

# The Wider Implications Of the Epicurean Warnings About Passionate Love

Post by "Cassius" of March 5, 2016 at 3:04 PM

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[Cassius Amicus 03-5-2016 0 Comments](#)

One of the most troublesome topics used by those who erroneously advocate the view that Epicurus taught "ascetic quietism" is the advice given in Vatican Saying 51. Here is Vatican Saying 51 in three different translations:

## Vatican Saying 51:

[Epicurus.net](#): *"[addressing a young man] I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will, provided only that you neither violate the laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbors, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by one or more of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm."*

[Cyril Bailey \(Epicurus The Extant Remains\)](#): *"You tell me that the stimulus of the flesh makes you too prone to the pleasures of love. Provided that you do not break the laws or good customs and do not distress any of your neighbors or do harm to your body or squander your pittance, you may indulge your inclination as you please. Yet it is impossible not to come up against one or other of these barriers: for the pleasures of love never profited a man and he is lucky if they do him no harm."*

[Epicurus.info](#): *"I learn that your bodily inclination leans most keenly towards sexual intercourse. If you neither violate the laws nor disturb well established morals nor sadden someone close to you nor strain your body nor spend what is needed for necessities, use your own choice as you wish. It is surely difficult to imagine however than none of these would be a part of sex because sex never benefited anyone. It would be better if it did not harm you."*

In this post I won't recite the lengthy exposition of the subject in Book IV of Lucretius, but the Bailey translation of this discussion can be found [at this link](#) beginning with the phrase "There is stirred in us that seed..."

Rather, what I'd like to submit is that this passage should not be singled out as a special condemnation of "love," or "sexual relations," or even what we might refer to as "romantic

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love." My reasoning goes like this:

First, the pleasures of these activities are no less desirable than any other pleasures, for we know from the Letter to Menoeceus that "all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good," and we know from [surviving fragments from Epicurus' treatise "On the Ethical End"](#) that he taught: "I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, sexual pleasures, the pleasures of sound and the pleasures of beautiful form."

Our starting point is therefore the desirability of pursuing pleasure all pleasures, limited not by our on concepts of "good" or "worthy" or "noble" or "virtuous" pleasures, but only by an intelligent analysis of whether indulgence in any pleasure will lead to greater pleasure or to its reverse - greater pain, This is of course the analysis expressed by Epicurus himself in the [Letter to Menoeceus](#):

*"While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned. It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good."*

Seen in this way, Epicurus is doing nothing more in regard to passionate love than he is doing to any other passionate activity that may lead to pleasure or pain depending on the circumstances involved. In the passage cited above to the "young man," we could just as easily substitute any other pleasure which can be experienced in such intensity that it can become intoxicating - not only sex, but also alcohol, or race-car driving, or mountain-climbing, or snow-skiing - any activity that contains within in both thrills and danger.

If we play that substitution game, do we find that Epicurus warns us never to engage in such activities because they involve danger? No! We can and should apply the warning Epicurus gave to the "young man" whether our passionate interest is in sex, drugs, rock and roll - or pursuing "virtue" through asceticism. The analysis follows the same pattern:

1) "Does your activity violate the law?" If it does, you can be sure that its dangers are well defined in terms of the punishment you will suffer if you are found out and reported to the authorities. Sometimes laws can and should be broken, depending on the situation, but it is very prudent to ask at the beginning of the analysis whether there are in fact laws that would be broken by the activity.

2) "Does your activity disturb well-established morals?" If we presumed that Epicurus considered "well-established morals" to be legitimate expressions of common sense in human relations, rather than the arbitrary norms we often associate with religious or social rule-making, then we can see again that violation of common sense in dealing with other people is going to lead to friction and a negative reaction from them, which is just the kind of thing we can expect to detract from our calm experience of happy living. The issue is not that arbitrary

rules are broken, but that in violating these rules we can expect painful reactions from the people we are involved with in the rule-breaking.

3) "Does your activity sadden someone close to you?" If we take "someone close to you" as referring to a friend, then we can easily see the problem, because it is clear in Epicurean theory that our friends are among our most important possessions. If "someone close to you" refers to a non-friend, then we also can see the likely problems that will occur from that person deciding to retaliate.

4) Does your activity "strain your body?" This part of the test seems clearly to relate to current or future physical pain, and needs no elaboration.

5) Does your activity "spend what is needed for necessities?" Here we see (Bailey uses the word "waste") that the test derives from the long-term analysis of the pleasure or pain that results from the activity. The question is not posed in a way that indicates that "no" possessions should be spent on the activity, but whether the expense threatens our long-term survival (our "necessities"), or is "wasted" in terms of the pleasure that is gained. Worthwhile purchases are the stuff life is made of and which we should choose to pursue. Loss of necessities or "waste" means the focus is that the result in pleasure is no worth the pain that will be received as its cost.

