

# History of Philosophy

## 15 Epicurean Philosophy

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#### Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes explores the evolution of **Hellenistic ethics**, specifically focusing on the transition from early Socratic offshoots to **Epicureanism** and **Stoicism**. The text highlights how the **Cyrenaics** established an extreme, egoistic hedonism that was later refined by the Epicureans into a pursuit of **ataraxia**, or freedom from physical and mental distress. This ethical framework was grounded in **atomistic materialism**, which viewed the universe as a series of chance physical collisions devoid of higher purpose. In contrast, the **Cynics** rejected social conventions in favor of a self-sufficient life aligned with nature, a perspective that eventually informed **Stoic philosophy**. By merging Cynic values with the metaphysical concepts of **Heraclitus**, the Stoics developed a worldview centered on the **Logos**, an ordering principle that profoundly influenced Roman law and early Christian thought. Ultimately, the source illustrates how different **metaphysical assumptions** regarding the nature of reality directly shape distinct systems of human morality.

#### Briefing Document:

Analysis of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophies: Origins, Metaphysics, and Ethics

Executive Summary

The transition from Socratic thought to the Hellenistic period saw the emergence of several distinct philosophical schools, most notably the Cyrenaics, Epicureans, Cynics, and Stoics. These schools diverged from Socrates' dictum "know thyself," repurposing self-understanding as a tool for achieving specific ethical ends. The Cyrenaics pioneered an extreme, egoistical hedonism centered on immediate

physical pleasure, which was later moderated by the Epicureans into a pursuit of *ataraxia*—freedom from bodily pain and mental trouble. Epicureanism grounded its ethics in an atomistic materialism derived from Democritus, positing a mechanistic universe governed by chance and conventionality.

In contrast, the Cynics advocated for a "back to nature" lifestyle, rejecting social conventions in favor of self-sufficiency. This ethical foundation was synthesized with Heraclitus's metaphysics—centered on the *Logos* and a cyclical, ordered cosmos—to form Stoicism. While Epicureanism sought liberation through the avoidance of pain and the denial of immortality, Stoicism emphasized internal resilience and adherence to natural law, eventually exerting a profound influence on Roman jurisprudence and Western political thought.

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### The Cyrenaic School: Radical Hedonism

The Cyrenaic school, founded by Aristoppos of Cyrene, represents the first clear-cut advocacy for hedonism in the history of ethics. Their philosophy transformed the Socratic pursuit of self-knowledge into a means of identifying what brings the individual maximum enjoyment.

#### Key Tenets of Cyrenaic Thought

- **Egoistical Hedonism:** The "good" is defined strictly as pleasure. This pursuit is individualized and self-centered.
- **Intensity and Immediacy:** The school advocated for the maximum pleasure of the highest intensity and greatest immediacy.
- **Physical Basis:** Since knowledge is rooted in sense experience, pleasure and pain are primarily physical sensations.
- **Rational Restraint:** Cyrenaics recognized that unrestrained excess could lead to pain (e.g., "the morning after the night before"). Consequently, they argued for maintaining mastery over oneself and one's environment as a means to a hedonistic end.

### Hegastius and Hedonistic Pessimism

Hegadius, a later Cyrenaic, reached a pessimistic conclusion: because life cannot produce a surplus of pleasure over pain, the happiest state is the complete absence of pain. This logic led him to become a counselor of suicide, arguing that ending life was the most effective way to minimize suffering.

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### Epicureanism: Moderation and Ataraxia

Epicureanism, led by Epicurus (3rd century BC) and the Roman poet Lucretius (1st century BC), moderated the radical hedonism of the Cyrenaics. Their goal was not intense sensory stimulation but *ataraxia*.

