller discussion of the role of nature in Aristotle's ethics.

firmly establish that the Epicureans are psychological hedonists.[4] In *De Finibus* 1.23 the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus says that pleasure and pain "explain our every act of pursuit and avoidance." Likewise, Epicurus says that we "must practice the things which produce happiness, since if that is present we have everything, and if it is absent we do everything in order to have it." (*Ep. Men.* 122.) Epicurus is here describing what we *do* strive for—happiness, i.e., pleasure—and from this observation derives the conclusion that we *ought* to do the things which allow us to obtain pleasure.

Finally, in *De Finibus* 1.42, Torquatus makes a quick argument that establishes normative hedonism, i.e., the intrinsic goodness of pleasure alone, on the basis of psychological hedonism, i.e., the thesis that pleasure is the only thing pursued for its own sake. This argument appeals to what motivates people generally, not infants in particular, and if people were not all motivated by the desire for pleasure, the argument would fall apart. I will look into this passage in more detail later, but for now, the relevant statement from it is: "the impulse to seek and to avoid and to act in general derives either from pleasure or pain."

So, given these apparent problems, how should we understand the Epicureans' appeal to the natural pursuit of pleasure by uncorrupted infants in the cradle argument?

1.1. The fact that we "naturally" pursue pleasure shows that it is good

Epicurus appropriates the teleological framework of Aristotle's ethics. The highest good is that which we seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and everything else that we seek is sought for its sake. As I noted above, when Epicurus appeals to nature to ground ethics, he should not be relying on an Aristotelian functional notion of nature, which allows us to distinguish between developments that fulfill our natural end as rational and social animals

[4] Most prominently, Cooper (1998) disputes that the Epicureans are psychological hedonists, but his arguments are given a detailed (and I believe convincing) rebuttal by Woolf (2004). For the sake of this paper, I will simply briefly give my own reasons for thinking Epicurus is a psychological hedonist.

and those that are deviations from it. Absent such an appeal, we can still look to what we do, as a matter of fact, pursue for its own sake, and what we do approve of for its own sake. The Epicureans think that in order for something to exist for the sake of some goal, it must be the result of the intention of some agent. (Simplicius *in Phys.* 198b29) Thus value comes in at the level of intentional, goal-directed behavior itself: the "end" of some piece of behavior is its good. And this behavior, in turn, is motivated by our desires, which are also intentional and aim at some end. But then, to determine what actually is good requires us to engage in some empirical work: what *do* we seek for its own sake and approve of for its own sake? The Epicureans answer: pleasure. This sort of naturalistic metaethical theory, which posits that the good is what we seek for its own sake, need not be hedonistic: Ralph Barton Perry's naturalistic theory of the good is an excellent example of this. (Perry 1914) For Perry, goodness consists in being liked and sought for its own sake, and badness in being disliked and being avoided for its own sake. But he is not a hedonist because he thinks that hedonism's conception of what we seek for its own sake is much too narrow.

The argument for hedonism that the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus advances precisely fits with the naturalistic metaethics that I have outlined above: that we all *seek* pleasure for its own sake establishes that it is intrinsically *good*:

> Furthermore, the impulse to seek and to avoid and to act in general derives either from pleasure or pain. This being so, it is evident that a thing is rendered right and praiseworthy just to the extent that it is conducive to a life of pleasure. Now since the highest or greatest or ultimate good – what the Greeks call the *telos* – is that which is a means to no other end, but is itself the end of all other things, then it must be admitted that the highest good is to live pleasantly. (*Fin.* 1.42)

It is not only our pursuit of pleasure that establishes its goodness, but also our delight in it. Epicurus' canon lists feelings of pleasure and pain as the criteria of choice and avoidance, with pleasure being familiar or congenial (*oikeion*) to us, whereas pain is alienating or foreign (*allotrion*). (DL 10.34) I have already mentioned *De Finibus* 1.30, where Torquatus says that every animal rejoices in pleasure, and goes on to say that the truth that pleasure should be sought and pain avoided "is perceived by the senses, as fire is perceived to be hot, snow white, and honey sweet."