As we come to the concluding passages we have to look carefully at the translations, because some imply that Epicurus is saying that it is "impossible" not to be checked by one of these warnings and that "sex never benefited anyone." I am not competent to provide a better translation so I will not attempt it, but I will say that Epicurus would not have been considered the great philosopher that he was if he had produced a passage on such an important topic that was inconsistent with the rest of his philosophy. It seems to me that the focus of the Epicurus.net translation is the closest to the probable intent, because it has Epicurus saying to apply the tests he has listed and then, if the circumstances of the activity indicate a likelihood of greater pleasure than pain, then "use your own choice as you wish."

It would be very helpful if we had a thorough and well-researched analysis of the final phase which Epicurus.net translates as "It is surely difficult to imagine however than none of these would be a part of sex because sex never benefited anyone. It would be better if it did not harm you." In order to grasp the shades of meaning we would need to pick through the various meanings of "sex," of "benefited anyone," and "it" in the dangling phrase "It would be better if it did not harm you."

It seems to me that the correct interpretation is to view the discussion about sex as an integrated part of Epicurus' overall teaching - that pleasure should be pursued intelligently, with "intelligently" defined as "can I reasonably expect the activity to lead to greater pleasure, or greater pain." From the Letter to Herodotus and everything we know about Epicurean physics and epistemology, we know that circumstances control the outcome of all ethical decisions, and that no set of choices are ever singled out for "always bad" or "always good" treatment. The idea that sexual relations is an exception to this rule, and that it is "always bad" flies in the face

of the rest of Epicurean philosophy, and should be rejected as an unfortunate result of the fragmentary nature of our surviving texts. In fact, the final passage of Lucretius' Book IV is devoted to an illustration of how romantic love, when it is enduring and therefore real, wears away the hardest obstacles.

Seen in this way, the tests that Epicurus applied to sexual relations should be considered for its wider implications, and not just as a special commentary on sex. We should keep an open mind about engaging in *any* activity until the circumstances are fully evaluated as Epicurus advised. But once the circumstances are evaluated, and we determine that the benefits in pleasure will outweigh the penalty in pain, then *use your own choice as you wish*. Sexual relations, is not only not an exception to this rule, it is one of the most basic pleasurable activities of life - the sort of activity *without which we would not even know "the good."*

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## Post by "Cassius" of March 7, 2016 at 4:48 PM

Excerpts from Facebook discussion:

HDJ: I'd like to add my two cents from a bystander's point of view. There are many rigorous scientific articles showing many benefits of the act of sex. Maybe Epicurus might have chosen his words differently with the knowledge we have today?

[Cassius Amicus](#) I agree with what I think you are saying, HDJ, but I think the problem is not so much that he chose his words poorly (and that might be an issue with translation) but that we only have fragments without the overall context. He seems to have been addressing someone who was clearly so over-indulging in this department that he was causing trouble for himself or others (else why would the topic even be addressed?). I don't think Epicurus was unaware of the benefits of sex and certainly he was not unaware of its pleasure. But it seems that the parts of Epicurean texts which survive are heavily slanted toward Epicurus warning someone *\*against\** doing something in particular that is pleasurable, while those which certainly would have existed *\*encouraging\** the pursuit of pleasure are only the general statements.

I think we could compare the phrase that is preserved about Pythocles, that "if you wish to make Pythocles rich, do not give him more money, but restrain his desires." To me, this is one of those sayings that CLEARLY can be only understood if we know the pre-existing state of Pythocles. Is he rich and cynical and degenerate from wasting money? Then yes, restrain his desire for money. But is Pythocles poor and at the point of death and wishing only for a few of the common ordinary "luxuries" of life? Then I cannot imagine that Epicurus would say such a thing to such a pitiful person.

I strongly suspect that the surviving fragments come to us reflecting "cherry-picking" by stoics and their sympathizers who wanted to preserve sayings from Epicurus with which they agreed, or which they could shape to their own uses.

Fortunately someone also preserved for us VS 63. "There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance." I think [VS63](#), if thoroughly considered and applied, is the key to blowing away all the stoicisms that have clung onto Epicurean theory like barnacles.

And if you apply [VS63](#) to your question you come up with the same conclusion you have reached, that ALL activity, even/especially sex, has to be evaluated in context of the situation that applies. And as you note, in general, sex is a natural and healthy and pleasurable part of life.