

# Epicurus' Warning To the Young Man Who Was "Too Prone To The Pleasures Of Love"

Post by "Cassius" of February 11, 2019 at 9:39 AM

G: What about that one mention to the young fellow by epicurus' about sex? I think it went something like not to break any customs or hurt others and if you can do this then do it if not they don't. Do you know what I am referring to?

Cassius:

"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."

*That one can be explained in large part, as Epicurus says, by presuming it was written to someone who was in intoxicated overdrive and taking risks that were not warranted by the potential gain. If you do approach sex prudently, then you can greatly reduce or eliminate those potential pains that Epicurus was warning about.*

*Now as to the last part about "never profited" I think we would want to scrutinize the translation and the context (which we probably don't have). "Never profited" cannot mean "never pleased" or "was never desirable" because we know that all pleasure is desirable from other Epicurean texts. Was he referring to intoxicated pursuit of "the pleasures of love" - maybe so and that would be consistent, if that is what the context shows. We know from other texts that Epicurus advised the daughter of Metrodorus to get married, and the texts also seem to say that he recommended marriage when appropriate. If he had advised against all marriage and all sex you can be sure we would have more clear texts on that point.*

*So I think this is one of those texts that has to be weighed against the rest, and if you do then you don't let this one overrule the rest, which are more consistent with the whole. Was it Epicurus or this text that appears to have a problem. My bet is that this text has a problem that would be explained if we had the original or more context or both.*

*And of course there is the lengthy discussion of all this in Lucretius.*

*In general Epicurus doesn't say that you can eliminate all risk or all pain, but you can't do that in the rest of life either. Just like in any pleasurable activity, you can reduce risks and pain to a manageable level if you act prudently in pursuing that pleasure. Some particular choices in*

*pursuing pleasure cost more in pain than they are worth, but at the same time (1) pleasure is the goal of living, and (2) even if the worst happens, pain that is intense doesn't last long, and pain that is less intense is manageable.*

*No one can make particular choices for you -- and it is impossible that they could, because if they could that would mean there is fate and/or some kind of mechanical determinism, which there is not in these issues.*

You might find this prior discussion interesting <https://newepicurean.com/love-marriage-...e-modern-world/>

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2019 at 10:52 AM**

Looking further at the conclusion of this quote (Vatican Saying 51) , I see that it says that " it is impossible not to come up against one or other of these barriers" << I would particularly scrutinize any attribution to Epicurus where he allegedly says that something in human affairs is "impossible." Given that there is no "fate," and that humans have "free will," can anyone cite another instance besides this where Epicurus says that something is "impossible"? Remember we are talking **\*\*ethics\*\*** here - not something like death that derives from the unchanging properties and qualities of the elements. Death (except for the gods) is impossible to avoid for elemental reasons, because all bodies that come together eventually break apart. But is there any reason that it should be "impossible" to prevail over the dangers of sex? Remember - is there any backup beyond Vatican Saying 51 to confirm this phrasing? Do we even have a copy of the original text of the Vatican list to confirm it?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2019 at 11:02 AM**

“You tell me that the stimulus of the flesh makes you too prone to the pleasures of love." Also, if this is a correct translation, **note the "too prone."** That doesn't seem to be an absolute prohibition either, but a reference to *\*excessive\** indulgence.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2019 at 11:18 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/735-epicurus-warning-to-the-young-man-who-was-too-prone-to-the-pleasures-of-love/>

Thank you Elli for correcting me! Strike what I said above about "impossible - Epicurus . net is wrong - the word is DIFFICULT according to this source -- <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...rOWsEsRSQzQNUvK>

Substituting difficult for impossible helps a lot - we would still need to be careful with whether the issue is "sex" or "too prone" or "leans most keenly" -- in other words whether the issue is sex itself, or excessive / imprudent ways of indulgence in it.

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### **Post by “Matt” of February 11, 2019 at 1:54 PM**

Indulging our *natural* desires (as long as it is both legal and culturally acceptable) is perfectly normal in all cases. We require food and drink ...so we eat, do we need to only moderately subsist on meager food? No way! If it is prudent and good for your health to indulge every so often (maybe more often then not) then SO BE IT! As long as you aren't going to cause health problems for yourself then indulge as long as it is in your means.

As for sex, it's the same. If the sex drive is there (and for most it is) then it is unhealthy to deny that natural urge. In fact, it could cause physical and mental issues if suppressed unnecessarily. Do everything within your means. Find consenting partners who share your desires and go for it! We live once, that's it. It's a shame to suppress one of life's most pleasurable and natural gifts.

