

Episode 317 - TD43 - The Epicurean "System Of Counterbalancing" In Pursuit Of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of January 16, 2026 at 2:43 PM

Welcome to Episode 317 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

We are closing in on the end of those portions of Tusculan Disputations that are most relevant to Epicurean philosophy today, so we'll pick up this week with more on [Section 32 of Part 5](#).

XXXIII.

You see, I imagine, how Epicurus has divided his kinds of desires, not very acutely perhaps, but yet usefully: saying, that they are "partly natural and necessary; partly natural, but not necessary; partly neither. That those which are necessary may be supplied almost for nothing; for that the things which nature requires are easily obtained." As to the second kind of desires, his opinion is, that any one may easily either enjoy or go without them. And with regard to the third, since they are utterly frivolous, being neither allied to necessity nor nature, he thinks that they should be entirely rooted out. On this topic a great many arguments are adduced by the Epicureans; and those pleasures which they do not despise in a body, they disparage one by one, and seem rather for lessening the number of them: for as to wanton pleasures, on which subject they say a great deal, these, say they, are easy, common, and within any one's reach; and they think that if nature requires them, they are not to be estimated by birth, condition, or rank, but by shape, age, and person: and that it is by no means difficult to refrain from them, should health, duty, or reputation require it; but that pleasures of this kind may be desirable, where they are attended with no inconvenience, but can never be of any use. And the assertions which Epicurus makes with respect to the whole of pleasure, are such as show his opinion to be that pleasure is always desirable, and to be pursued merely because it is pleasure; and for the same reason pain is to be avoided, because it is pain. So that a wise man will always adopt such a system of counterbalancing as to do himself the justice to avoid pleasure, should pain ensue from it in too great a proportion; and will submit to pain, provided the effects of it are to produce a greater pleasure: so that all pleasurable things, though the corporeal senses are the judges of them, are still to be referred to the mind, on which account the body rejoices, whilst it perceives a present pleasure; but that the mind not only perceives

the present as well as the body, but foresees it, while it is coming, and even when it is past will not let it quite slip away. So that a wise man enjoys a continual series of pleasures, uniting the expectation of future pleasure to the recollection of what he has already tasted. The like notions are applied by them to high living; and the magnificence and expensiveness of entertainments are deprecated, because nature is satisfied at a small expense.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/69538630/media>

Post by “Cassius” of January 17, 2026 at 1:50 PM

Last week's Episode was entitled "Happiness Is The Goal of Life - A Life of Happiness Is A Life of Pleasure."

As we close in on the end of Tusculan Disputations, I'd like to continue to emphasize not only that each one of these two prongs is controversial, but that there is another prong that's equally or more important:

1 - "Happiness is the goal of life" is hotly disputed by religion (which claims piety) and humanism/Platonism/Stoicism (which claims "virtue" or "being a good person." Many people loosely agree that they want to be happy, but they view happiness is a very non-Epicurean way.

2 - The dispute about prong one is why prong two is bitterly opposed. "A life of happiness is a life of pleasure" is exactly how Diogenes Laertius and Torquatus interpret Epicurus, but many - especially today - want to play word games and cite "absence of pain" or "tranquility" as the goal of life, and push "pleasure" off to the side and safely out of sight. And as a result they live lives that are very different from those which Epicurus, Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and the Epicurean leaders of the ancient world pursued.

3 - Prong three, which we need to address in this and coming episodes, is to emphasize that when Epicurus held that there are only two feelings with no middle ground, that means "pleasure" is everything not just physically but also mentally that we find to be agreeable. Far too many people hear the word "pleasure" and all they hear is "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." That's the way Cicero and most opponents of Epicurus chose to interpret him, and that's wrong, but it's pervasive.

We can say "Happiness is the goal of life," and "a life of happiness is a life of pleasure" all day long, but unless we can articulate the full meaning of pleasure as Epicurus advocated for it, the other two statements are largely worthless. "Happiness is the goal of life" can and has been

said by many different types of philosophers, and "A life of happiness is a life of pleasure" is 9 times out of 10 going to be understood as the slogan of a party animal.

