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Natural and Empty Desires: An Epicurean View of Musical Experience

Daniel Putman

Abstract

Epicureans distinguish natural desires, which have their origin in the body itself, from empty desires which are imposed by society. Natural desires allow a person to enjoy pleasures free from anxiety and worry. Empty desires such as those for status or luxury are endless and lead to a life of frustration, resentment and anxiety. In this paper I apply this distinction to musical experience and differentiate between the genuine enjoyment of music and musical experience tainted by empty desires.

Key Words

Epicureanism, natural desires, empty desires, musical experience

1. Epicurus on Desire

Ataraxia, or freedom from disturbance, was a central concern of ethical schools after Aristotle. For the Skeptics it was achieved by using reason against itself to eliminate beliefs. Beliefs constantly need defending, make contrary beliefs difficult to tolerate, and generate anxiety about uncertain futures.^[1] The Skeptics argued it was best to have as few beliefs as possible. For the Stoics, unlike the Skeptics, reason was a positive path to a life of peace and happiness, but at the price of eliminating or controlling passions and desires as much as possible. We are always free to choose our responses to the world and the world need never disturb us. By controlling our desires, reason can preserve our freedom to choose wisely.^[2]

The Epicureans took a somewhat different path to *ataraxia*. Epicurus argued that the problem is not desires or beliefs *per se* but the distortion of desires caused by false beliefs. Desires are not alien to being human, and achieving pleasure in the right way can facilitate a life of tranquility.^[3] The problem lies in the fact that most often we attempt to fulfill desires in the wrong way. Why? Because of the myths, stories, expectations and superstitions handed down by society. A simple meal, eaten slowly and with good friends, can be enormously satisfying and a treasured memory. On the other hand, a meal based on society's expectations of eating at the "right restaurant" in the "right city" while being seen with the "right people" is part of a false set of beliefs in which the genuine pleasures of food and friendship get buried under socially imposed expectations. This behavior can become an endless cycle, in the sense that with such beliefs we are always chasing the fads of society in a fruitless search for a happiness that does not exist. It can also become a habit, so much so that many adults may forget how to enjoy the true pleasures of life. For the Epicureans, *ataraxia* means eliminating false beliefs from our consciousness and enjoying the genuine pleasures of being human.

In his analysis of desire and pleasure, Epicurus distinguished

"natural desires" from "empty desires." Natural desires have the body as their source. Some are necessary for survival -- a positive one being the desire for food and a negative one being the desire to avoid pain. Other natural desires involve our social nature, or friendship, for example. Some desires are natural but not necessary, e.g., eating expensive food at plush banquets. Epicurus recommended that we not pursue such pleasures, but that, if they occur, we should enjoy them for what they are. But there is another type of desire. These "empty desires" are natural desires twisted and exaggerated by society.^[4] Epicureans were fond of blaming three sources in particular for empty desires: love stories, stories that glorify wealth and luxuries, and stories about the gods and immortality, all which are the source of much anxiety and suffering in the world. When a desire becomes tied to one of these distorted and false stories, no possible source of satisfaction exists because the focal point of the body's experience has given way to delusional beliefs which can never be satisfied. We can never lead the perfect life the gods want or have all the luxuries which we are told we need to be happy. Natural desires can be regained and a life of *ataraxia* achieved by eliminating these false beliefs from our consciousness.

2. Music and Desires

This Epicurean analysis has much to say for it. It certainly seems to fit well into a society where advertising always preaches the need for the next luxury around the corner and where so many people rich in having their desires fulfilled seem to be hostile, resentful and anything but "ataraxic." But what does this have to do with musical experience? I believe it applies in several ways and makes some sense of how and why people enjoy or do not enjoy music. Though little if anything about music is extant in the Epicurean literature, it seems reasonable to assume that music for the Epicureans would be a natural desire. Music seems analogous to friendship, one of those natural desires which integrate the mind and body in a more transcendent moment of pleasure. Cicero quotes Epicurus as saying that part of what he defines by "good" is "listening to songs."^[5] Given the assumption of the enjoyment of music as a natural desire, I want to explore two issues in this paper. The first is whether the natural-empty distinction taken at face value is useful for the analysis of musical experience. Second, I want to examine briefly whether Epicurus is in fact right that the natural-empty distinction is a real distinction and what that might tell us about the enjoyment of music.