These behavioral and affective proofs of pleasure's goodness and pain's badness are not competing accounts. Instead, they work together: it is because we delight in pleasure for its own sake and abhor pain for its own sake that we seek pleasure for its own sake and flee pain. Epicurus' brief summary of why pleasure is the good appeals both to our instinctive pursuit of pleasure and our feelings toward pleasure: "We do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. As soon as we achieve this state every storm in the soul is dispelled, since the animal is not in a position to go after some need nor to seek something else to complete the good of the body and the soul. […] And this is why we say that pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly. For we recognized that this [viz., pleasure] as our first innate good, and this is our starting point for every choice and avoidance and we come to this by judging every good by the criterion of feeling." (*Ep. Men.* 128-129) So the Epicureans ground our end, and hence our good, in our goal-directed behavior and our pro-attitudes.

1.2. Infants and "corruption"

Let us now turn to the issue of "corruption" and what it means, and why we should look to the cradle in particular to establish what is good. Initially, the thesis that pleasure is good because we seek it for its own sake may not only appear hopelessly misguided, but also

inconsistent with Epicurus' repeated insistence that we desire lots of things that we should not, that we make serious mistakes about what is good for us.

But in the *De Finibus* 1.55, Torquatus says, "There is no possibility of mistake as far the highest goods and evils themselves – namely pleasure and pain – are concerned. Rather error occurs when people are ignorant of the ways in which these are brought about." None of us are mistaken about what is good, but we make mistakes about what will bring us that good. Likewise, says Epicurus, all pleasures are good, but not all are choiceworthy, and all pains bad, but not all such as to be avoided. That is because some pleasures lead to more pain in the long run, and vice versa, so we have to think about the long-term consequences when choosing among pleasures and pains to make sure that we make our life overall as pleasant as we can. (*Ep. Men*. 129–30)

This allows us to see how we can desire some things we should not, even if psychological hedonism is true: we have false beliefs about what we need to live pleasantly, for instance, believing that striving to accumulate as much wealth as possible is the way to make us secure and ensure we will be able to fulfill our desires. It also allows us to account for why infants are not corrupt, and the sense in which we often are. Animals and infants do not have empty and false judgments because they do not (robustly) have judgments at all. Some later Epicureans discuss how our reasoning abilities set us apart from other animals. We can calculate the outcomes of different possible courses of action, whereas animals have only "irrational memory." That is, they have repeated experiences that condition them to act in certain ways, and to find certain things attractive or repulsive, but they do not think through the outcomes of possible courses of action. That is because they do not understand concepts such as "healthy"

and "expedient," and they cannot make causal inferences.[5]

Even though this development beyond the animal and infantile state is what allows us to be corrupted, this development is not as such a bad thing. We would not want to return to the cradle, even if it were possible. Infants obey the pleasure principle, going for whatever pleasure immediately beckons. Adults are still motivated by the desire for pleasure. But we need to move from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, delaying gratification when needed. Virtues such as courage do not come into being by nature, but by reasoning about what is advantageous (DL 10.120), and this is why Epicurus says practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is the source of all of the other virtues. Things like friendship and farming allow us to satisfy our needs better than we would be able to otherwise, and to face the future with serenity.

People who are "corrupted" do not pursue something *other* than pleasure: instead, they pursue pleasure *badly* because of their false and harmful beliefs. And infants and non-human animals do not always pursue pleasure well. Instead, they pursue pleasure in a relatively simple and straightforward fashion, which precludes both the possibility of corruption but also of the sort of rational long-term planning that adults with practical wisdom engage in.

So the cradle argument does not state that we ought to pursue pleasure because infants do, or that their behavior is normative for us because they are uncorrupted. Instead, it starts from the observation that the good is what we pursue for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and we want to know what this is. Infant behavior is (supposedly) a better and clearer guide to what we all pursue for its own sake. Discovering what we really desire is a problem because of self-deception and the opacity of our own motives. When discussing the fear of death,

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[5] These Epicureans, Hermarchus and Polystratus, are discussed in Annas (1993b) 66–9. There is no reason to think that what they say regarding other animals departs substantially from what Epicurus would have said.