Only a clear and full explanation of Epicurus' use of the word "pleasure" can give legitimate meaning to "happiness is the goal of life" and "a life of happiness is a life of pleasure."

Torquatus and Diogenes of Oinoanda were able to do it, and the existence of legions of other intelligent Greek and Roman Epicureans are evidence that many others could too.

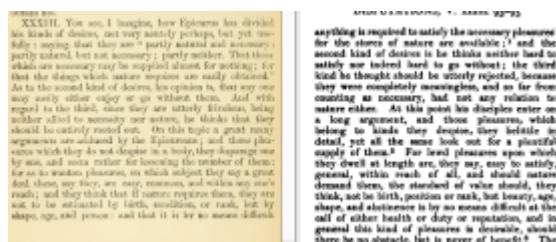
We today can do the same.

Post by "Cassius" of January 20, 2026 at 9:32 PM

In this week's episode, part of what we discuss is the following section from XXXIII which was new to Joshua and me when we came across it. In tonight's 20th Zoom there was a general idea that this is likely referring to sex / romantic relations, but all ideas will be appreciated.

There are two things going on here: (1) is that there's a significant difference between the Yonge and Loeb translations of the sentence before the one we're referring to ("and seem rather for lessening the number of them" vs. "yet all the same look out for a plentiful supply of them," where Yonge and Loeb seem to be at odds, and

(2) the sentence that contrasts "birth position and rank" to beauty, age, and shape." (the Loeb version) on which point Yonge largely agrees, but the question is "what exactly are they talking about?"



Post by "Bryan" of January 21, 2026 at 3:03 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4906-episode-317-td43-the-epicurean-system-of-counterbalancing-in-pursuit-of-pleasure/>

between the Yonge and Loeb

Looks as though Loeb is correct. Older editors assumed the Latin was wrong. So they assumed a lost negating word. This was considered more plausible here because the word just before this phrase "they condemn" (contemnunt) has an apparent errant "non" (the Loeb edition does have a note about that issue).

For example, this edition ([link](#)) says at that spot (in Latin):

"Yet they seek abundance" (quaerunt tamen copiam) These statements are plainly contrary to what Cicero has just said, namely that the Epicureans feigned contempt for pleasures. Therefore Bentley's conjectures are not to be rejected: 'yet they do not seek' or 'yet they despise'. But perhaps Cicero wrote 'yet they cling to something'. In any case, nothing certain can be established *from the agreement of all the manuscripts.*"

Post by "Cassius" of January 21, 2026 at 3:53 PM

Thank you Bryan! King's version makes much more sense to me.

Post by "Cassius" of January 21, 2026 at 4:32 PM

I'm taking the title of today's episode from the fact that both Yonge and King translate "system of counterbalancing" as the best English version of the Latin in section 33:

Totumque hoc de voluptate sic ille praecipit, ut voluptatem ipsam per se, quia voluptas sit, semper optandam expetendamque putet, eademque ratione dolorem ob id ipsum, quia dolor sit, semper esse fugiendum ; itaque hac usurum compensatione sapientem, ut et voluptatem fugiat, si ea maiorem dolorem effectura sit, et dolorem suscipiat maiorem efficientem voluptatem, omniaque iucunda, quamquam sensu corporis iudicentur, ad animum referri tam en;

pleasure itself because it is pleasure; and for the same reason pain is to be avoided, because it is pain. So that a wise man will always seek a system of counterbalancing so to do himself the justice to avoid pleasure, should pain more than it is too great a proportion; and will submit to pain, provided the effects of it are to produce a greater pleasure.

and also on the same principle pain is always to be avoided for the simple reason that it is pain, and so the wise man will employ a system of counterbalancing which enables him both to avoid pleasure, should it be likely to ensure greater pain, and submit to pain where it ensures greater pleasure; and

Post by “Cassius” of January 21, 2026 at 4:40 PM

Episode 317 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "The Epicurean System of Counterbalancing In the Pursuit of Pleasure"

[media]<https://www.speaker.com/episode/69538630/media>