### Concepts of Pleasure and Quality

- **Ataraxia:** Defined as freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the soul. The goal was a life of quiet contentment.
- **Qualitative Distinctions:** Unlike the Cyrenaics, Epicureans distinguished between "high quality" and "low quality" pleasures.
  - **High Quality:** Friendship, education, good company, and living in a just society. These are considered intrinsically more pleasurable.
  - **Low Quality:** Constant overindulgence and physical excess.

### The Mechanistic Metaphysic

Epicurean ethics were grounded in the atomistic materialism of Democritus. This worldview posits that the universe consists entirely of atoms and empty space.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Epicurean Description</b>
<b>Origins</b>	Atoms and the void are eternal; "Out of nothing, nothing comes" ( <i>ex nihilo nihil fit</i> ).
<b>Atomic Motion</b>	Atoms fall vertically through space.
<b>The "Swerve"</b>	An occasional, uncaused swerve of an atom causes collisions, creating compounds and allowing for causal indeterminacy (human freedom).

<b>Primary Qualities</b>	Objectively real properties: size, shape, weight, and spatial occupancy.
<b>Secondary Qualities</b>	Subjective experiences: color, smell, and taste, produced when thin "films" of atoms interact with sense organs.

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### The Epicurean View of the Soul and Death

The Epicurean system utilized materialism to liberate individuals from the "bondage of superstitious fear," particularly regarding death and the gods.

- **Material Soul:** The soul is composed of the "smoothest and roundest" atoms distributed throughout the body. Because it is material, it escapes and diffuses at death.
  - **Denial of Immortality:** Since the soul does not survive death, there is no afterlife to fear.
  - **Argument Against Fear:** Epicurus argued that "death is no bother to us" because when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist to feel pain or trouble.
  - **Nature of the Gods:** If gods exist, they are physical, mortal beings with limited powers who do not harass humans.
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### Social and Intellectual Conventionalism

Epicureanism posits that many aspects of human life are products of social convention rather than inherent natural law.

- **Conventional Justice:** Justice is not an absolute or intrinsic good. It is a "social contract" or an expression of expediency designed to prevent people from harming one another.
- **Ethic of Utility:** Injustice is only "bad" because of its consequences—specifically the fear of being caught and punished.

- **Language and Science:** Language is a conventional tool for naming and organizing experience. Consequently, scientific and theoretical understandings are viewed as social conventions rather than absolute truths.

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## The Cynic and Stoic Traditions

Parallel to the development of Epicureanism, the Cynics and Stoics offered a different response to the tension between nature (*phusis*) and custom (*nomos*).

### The Cynic Influence

The Cynics, such as Antisthenes and Diogenes, represented a "counterculture" movement.

- **Back to Nature:** They believed human troubles were products of culture. They advocated for a return to a simple, independent existence.
- **Rejection of Institutions:** They shunned property, government, marriage, and family in favor of self-sufficiency.
- **Anti-Establishment:** Their lifestyle was famously compared to that of a dog (*koune*), from which the term "Cynic" is derived.

### The Stoic Synthesis

Stoicism emerged by combining Cynic ethics with the metaphysics of Heraclitus.

- **Metaphysics of Heraclitus:** The Stoics adopted the view of a world in constant change, governed by an active ordering principle called the *Logos*. They believed in a cyclical universe that undergoes "fiery disintegration" and renewal.
- **Historical Development:**
  1. **Early Greek Stoics:** Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus (3rd century BC).
  2. **Middle Period:** A period of assimilation.
  3. **Roman Stoicism:** Represented by Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

- **Legacy:** Stoic thought profoundly shaped Roman law and jurisprudence, eventually influencing medieval and modern political philosophy. Unlike the Epicureans, who sought to save the individual from culture through nature, the Stoics (and Platonists) often viewed culture and the *Logos* as necessary to manage human nature.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Epicurean, Cynic, and Stoic Philosophy

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the Hellenistic philosophical movements as outlined in the lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the metaphysical foundations and ethical conclusions of the Cyrenaics, Epicureans, Cynics, and Stoics.