Lucretius furnishes some examples of how we can be blind to ourselves: a person restlessly moving from room to room, and from his city home to his country villa, not realizing that his ennui and misery is caused by his fear of death (*DRN* III 1053–75), and another who unconsciously believes that some part of him survives his death, and hence finds it horrifying to contemplate his body rotting, being incinerated, or being devoured, even though he denies believing that there is any sensation after death. (*DRN* III 870–93) Torquatus acknowledges that many people *think* that the highest good is located in virtue alone. Such people are "beguiled by the splendor of a name," (*Fin.* 1.42) and we need to get them to see what they really value for its own sake. So a study of what we *actually* desire for its own sake and approve of for its own sake is crucial for ethics.

2. Natural and non-natural desires

Now let us turn to the Epicurean division of desires. We will ask the same questions: what is it for a desire to be natural, and what normative work does a desire's being natural do? (That is, what reason, if any, does a desire's being natural give me for pursuing the object of that desire and trying to fulfill that desire, as opposed to not doing so and trying to eliminate it?)

Of course, the Epicureans do not make just a dichotomy between natural and non-natural desires, but a trichotomy, which is spelled out in a number of places. The overall trichotomy is reasonably clear, but there are still a few puzzles about how exactly it is supposed to work, because the reports are not entirely consistent. Let us start by looking through these reports.

Principal Doctrine 29 states the trichotomy this way: some desires are natural and necessary, some are natural but not necessary, and some are neither necessary nor necessary but are the result of a "groundless opinion [*kenon doxan*]." This is echoed in *Ep. Men.* 127, where the third class of desires is simply called *kenon*. A scholion to *Principal Doctrine* 29 fills out the

trichotomy with examples, saying that the desire to drink when thirsty is natural and necessary, the desire for expensive food is natural but not necessary, while the desires for crowns and the erection of statues is neither natural nor necessary. It also reports that natural and necessary desires are ones whose fulfillment liberates us from pain. This echoes *Ep. Men.* 127, which however draws the distinction slightly differently. It says that necessary desires are necessary for at least one of three reasons: for happiness, or for freeing the body from troubles, or for life itself.

Finally, Epicurus characterizes the natural but not necessary desires as follows: "Among natural desires, those which do not lead to a feeling of pain if not fulfilled and about which there is an intense effort, these are produced by a groundless opinion and they fail to be dissolved not because of their own nature but because of the groundless opinions of mankind." (*KD* 30) This text is problematic, because elsewhere Epicurus seemed to identify the desires produced by groundless opinion with the desires that are neither natural nor necessary, whereas here he seems to classify at least some natural but unnecessary desires as based on groundless opinion.

Julia Annas has put forward the most detailed attempt to pull together these various reports. Natural and necessary desires, she says, are "generic" desires for food, drink, clothes, etc. Such desires fit the criteria for being necessary for happiness, or for freeing the body from troubles, or for life itself. Natural but unnecessary desires are specific versions of these generic desires—for instance, the desire for lobster in particular, rather than food in general. It is natural to desire food, but eating lobster in particular is not necessary to live happily, to free your body from troubles, or to continue to exist. And if it takes a lot of effort to get lobster, and you acquire the belief that you really do need lobster in particular so that you are put out when it is not available, then—because it is based on a groundless opinion that you learn—then the desire for

lobster is no longer merely natural, but instead is neither natural nor necessary. (Annas (1993a) 191-3)

I think that Annas' understanding of these passages is partially correct. But it does contradict another report, a scholion to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Usener 456) It says that the "desire for food and clothing" is a natural and necessary desire, "the desire for sex" is a natural but unnecessary desire, and "the desire for such-and-such (*toionde*) food and or such-and-such clothing or such-and-such sex" are examples of desires which are neither. Annas claims that "we have no reason to give this scholion authority, however, and it faces difficulties. (1) It cannot accommodate *KD* 30, which plainly implies that a desire can be either natural and non-necessary, or empty. (2) It makes the necessary distinction artificial; surely we have as much a need for sex as for clothing?" (Annas (1993a) 193 n. 29)