One obvious application of the natural-empty distinction is when music is utilized directly as an adjunct in order to support false beliefs. When music is used in advertising, for example, it serves a particularly insidious role from an Epicurean perspective. The fragments we have concerning Epicurus clearly indicate that pleasant memories are a fundamental part of life's enjoyment. Music has a way of staying with us long after the auditory experience ends. Empty desires concerning status, love or luxury that prevent us from experiencing genuine pleasure become heavily reinforced when music becomes associated with the false belief. So an automobile, which may be entirely comfortable in itself and

satisfactory as a utility for achieving other natural pleasures such as family trips, becomes instead a status symbol. The desire for that status is then reinforced with that music, music specifically designed to get you to remember and act upon the false belief. Long after the details of the ad have gone from memory, the music for that ad will be associated in your mind with the need to show off a higher status in society. Feeling frustrated or inadequate because one's status is not high enough is an endless cycle. Someone will always be "above" you and, when attached to material objects like cars, the desire can bankrupt a life both financially and emotionally. This empty desire is strengthened considerably by the music associated with it. [6]

But I think the distinction runs deeper than that. Consider the genuine enjoyment of a piece of music, a symphony, for example. As discussed a great deal in the literature since Kant, music allows us in a unique way to explore our emotional landscape. How and why that occurs is subject to much debate and I will look at two such theories later in the paper. [7] Regardless of how it happens, the experience of music is a natural desire humans have around the world. The pleasure is natural from an Epicurean perspective in that only two factors are involved: the music and the individual. The relationship is direct -- Beethoven's *Fifth* and my emotional reaction, with no intervening social myths to distort the experience. It might be inferred, then, that music that produced direct violent or emotional upheaval in a person would be ideal. But the difference between Epicurean and Cyrenaic hedonism was that, for Epicurus, natural desires included use of the *psyche*. Those who advocate violent or disturbing emotional experiences fail to consider that pleasures mediated through the mind are more long-lasting, less likely to have painful consequences and "deeper" in the sense of staying with one positively throughout a longer span of life. [8]

But then what happens when great music becomes part of society's expectations? A concert can become a place to be seen. Certain music becomes integrated with the story of wealth and success in people's minds and attending a concert may become a symbol of such success. The empty desire for status can get in the way of the natural desire to enjoy the music. The whole experience can become what the Epicureans would call a "disturbance of the soul," in which anxiety replaces contentment. Clearly this does not always happen to concert-goers. But the Epicurean point is that the more the empty desire of social expectations dominates the experience, the less sheer enjoyment the music will provide. Our consciousness may be divided between the natural desire to enjoy the music and the empty desire of proving our status by showing that, after all, we *do* appreciate great music. Meanwhile, we may in fact hardly hear the music in other than the most superficial way. We have lost a chance to experience one of the deepest and most long-lasting pleasures in life. To an Epicurean, for whom life is far too short and there is no afterlife, wasting time at that concert trapped by empty desires is a personal tragedy.

Another type of empty desire common to aesthetic experience is the desire to figure out what we are *supposed* to feel from

music. This is empty not because it is endless, but because it intellectualizes the experience too much, becoming a filter that blocks the pleasure of the music. One learns to associate certain music with certain emotions, possibly because of previous listening experiences or because of what society tells us to expect. Listen to a piece of music enough and emotional ruts start to form. Be too concerned about what the artistic elite is saying about a piece of music and the mind can channel the musical experience into a personal test case of one's aesthetic skills. From an Epicurean standpoint, we need to eliminate from consciousness beliefs or expectations that filter or distort the pleasure of the music. While there is nothing necessarily problematic in associating certain emotions with music, the attempt to "match" the music in front of us to a preconceived idea or expectation can divorce the natural desire of the body to enjoy music from the music itself.

