

Workout 2 ▪ Desire

Observing & Evaluating the Various Kinds of Desire

Prompt, Exercise & Practice for Epicurus

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! . . . For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. . . . You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. . . . I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" —Titus Lucretius Carus

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WHAT IS DESIRE? Looked at etymologically, desire means "to long or wish for," from the Latin *desiderare*. Originally, however, it meant something like "from the stars" (*de sidere*). And so desire signified the power that a star, a constellation, or other heavenly bodies had over us.

Whatever desire is, it feels like that at times—as if it exerts a certain power over us. Yes, we have our desires, but at times they seem to have us, directing and moving us.

So desire is a strange thing—both wanted and unwanted. The ancient Greek poet Hesiod reports that Desire (*Eros*) is "the most beautiful of the immortal gods." At the same time, Desire is "the one who loosens limbs and conquers the mind in the chest of every god and every human being and the wise counsels therein." *Not so good.*

With Hesiod and other Greeks, therefore, we see that desire is good and bad—beautiful and ugly, noble and base, beneficial and harmful.

PROMPT ▪ OBSERVE DESIRE ▪ Next time you desire something, anything at all, sit with the desire for a moment in your inner observation space (your heart and mind), observe it, and answer the following questions.

What does the desire feel like? How does it present itself to me? _____

When did I first notice the desire? _____

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What gave rise to the desire? _____

What, exactly, is the desire for (what does it want, what is it reaching out for)? _____

How natural does the desire seem to be? _____

How (if at all) is the desire influenced by fashion or others? _____

How necessary is the desire's satisfaction? What would happen if I don't satisfy the desire? _____

"Everything natural is easy to get, but whatever is groundless is hard." — Epicurus

KINDS OF DESIRE

Epicurus categorizes the desires relative to whether they are natural or groundless and whether their satisfaction is necessary or not.

"Of the desires," he says, "some are natural and necessary, whereas some are natural but unnecessary. Others are neither natural nor necessary but arise thanks to groundless notions. . . . Unnecessary desires are those that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied. They involve an appetite that is easily relieved whenever its satisfaction is hard to procure or when it seems likely to cause harm."

Otherwise, he notes, "Of the desires, some are natural, and some are groundless. Of the natural desires, some are necessary, and some are merely natural. And of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for freeing the body from disturbance, and some for living itself."

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EXERCISE ▪ DESIRE ANALYSIS ▪ Analyze some of your more frequently recurring desires by placing them in the following chart.

FOUR KINDS OF DESIRE

Natural These correspond to human nature.	Natural + Unnecessary There is no pain if they remain unsatisfied.
Natural + Necessary There is pain if they remain unsatisfied.	Groundless + Unnecessary These are the product of faulty judgments and empty opinions, whether our own or others.

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EXERCISE ▪ FURTHER DESIRE ANALYSIS ▪ Epicurus states that “of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for freeing the body from disturbance, and some for living itself.” With this in mind, reflect on the following questions.

What desires are necessary for me to satisfy in order to maintain life itself—that is, the barest survival?

What desires are necessary for me to satisfy in order to free myself from disturbance, whether in my body, soul, or mind?

What desires are necessary for me to satisfy for the sake of happiness? _____

PRACTICE ▪ EXAMINATION OF DESIRE ▪ Ask your desires the following Epicurean questions. According to Epicurus, “We must present the following questions to all our desires. What will happen to me if the desire I wish to satisfy is fulfilled? What will happen if it is not?”

Let’s question our desires. Select three commonly recurring desires you have. You may wish to focus on desires that seem to pester or control you. Or others. Examine each desire with Epicurus’ questions:

- What will happen to me if the desire I wish to satisfy is **fulfilled**?
- What will happen to me if the desire I wish to satisfy remains **unfulfilled**?

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Desire 1— _____

Desire 2— _____

Desire 3— _____

PRACTICE • DESIRE DIALOGUE • Use the space below to have a chat with a few desires you have. Begin with the most bothersome one you experience. Ask the desire questions. Expect answers. Tell it what you think (in your more rational moments), and how you feel, and what you'd like to do. You may begin by asking the desire to introduce itself. Then concentrate on points such as the desire's origin, nature, behavior, goals, its all too loud voice (if it has one—or perhaps it whispers), and the like. If you need to do so, explain the need to break up with the desire. Or at least the need to take some time apart. Bring up whatever you want. After conversing with the most bothersome desire you have, shift focus to one that is noble. Ask it similar questions.

Me: Would you mind telling me about yourself?

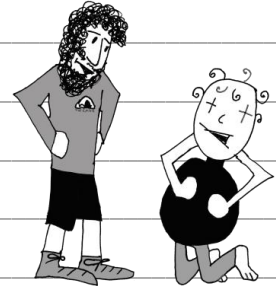
Desire: Sure, I was born when you were _____ years old, remember? It

was when _____, and you were . . . And so on.



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DESIRE DIALOGUE ▪ *Continued . . .*



3 ACTION POINTS

- **Observe** each desire you have—its origin, cause, nature, impact.
- **Analyze** desire itself. **Know** the different kinds of desire—natural, necessary, unnecessary, and groundless.
- **Examine** your desires. **Question** them. **Practice** talking to your desires, staying with the ones that are beneficial and breaking up with the ones that are not.

Open pages for additional answers-journaling

_____ “Desire lacks the thing it desires; desire is lacking.” —Socrates _____

_____ “Nature bestowed on animals sensation and motion, and a desire or impulse to
_____ approach things wholesome and retire from things harmful.” —Cicero _____

_____ “Desire is not always noble and worthy of praise, but only
_____ when he persuades us to desire and love nobly.” —Pausanias _____

Open pages for additional answers-journaling

"Bad men obey their desires as slaves obey their masters." —Diogenes of Sinope

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