

# Comparison Between Cyrenaic and Epicurean Epistemology

**Post by “Cassius” of April 23, 2023 at 4:58 PM**

A reader at the Facebook group has asked:

I'd be interested in a comparison between the Epicurean and the Cyrenaic epistemology (not ethics):

What would be the similarities and differences?

[Epicurean Philosophy | I'd be interested in a comparison between the Epicurean and the Cyrenaic epistemology \(not ethics\):](#)

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Probably a topic worth tracking here, with Diogenes Laertius the place to start.

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**Post by “Cassius” of April 23, 2023 at 5:09 PM**

Does not look like there is an awful lot in Diogenes Laertius but i extracted this:

[Lives of the Eminent Philosophers/Book II - Wikisource, the free online library](#)

- They affirm that mental affections can be known, but not the objects from which they come; and they abandoned the study of nature because of its apparent uncertainty, but fastened on logical inquiries because of their utility. But Meleager in his second book On Philosophical Opinions, and Clitomachus in his first book On the Sects, affirm that they maintain Dialectic as well as Physics to be useless, since, when one has learnt the theory of good and evil, it is possible to speak with propriety, to be free from superstition, and to escape the fear of death. 93. They also held that nothing is just or honourable or base by nature, but only by convention and custom. Nevertheless the good man will be deterred from wrong-doing by the penalties imposed and the prejudices that it would arouse. Further that the wise man really exists. They allow progress to be attainable in philosophy as well as in other matters. They maintain that the pain of one man exceeds that of another, and that the senses are not always true and

trustworthy.

- [Hegesians] They also disallow the claims of the senses, because they do not lead to accurate knowledge. Whatever appears rational should be done. They affirmed that allowance should be made for errors, for no man errs voluntarily, but under constraint of some suffering;

Sounds like Voula Tsouna is the place to go on this.

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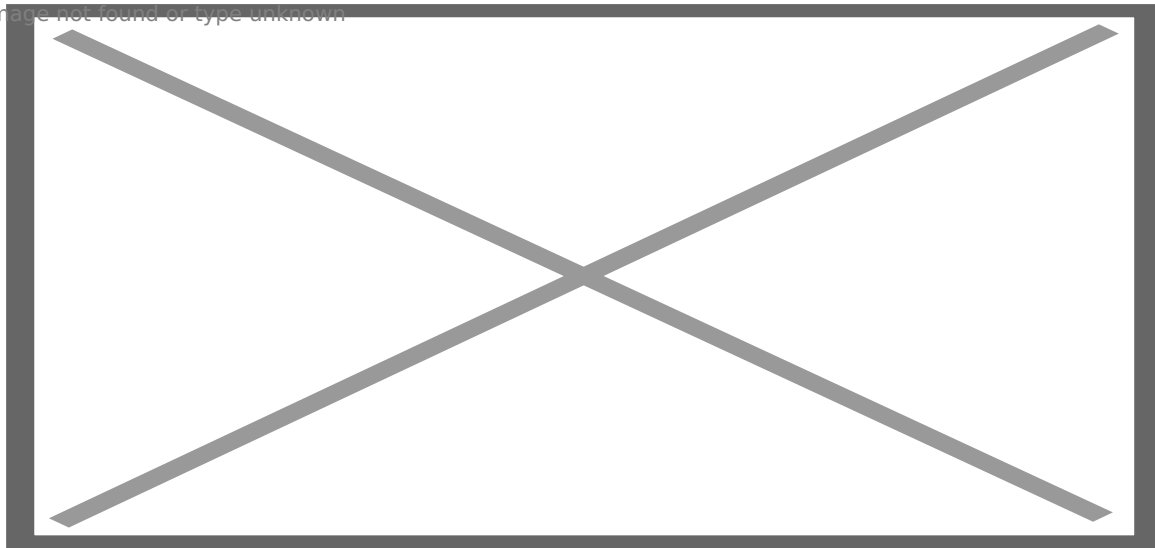
### **Post by “TauPhi” of April 23, 2023 at 7:09 PM**

This book may also be helpful:

LAMPE, KURT. “Knowledge and Pleasure.” *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life*, Princeton University Press, 2015

I don't have access to it but I found detailed review of it here:

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[Kurt Lampe, The Birth of Hedonism. The Cyrenaic philosophers and Pl...](#)

The monograph by Kurt Lampe is the first systematic attempt in any modern language to deal with the ethics of the Cyrenaics, in particular with their...