3. Desire and Theories of Musical Expression

The distortion of judgment brought on by empty desires can help clarify theories of musical expression. One such theory is that music expresses emotions that are designed to be aroused in the listener. Consider a nonmusical example first. Imagine your friend says "thank you" for a gift given her. How your friend says those two words means everything. They can connote appreciation, satire, bitterness or anger. The two words alone tell us very little. What you need to be able to do is to "read" the tone of voice in order to understand what your friend is actually saying, and then to have the appropriate emotional response to the expression. Imagine that your friend's "thank you" is satirical -- a biting way of saying "I am disappointed in you." But because you have just given your friend a gift that society says is all the rage and your head is filled with an image of yourself as the model gift giver, you either never hear what your friend is really saying or you gloss over it quickly and read the tone of voice as you want to hear it. An important moment of communication in a friendship is lost because, as Epicurus might say, your mind has been filled with a delusional belief about what brings happiness.

In this theory of musical expression the final movement of Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique Symphony* is designed to arouse in us an emotion like grief or sadness. The aesthetic moment is lost if we cannot respond to what the composer intends because we are distracted by some empty desire. Perhaps we are pondering what we now know about Tchaikovsky's love life and what society thinks of that, or perhaps we are pondering future conversations about the symphony and how erudite we can sound. In both cases we do not listen to the music itself and fail to experience the emotions intended to be aroused by the music. We may as well have not heard it at all -- something your friend might also say to you about your response to her words.

The arousal theory of music has been roundly criticized for several reasons. Without going into detail on this much discussed issue, two such criticisms are worth noting. One, first put forward by Hanslick, is that for much, perhaps most music, there is no general agreement about what constitutes the proper emotion to be aroused.^[9] So, if for A the last movement of the *Pathetique* arouses a feeling of noble

heroism in the face of tragic and unavoidable circumstances, while for B it arouses a deep sense of despair and total hopelessness, who is right? A second significant criticism is the implication of the arousal theory that music that does not arouse emotion is failed music. Thus music significantly different from what we are used to and which leaves people "cold" would be an aesthetic failure. Such an *a priori* judgment seems out of place. The natural-empty distinction is useful only to the extent that the theory itself is accurate.

So let's consider another theory of musical expressiveness and apply the Epicurean distinction. Kivy's "physiognomy" theory claims that music is not designed to arouse emotions, but that our experience of music is a function of our perception of it.^[10] His famous example is the face of a St. Bernard. It makes no sense to say that the St. Bernard *is* sad (he may be quite happy as dogs go) or to say that the St. Bernard's face is designed to arouse an emotion like sadness in us (he likely wants lunch). Yet it still does make sense to say that the St. Bernard's face is sad. What do we mean by that? The analogy with friendship may be helpful again. Sometimes, as in the friend example given earlier, the friend really *does* intend to arouse a clear emotion in us, and we need to get our delusions out of the way to be open to that. Other times, we may read a friend's expression even if that friend is not at all communicating with us directly or intending anything. Perhaps we see her in an unguarded moment and recognize an emotion that is haunting the person.

This ability to project our emotional understanding to people around us gets generalized to other sights and sounds. Willows "weep" and the song of a wren is "bright" or "happy." In many nonhuman cases the projection of emotion is pure anthropomorphizing and is simply inaccurate (and we usually know that). But this animation of perception, as Kivy calls it, applies equally to music.^[11] Music stands somewhere between the friend and the willow. With the friend in the unguarded moment, we assume, based on experience, that she probably really does have the emotion we sense (perhaps sadness). With the tree we assume it does not. But with music we do not assume the music (or the composer while writing it) somehow "has" the emotion. Clearly the notes do not have it, and no one knows what the composer was feeling while composing it. Nevertheless, the musical form strikes us as having a certain emotional configuration which we recognize and which had something to do with a human agent who structured the music in a certain way. Our reading of the music is neither a pure anthropomorphic projection nor is it based on the assumption that the music or composer somehow is (or was) sad. This "middle knowledge" on emotion is perhaps what gives us the aesthetic distance needed to enjoy the beauty of a piece like Gorecki's sad and tragic *Third Symphony*. It is not anthropomorphic nonsense to say the music is expressive of sadness, yet our recognition of sadness without ourselves becoming consumed by it allows us to enjoy the aesthetic moment.