But I do not think Annas' reply quite works. The Epicureans plainly disagree with her thesis that we surely need sex as much as we need clothing. In his brief for vegetarianism, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, Porphyry reports that the Epicureans compare eating meat to having sex or drinking exotic wines. A desire for meat does not cause pain when it is not satisfied, and none of these three activities contribute to maintaining a person's life. Instead, they simply vary our pleasure, and our nature can continue on without fulfilling them. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 1.51) And *Principal Doctrine* 26 states that the desires which do not bring a feeling of pain when not fulfilled are not necessary. So, by the Epicurean criteria, the desire for sex is not necessary. Similarly, DL 10.118 reports that having sex "never helped anyone, and one must be satisfied if it has not harmed." So we have good reason to stick the desire for sex into the "natural but not necessary" bin, as reported in the scholion to Aristotle.

What about the report in the scholion that particular desires for such-and-so food, clothing and sex are examples of empty desires? I am not so sure this expresses a sharp disagreement with Annas' interpretation: the scholion could just be talking about those instances where the desire is informed by the false and groundless beliefs that I really do *need* a particular kind of food, clothing, or sex, where according to Annas those would be empty desires. In cases where I do not have those sorts of empty beliefs, when I am hungry I might not have a desire for generic "food," like the cans of nourishment in the movie *Repo Man*. Instead, if I happen to see or remember a particular kind of food when I am hungry, then I might desire *that* food. As long I am not going to be put out if that sort of food is unavailable and can easily switch to something else, this sort of unnecessary desire would be acceptable. But the sort of attachment to eating lobster that Annas discusses, where I think that I need the lobster and will feel bad if I do not get it, is *not* natural but must be learned. This sort of harmful attachment is best avoided, and must be extirpated if acquired. The above account is speculative, but it fits the texts and helps explain the scholion to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, showing how desires for a particular sort of food, drink or sex may fit into either category, depending on how it is held.

When it comes to the distinction between necessary versus unnecessary desires, we have both the examples of both kinds, and also—very helpfully—a set of criteria that allows us to see why some desires are in one category and some are in another. Unfortunately, with the distinction between natural and non-natural desires, all we get are the examples, on the basis of which we have to figure out ourselves what natural desires are supposed to have in common that makes them natural. But the basic use of "natural" here seems to be the same as in our "natural" pursuit of pleasure and also the ways in which our preconception of the gods and our use of language are "natural." They are congenital, not learned, and they are not based on *logos*.

What normative work is done by the appeal to nature in the case of desires? It is important but limited. The key text is *Vatican Saying* 21: "one must not compel nature but persuade her. And we will persuade her by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the [merely] natural ones too if they do not harm [us], but sharply rejecting the harmful ones." That some natural desires are harmful and must be rejected shows that the mere fact that a desire is natural does not imply that it's good or to be pursued. But natural desires are generally easy to fulfill (*Fin.* 45), and so indulging in the fulfillment of natural but unnecessary desires, when they are not harmful, is usually prudent. More fundamentally, even when they are harmful, natural but unnecessary desires call for a different approach than vain and empty ones. Vain and empty desires, because they are based on false beliefs, can be subject to standard Epicurean cognitive therapy, exposing the basis for these desires and thereby helping to eradicate them. But natural desires, such as sexual desire, are not based on *logos* in this way, and so they can be managed but not eradicated. Another example is anger: Philodemus says that anger "is unavoidable, and is called natural for that reason." But anger can become empty (and unnatural) when excessive and towards the wrong objects.[6] Anger is disturbing, but the wise person is able to manage his natural anger in a way that does not interfere with his fundamental peace of mind.

3. *Friendship, and the natural goods of wealth and political power*

It is surprising that friendship is not mentioned anywhere in the Epicurean division of desires. It seems that the desire for friendship should be listed as a natural and necessary desire, because friendship fulfills one of the criteria for the object of such a desire: it is necessary for

[6] Philodemus O*n Anger* XXXIX 29-31, as noted and discussed in Annas (1993a) 194-5. For more on Philodemus on anger, see chapter 9 of Voula Tsouna (2007), 195-238. A controversial example of a natural emotion that can be managed but not eradicated is the fear of violent death at the hands of others, as argued for in Austin (2012). Although I do not agree with her specific proposal that the fear of violent death by others is natural, her discussion of managing but not eradicating disturbing natural desires is insightful.

happiness. (See *Fin*. 1.66-67) So it is tempting to include desires for social needs like friendship and a stable society among the natural desires, as does Annas (1993a, 196).