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### **Post by “Matt” of February 11, 2019 at 2:08 PM**

Celibacy is a peculiar thing for a human. There are rare cases (and I would just guess pretty rare) where there are people who are just not as "sexualized" as others. But the majority of the human population carries a desire for sex and reproduction. If anything self-imposed celibacy is abnormal if the desire for sex exists.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2019 at 2:12 PM**

For comparison and for future study, here is the part of Tusculan Disputations where Cicero criticizes Plato in particular, and seemingly the Stoics, and seems to praise Epicurus' position:

<https://archive.org/details/cicero...ceuoft/page/156>

XXXIII. However, we may allow the poets to trifle, in whose fables we see Jupiter himself engaged in these debaucheries: but let us apply to the masters of virtue—the philosophers who deny love to be anything carnal; and in this they differ from Epicurus, who, I think, is not much mistaken. For what is that love of friendship? How comes it that no one is in love with a deformed young man, or a handsome old one? I am of opinion that this love of men had its rise from the Gymnastics of the Greeks, where these kinds of loves are admissible and permitted; therefore Ennius spoke well:

The censure of this crime to those is due  
Who naked bodies first exposed to view.

all the rest.  
XXXIV. Now we see that the loves of all these writers were entirely libidinous. There have arisen also some among us philosophers (and Plato is at the head of them, whom Dicaearchus blames not without reason) who have countenanced love. The Stoics, in truth, say, not only that their wise man may be a lover, but they even define love itself as an endeavor to originate friendship out of the appearance of beauty. Now, provided there is any one in the nature of things without desire, without care, without a sigh, such a one may be a lover; for he is free from all lust: but I have nothing to say to him, as it is lust of which I am now speaking. But should there be any love—as there certainly is—which is but little, or perhaps not at all, short of madness, such as his is in the Leucadia—

Should there be any God whose care I am—  
it is incumbent on all the Gods to see that he enjoys his  
amorous pleasure.

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**Post by “Cassius” of February 11, 2019 at 2:13 PM**

DeWitt's commentary, which cites the section from Cicero above:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/735-epicurus-warning-to-the-young-man-who-was-too-prone-to-the-pleasures-of-love/>

These remain the epithets "imposed" and "prudent." For these it is the most plausible explanation that Epicurus discovered his teacher to be living a double life, practicing virtue, as all philosophers did, and at the same time practicing vice. Cicero informs us that most philosophers condoned the practice of *homosexuality*, and for once he agreed emphatically with Epicurus in condemning it as against Plato.<sup>22</sup> The

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less, as is well known, had essayed in his *Symposium* to sublimate this passion into a passion for knowledge. Epicurus also wrote a *Symposium*, in which he declared: "Intemperance never was the cause of any good and it is inhuman if it does no harm."<sup>23</sup> In the case of *Nausiphanes* there is another line of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (*Stoicists*) will think me really a pupil of the 'Young-fool' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immortal man and addressed to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom."<sup>24</sup> The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics,<sup>25</sup> but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shady side of student life among the Greeks.

As for Epicurus himself, even if strict in his views about chastity, there is no doubt that he was an irritating pupil. It will be recalled how he put his early instructor in a corner over the topic of chess. The following extract reveals no more the irritable teacher than the irritating pupil: the reference is to *Nausiphanes*: "Well, good riddance to the

<sup>22</sup> *Tusc. Disp.* 4.33.70-34.72.

<sup>23</sup> *D.L.* 10.118; *Us.* 62, which shows

It's not clear to me that the cite in *Tusculan Disputations* is quite as specific as this comment from DeWitt suggests, but it's clearly relevant. You'd probably need a study of the original text from Cicero to sort out exactly what specifically Cicero was talking about.

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## Post by "Matt" of February 11, 2019 at 2:22 PM

There can be no concession on this point. There is no benefit to self-imposed celibacy for consenting sexually mature adults. There are all sorts of disorders and aberrations of the mind that are clinically unnatural, but they are not a majority. The majority of healthy mature adults with sexual desire should ALWAYS accept *what it is*.

Anything that is unnatural and unnecessary will lead to pain. Prudent attention to the Hedonic calculus and the cultural morays of society are sufficient guidance for how a person should act in this arena.

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## Post by "Elli" of February 14, 2019 at 7:22 AM

"Celibacy" could lead and to "castration". Here is in the photo how was the whole issue.

## **Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2019 at 7:30 AM**

Elli from what source does that come?

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## **Post by “Matt” of February 14, 2019 at 8:25 AM**

The story of Origen castrating himself has been circulated since Tertullian and Eusebius's time. Both of them were adversaries of Origen. Scholars dispute it's authenticity since Origen's own writings show that he did not favor a literal view of castration.

<https://people.well.com/user/aquarius/origen-matthew.htm>

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## **Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2019 at 8:32 AM**

So I take it you don't believe the story? If so, once again we have an instance of total distortion of a writer's position for the purpose of discrediting him. I gather Origen had all sorts of other views (reincarnation?) that the church fathers wanted to discredit as well.

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## **Post by “Matt” of February 14, 2019 at 8:49 AM**

I think Origen was a pretty inspired writer that fused his philosophical views with his scriptural interpretation. That caused his anti-philosophical rivals to dismiss him and ridicule him. Whether or not he actually castrated himself, no idea, but his writing is attended by a spiritual interpretation of things as opposed to a literal one. I would imagine someone who understood the meaning of the parable probably *more likely* did not perform that action.

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## **Post by “Matt” of February 14, 2019 at 8:50 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/735-epicurus-warning-to-the-young-man-who-was-too-prone-to-the-pleasures-of-love/>

Yes Origen was anathema to the Church for his views on reincarnation and universal reconciliation.