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Non-Epicurean Desires

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is argued that there can be necessary and non-natural desires. After a discussion about what seems wrong with such desires, Epicurus' classification of desires is treated similarly to Kripke's treatment of the Kantian table of judgments. A sample of three cases is suggested to make this point.

Keywords: desire, Epicurus, judgment, nature, necessitation.

Introduction

There are impossible desires, those that cannot be satisfied due to physical limitations: flying like a bird, teleporting to the other side of the world, and the like. But this paper will talk about *conceptual* impossibilities, that is, whatever cannot be thought of by definition. Let us see why it is largely assumed that there *are* also conceptually impossible desires.

Epicurean desires

After describing Epicurus' classification of desires, we will focus on his assumed opposition between necessity and vanity.

Analogy I: Modal tables

Due to its connection with epistemological concepts like belief, will, or intention, desire has been studied as a modality of action impacting on human judgment (see, e.g., Gardiès, 1979). Like necessity or knowledge, desire can be studied as a proper, "boulic" modality of judgment.

There also seems to be a structural analogy between epistemic and boulic modalities, based on the distinction between subjective and objective contents of judgment. The objective part is expressed by the concept of knowledge, which makes the transition from belief to truth through justification; in the same way, the objective part of desire is expressed by the concept of will, which transitions from desire to reality through intention. Table 1 helps to see this analogy in a clearer way.

The sort of impossibility on which I want to focus is not located in the object of desire; rather, it relates to inconceivability and lies at a definitional level. A look at Epicurus' theory of desire may throw some light upon it.

Necessity and Vanity

In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus makes a distinction between good and bad desires. According to him, there are three sorts of desire: natural and necessary desires; natural and

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Table 1. An analogy between epistemic and boulic modalities.

Epistemic modalities	Boulic modalities
objective knowledge	will
subjective knowledge ("I am sure of it!")	subjective will ("I want it!")
belief	desire
doubt	aboulia
justification	intention

non-necessary desires; and vain desires. The first category splits into three different goals: happiness (*eudaimonia*); bodily well-being (*aochlèsia*); and life for itself (survival means). The second category corresponds to merely natural desires that can be dispensed with: sexual activities, pleasures of the table, and the like. The third category of desires is considered to be the source of pain and an unhappy life: avidity, anger, thirst for power, etc. Epicurus strongly advises us to avoid these bad desires because they are "devoid" (*kenai*) or empty desires. These are the most important in what follows, due to their radical opposition to necessary desires: quests for power, riches, or honour are said to be "empty" desires insofar as they do not have a proper end.

Vanity against necessity!

This statement may seem difficult to accept for anyone who has not studied theoretical philosophy: who can claim that power, riches, and honour are not frequent targets in our everyday life? Who has never dreamt about seducing the prettiest boy or girl in one's class, or becoming the president of one's state? Of course, Epicurus would reply that such desires are not "empty" in the sense of having no finality. Rather, the trouble with these vain desires is their self-growing and endless development: they can never be fully satisfied, insofar as their temporary satisfaction always leads to other, more demanding desires. For this reason, Epicurus urges us to renounce to them because attempting to fulfil them completely is a vain project. In this respect, the third category of desires corresponds to the sort of impossible desires mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

Vanity for necessity?

And yet, a capitalist-friendly agent could reply that the self-cumulative feature of vain desires is a virtue: just as Protestants bless a sense of effort and hardworking behaviour, it might be replied to Epicurus that nothing great can be accomplished without obstinacy. Or even that the criterion of asceticism for a good life is just a bad excuse for lazy losers. Here is where Epicureans depart from capitalists, roughly speaking: vain desires are vicious for the former; while they are virtuous for the latter. Pleasure is not the whole story.

Therefore, the controversy lies in the moral value of necessity and finiteness: according to the Epicureans, good desires are those that can be satisfied within the limits of human nature; knowledge of this nature is a precondition of happiness.

Is there any sort of sufficient reason behind such a classification of desires? Let us try to tackle this issue, even to challenge the Epicurean taxonomy of desires.

Non-Epicurean desires

First, let us consider the way in which Epicurus came to his famous classification. Then let us see how far it can be altered in a relevant way.

