

# On Malte Hossenfelder's book "Epikur"

Post by "Martin" of November 12, 2021 at 5:18 AM

Malte Hossenfelder's book (Verlag C. H. Beck oHG, Munich 1991, 3rd., updated edition, 2006, ISBN 978-3-406-54122-3) is one of a series of the publishing company on thinkers. Apparently, the publishing company limited the size of the book and thereby the level of detail.

The book depicts Hellenistic philosophy as the origin of individualism and Epicurus as the most prominent pioneer of individualism. It is a good introduction to Epicurus' philosophy when the reader is on the alert for some shortcomings.

Hossenfelder appears to be sympathetic to Epicurus' philosophy. Unfortunately, he came up with some misleading oversimplifications which seem to contradict Epicurus' extant texts and how we interpret them here on this forum.

He seems to overlook that Epicurus' philosophy is not only a logic system but refers to human nature as ultimate "irrational" motivation and to the nature of individual humans as source for variation in what are the most appropriate actions to take.

Therefore, Hossenfelder makes typical mistakes of "logicians", e. g. he misinterprets Epicurus' philosophy as egoistic and ignores the emotional aspects of friendship. Once a friendship has been established, the bonding is actually much stronger and important than the equivalent of profitable trades between indifferent business partners.

The table below lists some noteworthy details from the book.

<b>Page</b>	<b>Quote in German original</b>	<b>English translation by Google corrected by Martin</b>	<b>Martin's Comments</b>
56	D. h. es gibt einem sicheren Weg zur Glückseligkeit, der jedermann offensteht: Nimm Dir nur das vor, von dem gewiß ist, daß Du es auch bekommst.	I. e. there is a sure path to happiness which is open to everybody: Take on only what is certain that you will get it.	This seems to be adequate when "certainty" is clarified as "with high likelihood".

56	<p>Epikur umschreibt den Zustand der Glückseligkeit, wie vor ihm schon der Skeptiker Pyrrhon, mit <i>ataraxia</i>, was wir gemeinhin mit "Seelenruhe" übersetzen. Die Stoiker gebrauchen den Ausdruck <i>apatheia</i>. Gemeint ist jedesmal dasselbe, nämlich das Freisein von jeglicher Erregung, die Ruhe und Ausgeglichenheit des Gemüts, der vollkommene innere Friede, vergleichbar der Meeresstille.</p>	<p>Epicurus describes the state of bliss, like the skeptic Pyrrho before him, with <i>ataraxia</i>, which we commonly translate as "peace of mind". The Stoics use the term <i>apatheia</i>. What is meant each time is the same, namely the freedom from any excitement, the calm and equilibrium of the mind, the perfect inner peace, comparable to the calm of the sea.</p>	<p>Equating ataraxia with apatheia seems to be an oversimplification. Hossenfelder refers to his much bigger book on Hellenistic philosophy for details. For a proper understanding and possibly a refutation, that other book would have to be studied.</p>
56	<p>Bis hierher stimmen die Auffassungen aller hellenistischen Denker weitgehend überein. Es sei aber ausdrücklich darauf hingewiesen, daß sich die vorgetragenen Gedanken zur Grundlegung der Gesamtepoche zum großen Teil auf Rekonstruktion stützen und sie sich in dieser Form nicht mehr aus den überlieferten Quellen belegen lassen.</p>	<p>Under the aspects presented here so far, the views of all Hellenistic thinkers are largely in agreement. It should be expressly pointed out, however, that the ideas presented on the foundation of the entire epoch are largely based on reconstruction and can no longer be substantiated in this form from the extant sources.</p>	<p>Hossenfelder's formulation implies that he expects that if more sources had survived they would support his reconstruction. This is unlikely because that claimed agreement appears to contradict extant texts of Epicurus.</p>
63	<p>Epikur kommt somit auf ganz folgerichtige Weise zum Hedonismus: Höchstes Gut ist die Glückseligkeit des einzelnen, diese besteht in der Ataraxie, diese ist Lust, also ist das höchste Gut Lust.</p>	<p>Epicurus thus came to hedonism in a very consistent way: The highest good is the happiness of the individual, this consists in ataraxia, this is pleasure, so the highest good is pleasure.</p>	<p>This resembles Hegelian style false logic and appears to be a misleading oversimplification. Epicurus' philosophy is better characterized by the statement that peace of mind is required to experience maximum pleasure but is not equal to pleasure.</p>

122 Wie die Art der Kanonik so erklärt sich auch die besondere Form der Epikureischen Naturphilosophie aus den Aufgaben, die ihr von der Ethik bestimmt werden.

Like the type of canon, the special form of Epicurean natural philosophy is explained by the tasks that are determined for it by ethics.