The natural-empty distinction applies here in this sense. Empty desires can alter our perception of what is in front of us. One possibility is that empty desires (e.g. obsessions) distort and distract our perception to the point where we fail to

recognize the musical pattern. Who can hear joyful music when one is obsessed by envy or jealousy? Another type of example is very close to one Epicurus himself would have used. Imagine we are told by society what great art music is, i.e. it must have a certain musical form. If it does not have that form, then whatever else it is, it is of limited or no aesthetic value. We then happen to hear jazz for the first time. Our perception, distorted by society's stories, is limited by the belief that this *cannot* be great music and it is not even worth trying to understand. In the arousal theory, empty desires block our experience of the proper emotion. Here empty desires distort our perception. Natural desires, understood to be an unmediated interest in appreciating and enjoying music as it is given, allow us to hear (or sincerely try to hear) the potential emotional richness of musical expressiveness beyond our own limited experience. Empty desires, whatever their source, can block and distort our perception of that musical landscape.

4. Are There "Natural" Desires?

This aesthetic application of the natural-empty distinction assumes that the distinction itself is accurate. But is it? Epicurus assumed that all natural desires spring from desires of the body (including the psyche), and include social desires like friendship and virtues like justice. (His view of justice is distinctly egoistic.[\[12\]](#)) Unlike Aristotle, he did not accept the premise that the *polis* is central in shaping who we are as individuals, i.e., that the individual would not exist were it not for the stories of our culture and society. Yet Epicurus himself emphasized a *resocializing* of the individual, not an abandonment of society. The Garden, the school founded by Epicurus, was designed to do just such resocializing. The Garden was intended to be a retraining school for students in which the teachers were definitely the authorities. In fact, the Garden, noted for its radical openness to all classes and both genders, also appears to have been quite close to what we would call today a cult.[\[13\]](#) Epicurus talked about the child's experiences being the model. Yet neither he nor any other Epicurean would opt for the child's tendency toward immediate sensory satisfaction. What they really wanted was the child's direct simplicity and emotional honesty filtered through the wisdom of the adult mind. No adult becomes an adult without being socialized, and those who are poorly or minimally socialized are not the Epicurean ideal. Friendship takes patience and understanding, as does listening to a symphony. A Cyrenaic would have no time to waste learning to appreciate Stravinsky; a strong drink would be far more pleasurable. Epicurus wanted a wisdom provided by a different form of socialization. Thus the concept of "natural desires" is inherently vague.

But does the fact that desires are socialized destroy the usefulness of the natural-empty distinction for clarifying musical experience? I think not. Rather than "natural" necessarily being put in opposition to society, the distinction can be maintained by having "natural" refer primarily to the pleasure of the subject at hand (music, friendship, food) and "empty" refer to desires extraneous to that subject. The issue has more to do with focus than with society *per se*; indeed, focusing involving memory and repetition, was a big part of

the re-education that occurred in the Garden.^[14] Given what occurred in the Garden, the real Epicurean problem with love stories, tales of wealth and luxury, and religious mythology is not that they are socially inculcated into individuals (which process Epicurus himself was doing), but that they are *delusional* and *unrealistic*. This is the real Epicurean insight about aesthetics. Empty desires divert attention from genuine aesthetic pleasures toward an ideal of pleasure that cannot be fulfilled: the classic case is concern over being admitted to the club called the artworld.^[15] In music, what empty desires do is superimpose some delusional, nonmusical element on our experience. A desire for status distorts the musical experience, not because society is blocking a supposedly pure, uncorrupted experience of the body, but rather because one element of society, which is unrelated to the music and which can never in principle be satisfied, imposes itself between the listener and the music.

