

# 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 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.

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 12, 2021 at 9:48 AM

Thanks for all that work Martin, and AMEN to THIS :

[Quote from Martin](#)

Once a friendship has been established, the bonding is actually much stronger and important than the equivalent of profitable trades between indifferent business partners.

well said! 😊

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

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

And yes, it sounds like he is in the "Stoics and Epicureans are much the same" camp - despite the violent disagreement of ancient Stoics and Epicureans on the subject.

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

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.

I very much agree here too!

I don't have time to comment on the rest but I agree with your direction on each of them.

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### **Post by “Martin” of November 12, 2021 at 1:42 PM**

Some of Hossenfelder's ideas do look like from the "Stoics and Epicureans are much the same" camp but he is well aware of differences as well. Therefore, he is in the middle between us and that camp. I focused my review mostly on where I disagree with Hossenfelder and where he took a clearer position than I have seen before. He has a lot of material which matches our interpretation. He quotes Lucretius a lot and treats the poem like a primary source of Epicurus' ideas.

**Post by “Kalosyni” of November 12, 2021 at 7:05 PM**

[Quote from Martin](#)

Epicurus' philosophy is better characterized by the statement that peace of mind is required to experience maximum pleasure but is not equal to pleasure

This is good. This sheds light on things.

And so then:

Just as virtue is in the service of pleasure, so too peace of mind is in the service of pleasure.

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of November 12, 2021 at 7:16 PM**

Stoics vs. Epicurean philosophy:

# Epicurean vs. Stoic

A Comparison Chart With Citations To [Sources](#) In The Ancient Texts

(see also a [Comparison Chart on The Goal of Life](#))

		
Issue	Epicurean Philosophy	Stoicism
<p>Does "truth" exist? If so, how is it defined, is it attainable, and how? What is the role of reason in the affairs of men?</p>	<p>Truth is that which can be established with clarity by the senses, the anticipations, and the sense of pain and pleasure. On some matters, determination of truth is not possible, and we must be satisfied with acknowledging that a number of natural causes of events are possible. Reason is extremely valuable, but it relies on and is dependent on the senses for the verification of truth. There is no other dimension of ideal forms which constitute a higher truth to which reason alone has access, nor is elaborate syllogistic reasoning the key to truth.<sup>1A</sup></p>	<p>Truth is accessible to men only, if at all, through dialectical reason and the use of syllogisms (Logic). Reason is not dependent on senses; those who know how to reason properly may establish through logic and syllogisms, independently of and in contradiction to the information provided by the senses.<sup>1B</sup></p>
<p>What is the goal of human life? Is this goal attainable? What is the nature and value of "Pleasure"? (see also a <a href="#">Comparison Chart on The Goal of Life</a>)</p>	<p>The goal of life is to live a life of pleasure. To suggest that virtue is the goal of life is empty and vain. The goal of pleasurable living is attainable by choosing and avoiding intelligently, and by doing so a life of continuous pleasure is possible. Work to control your life. Pursue happiness. Spit upon "the beautiful" if it does not bring pleasure.<sup>2A</sup></p>	<p>The goal of life is to live a life of "virtue." Virtue should be pursued only those things which are under one's control, which are our own actions. Do not attempt to shape your life; accept your own actions. Do not laugh much. The good is "beautiful." Pleasure is neither useful, a contamination to be shunned. Reason tells us what to pursue.<sup>2B</sup></p>

Blog Article

## [A Comparison Chart: Stoic vs. Epicurean Philosophy](#)

This chart comparing the major features of Stoicism vs Epicurean philosophy is a continuing work in progress! It is currently hosted at a Google Docs page to make editing easier. Feel free to make comments and suggestions in [the Forum thread associated with this article](#). Click on this link to go to the chart: [Reference: Comparison Chart of Epicurean and Stoic](#)

## Views



Cassius

January 20, 2018 at 10:04 AM

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## Post by “Don” of November 12, 2021 at 8:01 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Martin](#)

Epicurus' philosophy is better characterized by the statement that peace of mind is required to experience maximum pleasure but is not equal to pleasure

This is good. This sheds light on things.

And so then:

Just as virtue is in the service of pleasure, so too peace of mind is in the service of pleasure.