It rather appears that Epicurus' derives the ethics from his natural philosophy, or he might have developed both together. However, which view is correct can probably not be established from the extant texts.

128 Der andere Grund, die unendliche theoretische Teilbarkeit zu bestreiten, betrifft die Art der Bewegung der Atome. Die Ursache ihrer Bewegung ist ihre Schwere, die Richtung wird bestimmt entweder durch die Schwere oder durch den Zusammenstoß mit anderen Atomen. Die Schwere läßt sie nach unten fallen, wobei Epikur sich darüber im Klaren ist, daß es im unendlichen Raum kein absolutes Oben und Unten gibt. Er definiert deshalb auch die Atombewegung nicht durch unten und oben, sondern umgekehrt diese durch jene: "Unten" heißt die Richtung, in die sich die Atome vermöge ihrer natürlichen Schwere bewegen, "oben" die entgegengesetzte. Alle übrigen Bewegungsrichtungen resultieren aus den Zusammenstößen, durch die sich auch die sichtbaren Körper entstehen.

The other reason to dispute the infinite theoretical divisibility concerns the nature of the motion of the atoms. The cause of their movement is their gravity, the direction is determined either by gravity or by collision with other atoms. Gravity lets them fall down, whereby Epicurus is aware that there is no absolute above and below in infinite space. He therefore does not define the atomic movement in terms of below and above, but, conversely, these by the former: "Below" is the direction in which the atoms move due to their natural gravity, "above" the opposite. All other directions of movement result from the collisions, which also create the visible bodies.

Epicurus' related explanations in the Letter to Herodotus appear contradictory. The way Hossenfelder clears up the mess makes sense but of course this now consistent theory of gravity by Epicurus remains false in view of today's knowledge.

133 Ferner stützt der Gedanke an die Unberechenbarkeit der Tyche die Einsicht, daß ein solches Glück nur garantiert ist, wenn man seine Ziele nicht in die äußeren Dinge, sondern in sich selbst verlegt, daß es allein auf die innere Einstellung ankommt.

Furthermore, the thought of the unpredictability of luck supports the insight that such happiness is only guaranteed if one places one's goals not in external things but in oneself, so that it depends only on the inner attitude.

Hossenfelder ignores that the hedonic calculus takes into account that certainty can never be achieved and a high likelihood is sufficient as a base for peace of mind and that a minimum of external things must be obtained for pleasure. This is another aspect where Hossenfelder's identification of pleasure with peace of mind misleads.

136 Bemerkenswert ist, daß er bei der Entstehung der Arten in Fortführung Empedokleischer Gedanken zu einer Theorie gelangt, die schon der Darwinschen sehr nahekommt.

It is noteworthy that with the emergence of the species, in continuation of Empedokles' ideas, he arrives at a theory that comes very close to Darwin's.

Agreed.

Denn anders als der neuzeitliche Mensch wollte der Hellenist Epikur die Natur eben nicht beherrschen, sondern gleichgültig machen. Nach ihm ist es für das Heil des Menschen am besten, wenn er sich nicht weiter um die Natur kümmert. Sie ist ein blindes Geschehen, das nach festen Kausalgesetzen ohne Ziel abläuft und auf den Menschen keinnerlei  
138 Bezug hat. Dennoch ist durch die  
139 Evolution gesichert, daß er alles findet, was er wirklich braucht. Alles darüber hinausgehende Begehren beruht auf leerem Wahn. Dies einzusehen und daraus eine ruhige, gelassene Einstellung zur Natur zu gewinnen, ist die einzige Aufgabe, die der Mensch ihr gegenüber hat. Denn so allein schafft er die Voraussetzung seiner Glückseligkeit, die der höchste Zweck alles Daseins ist.

Unlike modern man, the Hellenist Epicurus did not want to control nature but make it indifferent. According to him, it is best for man's peace of mind if he no longer cares about nature. It is a blind mechanism that runs according to fixed causal laws without a goal and has no relation whatsoever to humans. Nevertheless, evolution ensures that he will find everything he really needs. Any desire beyond that is based on empty delusion. To see this and to gain a calm, serene attitude towards nature from it, is the only task that humans have towards it. For in this way alone does he create the prerequisite for his happiness, which is the highest purpose of all existence.

Under this aspect, the difference between 2300 years ago and now is rather gradual than discrete. The destruction of Mediterranean forests in ancient times demonstrates that the ancient humans conquered nature, too. Moreover, the idea of conquering nature is already present in the Old Testament, too. For peace of mind, natural philosophy is indeed not necessary beyond the assurance that there is a natural explanation for every phenomenon. However, for those who gain pleasure from the pursuit of science, it is a worthy subject to work on. In the statements of this paragraph, Hossenfelder is misled by his already mentioned oversimplifications.