

# Is Romantic Love a Vainglory

**Post by "Bartleby" of November 29, 2020 at 12:01 PM**

Hello,

Years ago in philosophy class I learned that Epicurus counted romantic love as a vainglory (ie: an unnatural, unnecessary pleasure), equating it with other ego-driven illusionary pleasures like demanding a specific piece of cake or building statues to oneself. Now I've decided to write an article to set the record straight (<https://www.pureloveshop.com/2020/11/29/rom...ot-a-vainglory/>). However, I begin feel like I am fighting an opponent built of straws. I find evidence that Epicurus was against lust-driven relationships, but I see nothing where he calls romantic love a vainglory. I found this post by Cassius <https://newepicurean.com/love-marriage-...e-modern-world/>, which reminded me of Epicurus's faith in friendship and confirmed my vague memory that Epicurus had not been against marriage (the wise man may or may not marry). And I do not find anything where Epicurus calls romantic love a vainglory. I really begin to wonder if it wasn't so much romantic love that Epicurus disapproved of as placing sexual desire above friendship. But is there a place where Epicurus discusses romance and sexuality in terms of vainglories? Is there a place where he draws comparisons between needing a specific piece of cake (as opposed to the natural pleasure of desiring something sweet) and needing a specific sexual partner (as opposed to the natural pleasure of desiring sex)?

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**Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2020 at 1:21 PM**

Welcome Bartleby -

1 - The reference to a "specific piece of cake" is to some commentator, correct, as there is no reference in the Epicurean texts to that effect? I suppose you are asking if there is a reference to that effect, and my response would be "no" - that sounds like a commentator's overgeneralization and not something that Epicurus would have said.

2 - I see you defined vainglory as an unnatural, unnecessary pleasure. I realize of course what you are referring to there from the letter to Menoecus and other references, but as a general observation it seems to me that the contextual nature of all human actions under the Epicurean view of nature overrides the significance of any specific list of categories of pleasures or pains, so to me that is one part of the answer to the question you are examining, and why you are not likely to find the "specific piece of cake" reference - or any extensive discussion of specific

categories that are "vainglory" - anywhere in the texts. The general rule is as explained in Torquatus section of "On Ends" - that the principle of the classification arises from the difficulty of obtaining the pleasure without significant pain -- which is not a list of proscription, but an observation that helps you make your own decisions about which pleasures to pursue. ("... the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.)

3 - As to whether "Epicurus disapproved of ... placing sexual desire above friendship" as a general observation no doubt he would place friendship at or near the top of things that he approved of given PD 27. However once again the contextual would control and at certain times and places sexual desire would have its place. I would generalize that like any other goal, Epicurus would say that it is wrong to elevate sexual desire to an end in itself without regard to the ultimate outcome in terms of pleasure and pain. The issue with sexual desire is not that it is wrong or flawed in itself - no pleasure is intrinsically bad - but that the fulfillment of sexual desire without incurring pain that outweighs the pleasure is a particularly difficult goal to achieve.

Again, welcome to the forum,

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2020 at 1:30 PM**

Bartleby I have not yet had a chance to absorb your full article, but this catches my eye:

*Unnatural Unnecessary Pleasures (also called "Vainglories"):* Like demanding some specific piece of cake. Or having a statue built to yourself. Or having to have sex with some specific person. These are desperate, insecure, fantastical, ego-driven lusts that enmesh the pleasure-seeker in delusions about how their life is meaningful because of XYZ external circumstance. You should never indulge in these pleasures. They have no natural bounds and will devour and destroy you if you begin to dream of actually satisfying them. They molly-coddle, ratify, and encourage desire; and that destroys your most fundamental mental pleasure: freedom from desire = joyful, wide-open-conscious-space peace of mind. Not only that: Since these pleasures rob you of your senses, pursuing them is physically dangerous and they are apt to increase your physical woes.

I would disagree that Epicurus took the position which I underlined in red. As per my earlier post, the "principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered." This is no doubt an accurate generalization of what most people find to be the case in life, so as a general rule it makes very good sense to think about these observations before deciding what to choose and what to avoid.