[journals.openedition.org](https://journals.openedition.org)

Paragraphs 7-9 deal with Cyrenaic epistemology.

## Post by “Godfrey” of April 24, 2023 at 1:01 AM

Some brief highlights from The Birth of Hedonism, which I read and highlighted a few years ago....

From chapter 3.4. The Cyrenaic Theory of the Experiences:

*their most fundamental set of doctrines concerns the division between their experiences (pathē) and what causes those experiences.*

*...the Metrodidact... explained that there are three states in our constitution. In one, which is like a storm at sea, we feel pain. In another, which is similar to a smooth undulation stirred by a favorable breeze, we feel pleasure (for pleasure is a smooth motion). The third state, in which we feel neither pain nor pleasure, is in the middle and is like a calm sea. And he used to say we have perception of these experiences alone. (SSR 4b.5 = Eusebius PE 14.18.32)*

*The most straightforward reading of this terminological shift is that by “these experiences” (pathē), Eusebius means the experiences of our own states: it is solely of these that we “have perception.”*

*Whether the Cyrenaics’ own term was “perception,” “knowledge,” “apprehension,” or something else again, its meaning is tolerably clear from our sources. This is that our sensations of vision, hearing, taste, and touch do not vouch for whatever they appear to represent; they only vouch for themselves, and they do so inwardly, unmistakably, truly, and incorrigibly.*

*Cicero testifies to their inwardness by distinguishing the “inner touch” from all our exterior sensations. We have interior contact with our pleasure and pain, just as we have interior perception of our own yellowing, burning, or embittering. Plutarch employs similar rhetoric in saying,*

*These men placed the experiences and appearances in themselves; they didn’t think the proof from these sufficed for the confirmation of real things. As if in a siege, they withdrew from what is outside and locked themselves into their experiences. (Mor. 1120c-d = SSR 4a.211)*

*But the Cyrenaics do not believe we can work through these disagreements and thus reveal the truth about external reality. They not only want to argue that we are less certain about the external world than about our own experiences, they want to argue that that we cannot know external reality at all.*

This is a pretty comprehensive book for anybody interested in the Cyrenaics. There are some nuances separating various Cyrenaic schools which the book examines; as it's been a while since I read it, I'll shy away from getting into any detail in these matters.

## Post by “Cassius” of April 24, 2023 at 9:21 AM

Thanks for those comments.

So it appears that the Cyreniacs like Democritus were stuck in skepticism.

It would also be interesting to know if the Cyreniacs were stuck in determinism, and if so that would make them twins with Democritus in having both of those major flaws which Epicurus rejected.

Every time we go back into the Cyreniacs it impresses me that we can learn from them to fill in likely gaps in our knowledge of Epicurus, after we adjust for Epicurean reasoning. I see no reason, for example, that Epicurus would not have embraced the "smooth motion" perspective as the ultimate basis of pleasure, even though I don't think that is explicitly stated in the texts we have today. (Or is it - is something like that in Lucretius?)

It is as if Epicurus studied both the Cyreniacs and Democritus and explicitly went about purging them of skepticism and determinism, placing the final result on a much more sound logical footing. The glue that sticks it all together seems to be the epistemology of placing priority on what our faculties reveal to us, as just as real (more real) than speculation without evidence. Epicurus always traces out logical conclusions tied to observations, and never lets rationalism (speculation without real-world evidence) contradict and spoil the result.