A combinatorial picture

Two basic elements are used by Epicurus, namely, naturalness and necessity. A combination of both results in the three above kinds of desires; however, a pure combination of the two elements should yield not three but, rather, four elements. Let Na and Ne be symbols for naturalness and necessity, respectively. Then the powerset of the basic set of desires D = {Ne, Na} is $P(D)$ = {{Ne,Na}, {Ne}, {Na}, {}}. The first subset {Ne,Na} is the set of both necessary and natural desires, whilst the third {Na} is the set of natural and not necessary desires. Somehow ironically, the fourth subset of "empty", i.e., neither necessary nor natural desires, corresponds to the empty subset {}. As for the second element {Ne}, it is never mentioned in Epicurus' theory of desire: the subset of necessary and not natural desires. Admittedly, philosophers will mostly reply that such a combinatorial picture presents a typically anachronistic reading that is both immaterial and misleading for any serious philosophical investigation. But does it?

Our initial question about whether there are conceptually impossible desires can thus be reformulated as follows: can there be desires that are both necessary and not natural? A momentary reflection should be sufficient to answer negatively; but this is just the beginning of the investigation: the point is not to rely upon commonsensical beliefs but, rather, to find their roots and see how these can be relevantly questioned.

Analogy II: Kantian table

An analogy between two sorts of modalities was drawn above. The same can be drawn between Epicurean desires and Kantian judgments (*in* Kant, 2007 [1781]), despite their assumed difference in nature. At the same time, the comparison made by Gardiès (1979) between epistemic and aboulic modalities refers to two kinds of *judgment*. Could desire be viewed as a special sort of judgment? Or should so-called boulic modalities be restricted to the sole case of will, i.e., the objective part of desire? In fact, the following analogy does not need to fulfill the condition that desires be proper sorts of judgment. For analogy differs from identity: an analogy consists in saying that whatever holds for *a* with respect to *b* also holds for *c* with respect to *d*, even if there is no logical interconnection between the elements of the pairs *a,b* and *c,d*. For our present concerns, let *a* and *b* be symbols for the Epicurean necessary and natural desires, respectively; and let *c* and *d* be symbols for the Kantian analytic and a priori judgments. The same table (Table 2) appears as with the previous analogical table (Table 1) of epistemic and boulic modalities, accordingly:

Table 2. An analogy between Epicurus' classification of desires and Kant's classification of judgments.

	Epicurean desires	Kantian judgments
(1)	necessary	analytic
(2)	not necessary	synthetic
(3)	natural	a priori
(4)	not natural	a posteriori

Note that Kantian judgments are lexicalized by positive concepts, unlike some of the Epicurean desires. However, it is not difficult to find positive counterparts to "not necessary" and "not natural": *contingent*, for the former; *cultural*, for the latter. Consequently, our main issue can be reformulated as follows: can there be desires that are both necessary and cultural?

An obvious similarity arises between the way in which Epicurus and Kant made use of their respective concepts: there are three and only three possible combinations, in both cases. This is displayed in Table 3, where the same shaded row (2) is ruled out by the two theories.

Table 3. An analogy between Epicurus' forbidden desires and Kant's forbidden judgments.

	Epicurean desires	Kantian judgments
(1)	necessary, natural	analytic, a priori
(2)	necessary, cultural	analytic, a posteriori
(3)	contingent, natural	synthetic, a priori
(4)	contingent, cultural	synthetic, a posteriori

This combination seems meaningless, indeed, given that culture is the domain *par excellence* of contingent things like habits, norms, or taboos. Nevertheless, such an idea is not more absurd than the hypothesis of analytic a posteriori judgments.

Table 3 can be qualified in two opposite ways: by restricting, extending, or squarely cancelling its valid combinations.

Restriction of Kant's table

According to Kant (2007 [1781], B15-16), the judgment "7 + 5 = 12" is both synthetic and a priori: it is synthetic because it is not analytic, insofar as the predicate concept "equal to 12" is not contained within the subject concept "7 + 5"; it is a priori, because the justification of such a predication does not depend upon experience. The main problem concerns what Kant meant with "analyticity": a containment relation between subject and predicate in a judgment. How can it be warranted that the number 12 contains the sum of 7 and 5? What is the source of such a relation?