I'm not sure I'm fully on board with the characterization that "peace of mind... is not equal to pleasure." By "peace of mind" can I surmise we're talking about ataraxia? Which is, by Epicurus's definition, pleasurable.

If I indulge further in this, I'd revise [Kalosyni](#) 's statement, too, into:

"Just as virtue is in the service off pleasure, so too ataraxia is part of a pleasureable life."

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 13, 2021 at 3:06 AM

I am probably more with Kalosynis formulation rather than to say that ataraxia is equal to pleasure.

We're into the definition game when we say something "is equal to" something else, but this is something we have to be clear about. I would say that ataraxia is a way of experiencing some

(any) other mental or bodily pleasure (without disturbance). I am still firmly maintaining that "absence of something" is not something that is a positive feeling or experience. It is something we can define as desirable, like absence of roaches in your house, but when you are experiencing absence of roaches as a good thing you are really experiencing your house in a way you like to experience it - without roaches.

Further, the real hazard of defining ataraxia as equal to pleasure plays into the hands of those who equate it with "peace of mind" and say that it is the true goal of life rather than pleasure itself.

This recalls Joshua saying in episode 95 that he does not enjoy spending too much time defining pleasure. I think that is a very good observation and it represents a goal we should have not to worry about these issues. But like Joshua also said after his first podcast, he felt like Cicero had us dancing like puppets on his arguments.

I don't think any of us here are negatively caught up in that, but a lot of people I see on the internet ARE. They desperately want to validate Buddhist or Stoic viewpoints by saying that the real goal of life is some sort of nothingness.

Everybody is entitled to their own opinion about things, but I think it's our responsibility (if we want more Epicurean friends) to make sure that argument doesn't get in the way of people escaping Buddhism and Stoicism to "the true philosophy."

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### **Post by "Martin" of November 13, 2021 at 3:58 AM**

Piece of mind is pleasurable, should preferably be there when we go for the next exciting kind of pleasure, and should preferably be there when we are exhausted from that exciting pleasure later on. We might recede to a cave with a stock of bread and water at that time but if we stay there for a longer time than what we need for rest or meditation, pain in the form of boredom will come up.

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### **Post by "Don" of November 13, 2021 at 7:15 AM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that ataraxia is a way of experiencing some (any) other mental or bodily pleasure (without disturbance). I am still firmly maintaining that "absence of something" is not something that is a positive feeling or experience. It is something we can define as desirable, like absence of roaches in your house, but when you are experiencing absence of roaches as a good thing you are really experiencing your house in a way you like to experience it - without roaches.

I'm going to push back on your analogy here. I see this "ataraxia is the lack of something" a lot in both statements favorable to this forum's interpretation and antagonistic to it. It seems people get hung up on the a- "not" prefix. Ataraxia being translated as "lack/absence of x" where x is trouble, anxiety, or something else negative misses the boat. Yes, it is technically an "absence" of trouble in the mind but it describes a positive feeling. Epicurus included it in his list of pleasures, so it is a feeling of pleasure. We feel something positive. A better translation may be calmness, tranquility, peace of mind to get away from that un- or a- prefix. The metaphor used sometimes is a calm sea. It is a positive quality.

So, to go back to your post:

It's not "a way of experiencing some (any) other mental or bodily pleasure (without disturbance)." Ataraxia is itself a pleasurable experience of calmness and tranquility in the mind, just as aponia (another pleasure singled out by Epicurus) is a pleasurable feeling of being well-rested, not fatigued or feeling any bodily pains. I imagine soaking - luxuriating - in a hot bath. Translating ataraxia and aponia simply as a "lack" or "absence" of something does a disservice to the positive qualities inherent in those stable states of mind and body.

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 13, 2021 at 9:00 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

It seems people get hung up on the a- "not" prefix

Yes I am not primarily talking to you on this point, but to the external commentators who don't make your distinction of experiencing a positive feeling. It is my view that they are in fact either implicitly or explicitly trying to equate this particular statement "absence of pain" to "nothingness" and in so doing transmute Epicurean philosophy into Stoicism, Buddhism, or worse. What I plainly read in their material is that they are equating the particular experience of "calmness" or "tranquility to be the apex of human life and the goal of every human being. And to that I say "hogwash."