If we redefine "empty" as extraneous or irrelevant to the pleasure at hand, then we need to distinguish further between a desire that may be justified and one that is truly unrealistic. A person can be distracted from music by a sudden concern that one's child in the next room is coughing. In the spirit of Epicurus, this is hardly an empty desire but a case in which one natural desire (for the child's health) trumps another one (the desire to enjoy music). It is entirely different and completely in the spirit of Epicurus to reserve "empty" for those desires over which we have no control or which by themselves cannot possibly be fulfilled. Thus, obsessing about how one did on the exam yesterday or whether I am going to get my name in the paper by going to the concert would be empty desires. In the first example of the exam, the Stoics would say it is empty because the event is over and done with. Since it is over, why let something you have no control over dictate your thoughts? Maintain your freedom. The Epicureans would say it is empty because it is both a desire that (being in the past) cannot be fulfilled by one's actions *and* because it prevents us from enjoying the pleasure in front of us. The second example about one's self-image is more purely Epicurean, in that the nature of the desire itself (fame) is one that cannot in principle ever be completely satisfied. If we emphasize "empty" not as being socially imposed *per se* but as delusional or impossible to fulfill, we can allow socialization its proper role and still maintain the natural-empty distinction as aesthetically useful.

Contrary to the view that society today is too hedonistic, the Epicureans would say it is not hedonistic enough. Contemporary society blocks and distorts genuine pleasures by filling people's heads with stories and expectations that lead to anxiety, inadequacy and resentment because the desires can never be satisfied. The Epicureans would argue that the arts today hide other social agendas -- profit being the main one -- behind a veil of immediate pleasure-seeking. It pays in cash to create in the general public empty desires that need endless attempts at fulfillment. Epicurus, the pleasure-seeker, would be a huge critic of this so-called pleasure-oriented society, whose members so often do not know how to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. We have more pleasures in front of us, including musical pleasures, than any other culture in history, yet for many of us, how little time we take to be completely

present to the joys of being alive.

Endnotes

[1] See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), ch. 8. Nussbaum's insightful and well-written book provided the seed for the origin of this paper.

[2] For example, "Remember that what is insulting is not the person who abuses you or hits you, but the judgment about them that they *are* insulting. So when someone irritates you be aware that what irritates you is your own belief." Epictetus, *The Handbook of Epictetus*, translated by Nicholas White (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), p. 16.

[3] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, 128, in *The Epicurus Reader*, translated and edited by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), p. 30.

[4] Nussbaum, ch. 4. Inwood and Gerson translate "empty" as "groundless." "Of desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary, and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as a result of groundless opinion." Epicurus, *The Principal Doctrines*, xxix, in *The Epicurus Reader*, p. 34.

[5] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.41 in *The Epicurus Reader*, p. 58.

[6] Music for advertising involving status, for example, could in principle be isolated from the empty desire in the ad and appreciated in itself, turning what is intended to be an adjunct to promoting an empty desire into a genuine aesthetic experience. Something analogous might be Warhol's abstraction of everyday functional objects. Such a feat would be difficult because, the better the ad, the better the advertiser closely links the music to the images and feelings about the product.

[7] For a thorough discussion of the historical debate on music and emotions see Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions: The Philosophical Theories* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

[8] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, 131-132, in *The Epicurus Reader*, pp. 30-31.

[9] Budd, ch. 2.

[10] Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), esp. chs. VI and VII.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[12] "Injustice is not a bad thing in its own right, but (only) because of the fear produced by the suspicion that we will not escape the notice of those assigned to punish such actions." Epicurus, *The Principal Doctrines*, xxxiv, in *The Epicurus Reader*, p. 35.

[13] Nussbaum, pp. 131-136.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[15] I owe this thoroughly Epicurean phrase to an anonymous CA reviewer.

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