A controversy arose at the end of the 19th century between those who took logic to ground mathematics (e.g., Frege, 1980 [1884]; Carnap, 1947) and those who did not (e.g., Poincaré, 1968 [1902]). According to the former, "7 + 5 = 12" is not a synthetic but, rather, an analytic a priori judgment: the concept "7 + 5" is taken to be necessarily identical to the concept "12". Like Kant, this assumes a connection between arithmetic and apriority: no such justification can stem from the domain of experience, given that it is in principle not possible to find counterevidence against what is grounded a priori, i.e., universally. Against Kant, the concept of analyticity has been separated from the criterion of containment and updated by the logical positivists: an analytical judgment is a judgment that is true by definition, according to the meanings given to its terms in a given language. This more conventional definition helps to avoid the psychologist connotation of analyticity. Above all, it shows how a controversy can be raised in philosophy with a redefinition of its main concepts. Why not do the same with the Epicurean table of desires?

Extension of Kant's table

According to Kripke (1980), there is no restriction at all in the Kantian table of judgments: each row constitutes a proper judgment on its own, including the case of necessary a posteriori judgments. Again, a prior redefinition of the basic terms is required to go from a negative to a positive reception of Kripke's strategy. The same should apply to an extension of Epicurus' table of desires.

Take Kripke's famous case of analytic a posteriori judgment: "Water is H_2O". Strictly speaking, "analytic" should be replaced by "necessary" in Kripke's terminology; and "judgment" should be turned interchangeably into "proposition" or "sentence". How can such a sentence be true in every case, anyway?

Firstly, Kripke proposes a redefinition of analyticity in terms of necessary truth, i.e., truth in every *possible world*. Whether "possible" is to be taken in the same sense as "conceivable" or not is not at issue now, despite the close connection between conceivability and our issue of conceptually impossible desires.

Second, Kripke's point is that there are some sentences that are both necessary and based on experience. Thus, the chemical nature of water is taken to be a scientific fact; but as a fact, it needs to be discovered by experimental methods before it is shown to be true necessarily. There seems to be a clear-cut difference in the present controversy between Kant and Kripke and the opposition between Kant and logical positivists: in the latter case, the two sides agreed that experience has no role to play in the justification of arithmetic judgments; in the former case, however, Kripke claims that experience does contribute to the justification of analytic judgments.

Isn't there some misunderstanding here when it comes to the usual distinction between the origins of a concept and its justification? For if Kant accepted the empirical origin of concepts like numbers and operation signs, this does not mean that he thereby accepted the empirical foundation of an arithmetical identity such as "7 + 5 = 12". In a nutshell, doesn't Kripke, with his necessary aposteriority, reproduce the mistake made by John Stuart Mill? According to Mill (1974 [1843]), the empirical observation that adding seven apples to five oranges resulted in a set of twelve fruits was taken to be an argument for the empirical foundation of mathematics. Just as Frege (1980 [1884]) stressed this confusion between occasion and foundation, Kripke (1980) could equally be blamed for reproducing the same conceptual flaw.

Yet this is not the case. I take this distinctive reception of Kripke's hypothesis to rely upon a deep revision of what "analyticity" means. From a Kantian perspective, analyticity is closely related to the categories of pure reason, i.e., to what stands in the a priori conditions of thought. No such transcendental analysis seems to be at hand in the Kripkean account of necessary a posteriori sentences: "Water is H_2O" is a necessarily true sentence not in the light of pure reason but, rather, as a discovery holding in every world. Kantians must view rigid designators as a regressive emancipation of metaphysics from epistemology; in any case, the changes in analytic philosophy from Kripke (1980) to the *two-dimensionalism* of Chalmers (2006) should be tolerated with respect to the classification of desires too.

Cancellation of Kant's table

Recall how Quine also shook the ongoing debate around the distinction between analytic and synthetic. According to Quine (1951), there is no difference in nature but, rather, a mere difference in degree between these two kinds of judgment. Mathematical and logical sentences are "more analytically true" than truths from empirical sciences, but there is no purely analytic or synthetic sentence in the sense assumed by the Kantian table of judgments. Besides, Quine claimed that Carnap's distinction between "external" and "internal" questions relies upon an arbitrary distinction between facts and theories. Every true sentence has an empirical content, Quine argued, in the sense that true sentences always have a linguistic and factual component.