That is not the way the gods are described as spending their time, and it is not the way I want to spend mine. This is the way I understand to be the most accurate description of the best way of life, and therefore the goal to seek to be in line with at every point down that bowling alley:

***Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?***

I interpret the "with no pain to thwart or threaten them" as the ataraxia / aponia component of the description - as descriptors of various aspects of the goal, not as the goal itself. The advocates of ataraxia and/or aponia as of primary importance leave out everything else in that description, and it's my view that they do so intentionally to misrepresent the philosophy.

Not you or people here, of course, but the "commentators" I reference so often 😊

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## Post by "Don" of November 13, 2021 at 10:05 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

What I plainly read in their material is that they are equating the particular experience of "calmness" or "tranquility to be the apex of human life and the goal of every human being. And to that I say "hogwash."

I would concur with that. I would just add that having a sense of tranquility allows one to be more open to pleasure and to be better able to make decisions on what desires to choose and which to flee from. But it's not the goal or apex.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

That is not the way the gods are described as spending their time,

How are the gods described as spending their time? I was digging around but couldn't find what I was looking for. Is that in Cicero's writings?

[Quote from Torquatus - Cicero](#)

Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them;


I'll split hairs here. I would say ataraxia and aponia are two of the "pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily." The "with no pain to thwart or threaten them" is simply a description of the condition of that life. Don't equate the "no pain" with those two pleasures. When there is no trouble or pain, we feel the positive pleasurable experience of ataraxia and aponia.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of November 13, 2021 at 1:35 PM**

Quote from Cassius

This recalls Joshua saying in episode 95 that he does not enjoy spending too much time defining pleasure. I think that is a very good observation and it represents a goal we should have not to worry about these issues. But like Joshua also said after his first podcast, he felt like Cicero had us dancing like puppets on his arguments.

While listening to both of those statements I thought they were spot on. So just for the record, 

Also the roach analogy is a good one. If your house is infested, pain. After getting rid of the roaches, pleasure. Once you're used to the roaches being gone, you now jump to the analogy of Chrysippus' hand. It's just not something that you notice, because it's as it should be. If you only focus on the roaches, after the initial pleasure passes you'll become neurotic by focusing on roaches which aren't there. So by this reasoning all pleasures come and go, and the more I think about it the more unnatural a katastematic pleasure is, unless you're a god. For a properly functioning human being it would be more of a background condition for which you experience the pleasure of gratitude from time to time.

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**Post by “Cassius” of November 13, 2021 at 3:16 PM**

I am afraid my roach analogy betrays how much time I spend living in an old farmhouse.

#### Quote

How are the gods described as spending their time? I was digging around but couldn't find what I was looking for. Is that in Cicero's writings?

That's a good question. I am personally applying that description of the best life from Torquatus in "On Ends" to the gods themselves, because I think that when he starts out that this is the best life we could imagine, that would apply to our imaginings of the gods as well. But your' right he doesn't explicitly say so -- as far as I am aware (unless there are some fragments in Philodemus "On Piety") the only description of the life of the gods occurs in Cicero's Velleius narrative in "[On the Nature of the Gods](#)"

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#### Post by "Joshua" of November 14, 2021 at 11:37 AM

I would agree that ataraxia is not equal to pleasure, and I would formulate it like this; pleasure is a *class* of experiences (feelings?), and "peace of mind" is a *species* within that class.

Otherwise we fall on the horns of a dilemma prompted by the identity property; if pleasure equals ataraxia, then pleasure cannot *also* equal 'eating a sandwich' unless 'eating a sandwich' itself equals ataraxia.

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#### Post by "Don" of November 14, 2021 at 12:56 PM

#### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

I would agree that ataraxia is not equal to pleasure, and I would formulate it like this; pleasure is a class of experiences (feelings?), and "peace of mind" is a species within that class.

I like that characterization!

I think we're also going up against the part of the Canon which are the "feelings" of pleasure vs pain, and the ways we experience pleasurable feelings like (ataraxia) tranquility; (euphrosyne)

joy, pleasant sights, smells, etc; and eating a sandwich.

These two are intimately connected, but there not identical I don't think.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of November 14, 2021 at 10:13 PM**

That sounds good to me, too. I was going to say that "ataraxia is one type of pleasure," but class and species is more precise.