But the word translated as "desire" in the Epicurean trichotomy is *epithumia*—which usually designates appetitive desires in particular, as it does in the *Republic*. The exact status of friendship can be illuminated by comparing friendship to the virtues—which the Epicureans themselves often do. The virtuous person will have the right desires and aversions. (For instance, the courageous person will not fear death.) Practical wisdom teaches us that the virtues are necessary and sufficient for attaining a pleasant life (*Ep. Men*. 132; *KD* 5). But even though the virtues are necessary for living pleasantly, we do not have an *epithumia* for virtue—that would be a category mistake. We reason out that the virtues are beneficial, and so we might acquire a *wish* to be virtuous, but that is not the same as an *appetite* for virtue. And the Epicureans put both courage and friendship into the category of such rational contrivances: "Courage does not come to be by nature, but by a reasoning out of what is advantageous. And friendship comes to be because of its utility" (DL 10.120 (B)) Friendship, say the Epicureans, is a means to happiness devised by wisdom (*Fin*. 1.65, *KD* 27), and reason bids us to acquire friends when we realize that a solitary life is filled with fear and danger. (*Fin*. 1.66)

The "desire" for friendship here sounds less like an appetite, and more like what Aristotle calls *boulesis*, or "rational wish"—i.e., a desire for something based upon the belief that obtaining it is good for you. (*NE* 1113a15-1113b2) And Epicurus uses a form of *boulêsis* in *Principal Doctrine* 7 in a way that comports with this Aristotelian sense: "Some men want [*boulomai*] to become famous and respected, believing that this is the way to acquire security against [other] men. Thus if the life of such men is secure, they acquire the natural good; but if it

is not secure, they do not have that for the sake of which they strove from the beginning according to what is naturally congenial."

At the same time, for Epicurus, some things that we desire instrumentally because we believe that they will fulfill other desires of ours, like wealth, can still be the object of appetites, so *epithumia* for Epicurus is not restricted to bodily appetites. But that does not undercut the overall picture that Epicurus distinguishes between what we wish for and what we have an appetite for. Plato also says that money is desired by the appetitive part of the *psyche*.

Here I should clarify that I am not trying to attribute to Epicurus Plato's tripartite theory of the *psyche* from the *Republic*. Nor am I saying that he has a well-developed theory of rational and irrational elements in the *psyche* like Aristotle does. But it is plausible that Epicurus is working with something like Plato's and Aristotle's distinctions between types of desires when he uses the term *epithumia*, and that this explains which items are included in his trichotomy of desires and which are excluded. More generally, for the Epicureans there are many affective states that are not desires: attitudes like gratitude, grief, resentment, and regret are pleasant or painful, but are not desires. We do not have an appetite or passion to recall delightful memories of past goods, but we can follow Torquatus' recommendation to do so in order to obtain joy (*Fin.* 1.56-7), and gratitude for past goods is central to the Epicurean ethical program.[7]

The "natural good" of a contrivance, such as wealth, is the human need which it was originally devised to fulfill—such as reliably fulfilling our desire for food and other necessities in the case of wealth, and gaining security from others in the case of fame.[8] Because of the Epicureans' psychology this is very closely linked to getting pleasure. But we can pursue these things in a way that actually is counterproductive to gaining this natural good, and develop

[7] For more on grief, see Konstan (2013), and on gratitude, see Rider (2019).

[8] For more on the role of natural wealth in Epicurean ethics, see O'Keefe (2016), esp. pp. 39-41.

irrational appetites and passions for these things that lead to disturbance rather than peace of mind. When this happens, we need cognitive therapy to realize that our pursuit of these things is misguided.