Whether Quine's rejection of pure analyticity should be endorsed is not the point; rather, the controversy helps to call attention to those who accept the Epicurean table unreflectively.

Entailment

In any case, there is something common between the aforementioned tables: both locate the problem in row (2). A logical analysis shows that this corresponds to the issue of entailment.

Analogy III: Truth-table

Another deep epistemological obstacle seems to justify the open consensus around Epicurus' taxonomy of desires: the set-theoretical relation of inclusion between necessary and natural desires. A logical link with set theory is easily made through the connective of the conditional, which is said to approximate the relation of entailment. Little wonder that the Kantian table of judgment nicely matches with the truth-table characterizing the logical connective of conditional, "if … then" (Table 4).

Table 4. The truth-table of logical conditional and its "forbidden" truth-condition.

	p	*q*
(1)	T	T
(2)	T	F
(3)	T	F
(4)	F	F

The prohibited shaded row (2) is the case in which the antecedent p is true and the consequent q is false, in the conditional sentence $p \supset q$. A logical interpretation of this table comes to the same result as a Kantian interpretation of analytic a posteriori judgments: it is impossible for the complex sentence $p \supset q$ to be true whenever p is true and q is not true (i.e., false), just as it is impossible for a desire to be entertained whenever it is said to be necessary and not natural (i.e., cultural). The same sort of inclusive relation is presupposed by Kant's transcendental philosophy: no judgment can be analytically true and a posteriori at once, according to the Kantian reading of analyticity in terms of the categories of pure reason inherent to human nature. Similarly, no desire can be necessary and cultural at once, according to the Epicurean

reading of necessity in terms of the properties inherent of human nature. Drug addiction cannot be said to be "necessary" in this sense: it is made necessary, and such a necessitation is not a feature of human nature at all but a mere by-product of cultural devolution.

By analogy, any disagreement about the content of the preceding table is a disagreement about the logical relation between its terms. On the one hand, the logicists think that there is no entailment but, rather, an *equivalence* or bi-conditional relation between analyticity and a priority: whatever is analytic (or synthetic) is therefore a priori (or a posteriori), and conversely; on the other hand, Kripke thinks that there is *no* logical connection at all between the two: whether a sentence is necessary (or not) entails nothing particular about its being a priori or a posteriori. Finally, Quine cancels the logical relation by refusing any single occurrence of antecedent and consequent.

At any rate, whoever wants to break with the limits of Kant's transcendental reason and opt for Kripke's possible worlds should also tolerate the same stance with respect to the limits of human nature. If so, why not extend necessity beyond the realm of naturalness, just as Kripke did by building a channel between necessity and aposteriority?

Relative necessity

Nothing of this kind can be conceived with necessity, so long as the latter is associated with eternity. On the one hand, whatever is eternal is standing and cannot change, by opposition to the poietic feature of cultural things. On the other hand, the conjunction of necessity and culture can be validated if necessity is reduced to a relative or context-dependent sense of irrevocability.

Borrowing from the Aristotelian distinction between relative (*haplos*) and absolute (*katolou*) forms of true predication, a logical truth is said to be either relative or absolute according to whether its truth depends on given premises or not. Syllogisms are relatively necessary truths, insofar as the conclusion cannot be validated without accepting at least two prior sentences. The same is held about theorems in modern logic: any given formula can be a theorem in this logical system and not a theorem in that one, as witnessed by "*p* or not *p*": this is a theorem in classical logic, but not in intuitionist logic.

Comparison is not reason, however, and an advocate of natural philosophy might reply that the way in which logicians handle necessity has nothing to do with the topics that Epicurus dealt with. My reply, again, is that Kant's concept of analyticity also differs from what Kripke meant by necessity: the former was in accordance with the epistemic categories of pure reason, whereas the latter concerns metaphysical truth in every possible world. Therefore, in the following I shall give a relative non-answer to the initial question: are there impossible desires, conceptually speaking?