But that does not mean that you should "never" pursue a pleasure which is difficult to obtain without pain. The logical conclusion of taking your position to an extreme would be to put avoidance of pain as your most important goal, and would in many cases lead to living in a cave on bread and water -- and the weight of Epicurean philosophy does not at all support such a conclusion. One of the most important reasons for that, i think, is that there is no absolute rule of what pleasures are most to be chosen, because even those pleasures that last the longest are not always to be chosen (as per the letter to Menoeceus). Epicurus does not give a list because it is the individual's faculty of pleasure which is the test for that individual - there is no platonic ideal list of pleasures which are "best" for all people at all times and all places to pursue. In the absence of such a list, it is the faculty of pleasure alone which a person can look to for the answer on what to pursue and what to avoid, and so use of the word "never" in this context is something I think which would violate basic premises of Epicurean philosophy.

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### **Post by “Don” of November 29, 2020 at 2:07 PM**

Welcome, [Bartleby](#) !

I don't know if this will help you answer your question, but I thought I'd share this section from the website I put together on the characteristics of the Epicurean sage per Diogenes Laertius's list. This is the section specifically on sexual relationships: <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...hips?authuser=0>

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### **Post by “Bartleby” of November 29, 2020 at 4:30 PM**

Thanks Amicus and Don.

I can see that this quick little article will actually require quite a bit of research and thought.

Is there anything extant where Epicurus discusses the three types pleasures? Or is that all just second hand?

I took the essential error within vainglories (unnatural unnecessary pleasures) to be that they assuage the ego more than they answer the needs of the mind/heart/body, which you could actually satisfy more fully by just sticking to natural pleasures. Uups are called imaginary and boundless, and they seem a type of madness -- tricks and ploys to distract you from the more fundamental pleasure of freedom of desire. Maybe sometimes it is good to indulge in a little folly, madness, and caprice; the problem is, of course, that they have a tendency to wrap their tentacles around our legs and pull us back down when we'd swim away.

Anyway, thanks again both of you for the help.

Best,

BW

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2020 at 5:04 PM**

BW --

Thanks for engaging on this. You're coming at the issue from the normal perspective, so I understand why you reached the conclusions about Epicurus that you did. If you have the time and inclination to get started on the DeWitt book, you will see there is a different perspective on "pleasure" which involves the observation that what might be called "the faculty of pleasure," being Nature's ultimate stop and go signal, is not properly divided in to "good pleasures" vs "bad pleasures" or any other categories. There is only "pleasure" which covers a vast spectrum of pleasurable experiences, and there is only "pain" which also covers a vast spectrum.

In Epicurean philosophy it is fundamental that all pleasures are desirable, and all pains are undesirable, but it is also fundamental that there is no absolute standard as to how you as an individual (or humans as a group, for that matter) must always choose from among the available pleasures and pains. The "natural" and "necessary" divisions are totally pragmatically based -- there is no "list" by which nature approves or disapproves of any set category.

I don't want you to take what I am saying on my or DeWitt's authority - unfortunately there is no way for someone like you to be sure who is right without reading both sides of the argument and the texts for yourself. I cite DeWitt so strongly because his summary is the most concise and persuasive of which i am aware, but the articles I cited also provide much additional

documentation for the same conclusions.

Also I have to note that I think that you are off on a significant detour by talking in terms of "vainglories" -- which is not an Epicurean term in any way, and rather conveys the implication that there is a set category of prohibited pleasures, which I am contending, and think you will eventually find - there is not. 😊

For example, this from [Epicurus' letter to Menoecus](#):

Quote

"Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. **Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages** we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good."

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## Post by "Don" of November 29, 2020 at 8:15 PM

[Quote from Bartleby](#)

Is there anything extant where Epicurus discusses the three types pleasures? Or is that all just second hand?

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...0%3Achapter%3D1>

That's a link to Diogenes Laertius's Lives, Book X. The discussion of the desires is toward the end of verse 127 in the Letter to Menoikeus. That's one place Epicurus talks about the categories of desires.