Because he builds this purpose into his notion of wealth, Epicurus offers revisionist redefinitions of what truly counts as wealth and criticizes popular notions of wealth. We need little to fulfill our basic needs, and so, he says, "natural wealth is both limited and easy to acquire. But wealth [as defined by] groundless opinion extends without limit." (*KD* 15) In fact, if we measure it by "the goal of nature," poverty is great wealth and wealth without limits set on it is great poverty (*SV* 25), and in order to make a person wealthy, you should not give them money; instead, you should reduce their desires. (Stobaeus *Anthology* 3.17.23)[9]

4. The Justice of Nature

Famously, Epicurus states in *KD* 31 that "the justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor to be harmed," combining two conceptions of justice that were often thought to be opposed: conventional justice and natural justice. The sense in which justice is conventional for Epicurus is tolerably clear. At *KD* 33, Epicurus asserts that justice is not something that exists *per se*, but instead exists wherever there is a pact about not harming one another. Our agreements create justice, and Epicurus does not hesitate to draw out the implications of this theory: there is no justice (or injustice) with respect to animals that cannot make an agreement about not harming one another, nor between nations if they do not have a pact about not harming one another. (*KD* 32) This comports with Aristotle's characterization of conventional justice at *NE* 5.7: certain things that were indifferent beforehand may be rendered just or unjust by our laws. We make driving on the left hand side of the road

[9] Socrates offers redefinitions of wealth along similar lines in *Rep.* 521a and *Oec*. 2.2–10.

unjust by declaring that people must drive on the right hand side. But for Aristotle, unlike Epicurus, there exists natural justice in addition to conventional justice, which has the same force everywhere regardless of our decisions or opinions and which acts as a constraint on what may be conventionally just. (*NE* 1134b18-1135a6)

But the sense in which justice is "natural" is less clear. If my argument above has succeeded, justice obviously cannot be natural in the sense in which either the pursuit of pleasure or the desires for food and sex are natural. The pursuit of pleasure and the desires for food and sex are congenitally hard-wired into us, and into all other animals, apart from *logos*. As a human contrivance, justice is very much a product of *logos*. Human beings came together and formed societies in order to escape the threats posed by animal attacks and starvation which they faced in the wild, and they needed to devise laws and punishments in order to live together productively and peaceably in society.[10]

The Epicurean conception of the limits of our natural desires, however, can at least show that justice does not go *against* our nature in the way that it does in the social contract theory put forward by Glaucon in book II of Plato's *Republic*. For both Glaucon and Epicurus, justice is an agreement we make in order to have a safe society, and we need society to escape the dangers of the wild. But for Glaucon, neither committing nor suffering injustice is a second best. It is a constraint we agree to because it is preferable to both committing and suffering injustice, but it is not as good as being able to commit injustice while not suffering it. (*Rep*. 358e–359b) But Epicurus does not think that human beings are naturally aggressive and acquisitive. Instead, our natural desires are easy to fulfill. The fear of punishment is needed to keep fools in line, who otherwise would take others' goods, attack them, and otherwise harm them. The wise Epicurean

[10] For more on the origins of justice and how justice is not merely a non-aggression pact but allows people to coordinate their actions in order to fulfill their needs and escape danger, see O'Keefe (2001). For more on how the Epicureans' conception of justice fits with their conception of practical rationality, see Thrasher (2015).

does not desire great wealth, and he does not hate or envy others. (DL X 117). So he does not have a motive to commit injustice. The laws exist for the sake of the wise, not so that they will not commit injustice, but so that they will not suffer it. (Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.143).

For a positive sense in which justice can be natural, we should look to other products of human reason, such as wealth, the virtues, and friendship: like them, justice is a human contrivance, and in that sense it does not exist "naturally." But as an artifact, it has a "natural good" insofar as it is devised for a purpose. Epicurus says that we have a *prolepsis*, or "basic grasp," of justice as what is useful in mutual associations.[11] Epicurus' summary of justice as an agreement neither to harm not be harmed gives the basic content of what justice *is*, but we also have a basic grasp of what justice is *for*.