Necessitation

A relative sense of necessity implies that whatever has been accepted in the past cannot be modified afterwards, just like the rules of a game. Such an analogy with game theory echoes what Bouveresse (1987) has said about Wittgenstein's language-game theory: quoting Goethe in his preface, Bouveresse compares the foundations of language games with the mysterious sources of human societies by depicting them as products of *necessitated conventions*. This quotation insists on a paradoxical link between necessity and conventionality: convention is a product of contingent decision, and whatever is contingent cannot be necessary, by definition. The explanation is this: conventions are contingent by definition; however, they are made necessary or necessitated once accepted within a given area of study: language, with Wittgenstein; mind, with Epicurus.

An ultimate epistemological obstacle has to be overcome in order to proceed with desires as Kripke did with judgments: the view that human nature is *given* once and for all independently of human cultures, just as Kant located analytic judgments beyond particular experience. Anyone who has sympathy for transhumanism should make the jump without difficulty. But it can be done without even assuming such a metaphysical stance.

Three cases for cultural necessitation will now be suggested, namely: neurotic desires; mimetic desires; taboos, as a negative version of necessitated "counter-desires".

In Freud (1991 [1916])'s theory of the unconscious mind, "the ego is not the master in its own house". According to Freud, this is due to the opposition between two instances of mind, viz. conscious and unconscious. Whether or not psychoanalysis is a reliable theory is not the point; rather, the explanatory role of neuroses is that they give an example of unnatural desires that are formed after birth and through the negative effect of repressive education. If such uncontrollable desires are accepted as neuroses, then there are some desires that are both impossible for the agent to restrain and non-natural.

Following Girard (1966), desire is an essentially mimetic process: far from the naturalistic picture given by Epicurus, some desires result from a triangular relationship between the owner's desired object, the object itself, and the desiring agent. Desire has thus been made necessary by socialization, and everyone desires what another has. Such a cogent theory helps to account for current human behaviors like seduction or consumption. La Rochefoucauld (2002 [1665], n. 136) summarizes it in the following words: "There are some people who would never have fallen in love if they had not heard there was such a thing". Anyone who admits the prominence of such social desires may object to their necessity, in the sense of their being inherent to human nature. But still, it can be accepted by anyone who sees an impetus in them that cannot be cancelled out by the social conditions of life.

Finally, a reverse form of cultural necessity may be found in taboos. Following Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]), taboos can

be seen as a third example of what socialization may make necessary through the force of education, after Freud's neuroses and Girard's desires of desires. In fact, taboos proceed as counter-desires: they are feelings produced by prohibited rules in a given community, and the stronger they are the more natural they appear. Disgust provoked by the incest taboo, for example, is a feeling where agents do more than merely not desire something: they desire not to do what is made shameful by the tacit rules of the community. Therefore, anthropology and psychoanalysis jointly argue for the necessitation of some desires under the impetus of socialization, whether in a positive sense of lust or a negative sense of reluctance.

Conclusion

I have attempted to make room for an allegedly conceptual impossibility: necessary and non-natural desires, starting from the ancient classification of Epicurus. By means of a comparison with the controversial Kantian table of judgments, what entitled Kripke to justify the fourth "forbidden" kind of judgments should equally make the fourth kind of desires conceivable.

And yet, why has the latter never been even mentioned in the philosophical literature? It may be because of the commonsensical opinion that nothing necessary can stand outside the range of natural things. Such entrenched opinion has to face the arguments above regarding necessitation. It may also be because this fourth combination goes beyond the definition afforded by Epicurus in his theory of desires. If a whole philosophy of nature is implied by this classification, then no desire can be said to be both necessary and non-natural. The commonsensical opinion is much stronger, suggesting that such desires are barely unconceivable whether inside or outside of Epicurus' theory.

Did Kripke defeat common opinion about analyticity and aposteriority, if there is one? Or did he only make sense of such combined judgments outside of Kant's philosophy? This is what follows from his non-Kantian definition of analyticity, after the first amendment of the concept by logical positivists. This is what has been undertaken in the present paper, thereby showing that what is said to be impossible is not so inconceivable after all.

In fact, the central problem concerns the conditions for making sense of an idea inside or outside of a philosophical system. Is the occurrence of necessary and cultural desires an external or internal question? Quineans should question the very distinction between what a concept means *inside* and *outside* of a philosophical system.

Are there non-Epicurean desires, in conclusion? Not impossibly, at any rate.

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