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## Post by “Eikadistes” of April 30, 2023 at 11:40 AM

### PHILOSOPHY EPICUREANISM

Founder Epicurus

History *Epicurus* (341–270 BCE) founded this anti-Platonic ethical philosophy of non-deterministic atomism with the support of his disciples *Metrodorus*, *Hermarchus*, and *Polyaenus*. The 1st-century BCE Roman poets *Lucretius* (author of *De Rerum Natura*, "On the Nature of Things") and *Philodemus* made notable contributions to spread the philosophy. The 2nd-century CE *Diogenes of Oinoanda* is known for funding a large, Epicurean stonework project.

### CYRENAICISM

Founder Aristippus

*Aristippus* (c. 435–356 BCE) was born in ancient Libya and studied under Socrates in Athens until the death of his teacher in 399 BCE. Aristippus' propositions heavily deviated from his teacher. Eventually, the Cyrenaic school experienced a schism between Anniceris, Hegesias, and Theodorus. By the 3rd-century, Epicurean Philosophy had displaced Cyrenaicism as the dominant expression of hedonism.

Epistemology	<p>All knowledge begins with [1] <i>sensation</i> (aisthesis) caused by the interaction of external particles with our sensory organs. We detect pleasurable or painful [2] <i>feelings</i> (pathē) associated with the various sensations. Through repeated stimulation, we form [3] <i>anticipations</i> (prolepsis) about the patterns of nature.</p>	<p>The only reliable criterion of knowledge is [1] <i>feeling</i> (pathē), which is all that is required to pursue the true goal of life (<i>active pleasure</i>). Sensations cannot provide reliable information about the objective universe because they are purely subjective and we should therefore treat them with a skeptical attitude.</p>
Metaphysics	<p>Reality exists independent of the mind. The universe is made of bodies and void. Bodies are either particles that can neither be created nor destroyed, or compounds that are composed of particles. All compound objects are subject to the forces of dissolution. Both empty space and the particles that move through it are infinite in number and eternal in time. The mind is a compound structure associated with a living animal, and can be located within the body.</p>	<p>An objective reality exists, separate from our subjective experiences, <i>however</i>, that reality is ultimately unknowable because sensory data is limited and ultimately unreliable.</p>
Cosmology	<p>The Earth, Sun, Moon, planets, and other linked celestial objects comprise a <i>kosmos</i> in a spatially-infinite universe with infinite <i>kosmoi</i>. All <i>kosmoi</i> are made of atoms. The seeds of life are everywhere.</p>	<p>The material universe is sensible, but the contents of our perceptions do not reflect the actual nature of reality. It is best to focus on the reliable knowledge provided by our feelings.</p>
Theology	<p>The gods are perfect, material beings, unconcerned with humanity, imagined as either as [1] indestructible, extra-terrestrial animals, or [2] thought-forms we dream due to our natural preconception of "blessedness". Epicurus is romanticized as having been god-like.</p>	<p>The gods do not exist. Any discussion of theology is futile because our senses cannot be trusted to provide true knowledge about the objective universe.</p>

Ethics:	<p>Calculate the advantages of every situation based on their possibility to provide stable, long-term pleasure. Actions are judged according to their consequences. There are no eternal ethical rules. There are, however, "Masterful Opinions" attributed to Epicurus that should be studied in order to minimize pain and maximize the pleasure of the good life.</p>	<p>Maximize physical pleasure in all circumstances according to each individual's personal feelings. Prioritize changing your painful circumstances instead of changing your attitude. There is no virtue in tolerating pain. Physical pleasure is preferable to mental pleasure, and physical pain is worse than mental pain.</p>
Goal of Life:	<p>A godlike state of pure pleasure, a disposition of imperturbable joy, free from physical pain and mental anguish. The practice of prudence will lead the wise person to the good life.</p>	<p>Enjoy active, physical pleasures. Pleasure is more than the absence of pain. A life of luxury is demonstrably superior to a life of economic poverty and should be pursued.</p>