And just as in the case of wealth, where knowing the purpose of wealth allows us to reevaluate popular notions concerning it, our grasp of the purpose of justice gives us a teleological standard, but one internal to our own practices, whereby we can evaluate the laws and conventions of our society. Laws that work, that actually help us live together peacefully and fruitfully, are just, while ones that do not are not. This allows for the requirements of justice to vary from place to place and time to time, and for a law that was previously just to cease being just, when it stops working. But generally speaking, what is just will be the same, insofar as what will be useful to help people live together will be the same. (*KD* 37–8)

Finally, what normative work does the "naturalness" of justice do? The main Epicurean justification for why a person should be just appeals directly to their hedonism, not to justice being natural in some way. Injustice, says Epicurus, is not bad in and of itself, but because of the

[11] *KD* 37. We have a *prolepsis*, or "basic grasp," of the meanings of some words, without need of additional proof. (*Ep. Hdt.* 37-8) *Prolepseis* are one part of Epicurus' canon of truth. For more on this topic and how *prolepseis* are supposed to solve Meno's paradox of inquiry, see chapter 7 of Fine (2014), 226-256.

fear of punishment. (*KD* 34) By making injustice bad only because of its consequences, Epicurus allies himself with Glaucon's theory in the *Republic*, against Socrates' contention that justice is good not merely for the sake of its consequences, but for its own sake.

But we should not overstate the contrast with Socrates. Injustice is bad not only because it may bring punishment but because of the *fear* of punishment; this fear is (supposedly) inescapable (*KD* 35) and outweighs any benefits from acting unjustly. More crucially, the Epicurean defenses of the virtues do not focus just on the ordinary bad consequences of vice. In his consequentialist defense of the virtues, Torquatus does mention how intemperance can lead to serious illness and a bad reputation. But Epicurus thinks that the vices are forms of psychic disease (Porphyry *To Marcella* 31), and Torquatus stresses how the vices are disordered psychic states that inevitably cause distress simply because of what they are. The presence of dishonesty in the heart is disturbing, whereas justice "by its own power … calms the spirits," and temperance "brings our hearts peace and soothes softens them with a kind of harmony." (*Fin*. 47-49) An unjust person who is held back from theft and assault by the threat of punishment may not fear being punished, but he is still in a bad way, because greed and wrath are in themselves disturbing states. This line of thinking is not terribly different from Socrates', although the Epicureans cash out the badness of vice in terms of the pain that the diseased psychic state itself causes, rather than the disordered state itself being bad.[12]

While the hedonic benefits of justice are what directly make it choiceworthy, an appreciation of the natural good of justice, along with the natural goods of fame and wealth, plays an important role in living rightly. A person who knows what the point of justice is, what it

[12] How stark even this difference is depends on how we understand Socrates' task of praising justice in itself in the *Republic*. On most interpretations, this involves excluding any and all valuable consequences of being just, but on some less restrictive interpretations, Socrates may include certain types of consequences, e.g., those that justice brings about on its own or by its own power, which would include some of the benefits the Epicureans mention. A recent example of this sort of permissive interpretation is Payne (2011).

is good for, can distinguish between just and unjust laws. He is able to see that justice benefits the members of a society in general, and that he has little or nothing to lose by adhering to its norms, unlike the fool who knuckles under only because he fears punishment. Likewise, the person who grasps what wealth is naturally good for can prudently gather together the limited resources he really needs to face the future with confidence, and he sees why popular notions of wealth are based on a misunderstanding of the role wealth should play in life.

Conclusion

Epicurus' ethics and politics are "naturalistic" in some suitably broad sense, insofar as they are grounded on facts about what human beings are like naturally, what we desire and how we reason. And appeals to "nature" are central to many areas of Epicurean ethics and politics. However, the relationship of nature to goodness is far from straightforward in Epicurus, and being "natural" never *per se* makes something choiceworthy or beneficial. Instead, in the case of pleasure, we are naturally "hardwired" to seek pleasure for its own sake and delight in it for its own sake, and the good is what we seek and delight in for its own sake. So our nature does determine what is good for us, but indirectly. Similarly, in the case of the desires, the fact that a desire is "natural" to us does not make it good—some natural desires can be harmful. But whether a desire is congenital or learned will determine how to handle it, if it is harmful. Finally, human contrivances such as wealth and justice are not natural in the sense that the pursuit of pleasure and the desire for food are. But as contrivances, they have a "natural good," a human need they were designed to satisfy, and knowing this natural good is crucial for using wealth properly, evaluating and perhaps improving the laws of my society, and conforming to just laws willingly and without resentment.

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