#### Section 1: Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What is the "Socratic note" that serves as the point of departure for both the Cyrenaic and Cynic schools?
2. How does Cyrenaic hedonism differ in intensity and immediacy compared to later schools?
3. What was the philosophical justification for suicide offered by the Cyrenaic philosopher Hegesius?
4. Define "ataraxia" as understood by the Epicureans.
5. What is the primary difference between the atomism of Democritus and that of Epicurus regarding the motion of atoms?
6. How do Epicureans distinguish between primary and secondary qualities?
7. What is the "Lucretian swerve" and what is its significance for human agency?

8. According to Epicurean materialism, what happens to the soul at the moment of death?
9. What is the Epicurean view of justice, and why is it considered "conventionalist"?
10. Contrast the Cynic and Platonic views on the relationship between nature, culture, and human trouble.

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## Section 2: Answer Key

1. **The Socratic Point of Departure:** Both schools took Socrates' famous dictum "know thyself" as their starting point, though they interpreted it differently than he did. For these schools, self-understanding was not for the improvement of the soul in a Socratic sense, but rather a tool to understand what provides the individual with the most enjoyment or self-sufficiency.
2. **Cyrenaic Hedonism:** The Cyrenaics advocated for "egotistical hedonism," which sought the maximum pleasure of the highest intensity and the most immediacy. Unlike the later moderated versions, this was an extreme pursuit of individualized sensory enjoyment where pleasurable sensations were defined as the only "good."
3. **Hegaius and Suicide:** Hegaius argued from a pessimistic hedonistic standpoint that because life cannot produce a surplus of pleasure, the highest achievable state is simply the absence of pain. Consequently, if the goal is to minimize pain and no pleasure is possible, ending one's life becomes a rational choice.
4. **Ataraxia:** Ataraxia is defined as a state of contentment characterized by "freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the soul." It represents a moderated hedonism that seeks a life of tranquility and the avoidance of everything that harasses or upsets the individual.
5. **Atomic Motion:** While Democritus believed atoms were whirled around by a cosmic vortex, Epicurus and Lucretius proposed that the natural motion of atoms is a constant vertical fall through infinite space. They believed that

collisions and the resulting compounds occurred because of these vertical movements rather than a central vortex.

6. **Primary vs. Secondary Qualities:** Primary qualities are objectively real spatial properties of atoms, such as size, shape, weight, and density. Secondary qualities, like color, smell, and taste, are purely subjective experiences produced in the mind and have no objective reality in the material world.
7. **The Lucretian Swerve:** The swerve is an unpredictable, uncaused movement where an atom veers off its vertical path, initiating a chain reaction of collisions. This introduces an element of causal indeterminacy into a mechanistic universe, which the Epicureans used to explain the phenomenon of human freedom.
8. **The Material Soul and Death:** The soul is viewed as a material entity composed of the "smoothest and roundest" atoms distributed throughout the body. Because the soul is material, these atoms are simply diffused and escape the body at death, meaning there is no immortality and thus no reason to fear the afterlife.
9. **Conventionalist Justice:** Epicureans believe justice is not an intrinsic good but a "social utility" or an agreement made for expediency to prevent people from harming one another. It is purely conventional, meaning it is a social arrangement designed to ensure stable, pleasurable consequences rather than reflecting absolute moral rights.
10. **Nature vs. Culture:** The Cynics believed that human troubles are the products of culture and social institutions, advocating a return to a simple, natural life ("nature saving us from culture"). Conversely, Plato and Aristotle believed that troubles stem from human nature itself, which requires the structure of a rational culture to be controlled and improved.

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### Section 3: Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Use the following prompts to develop deeper arguments regarding the themes found in the source text.

1. **The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics:** Analyze how the materialist atomism of Democritus and Epicurus necessitates a hedonistic ethical framework. In your response, consider how a world "devoid of any but primary spatial properties" leaves no room for intrinsic moral norms.
2. **The Evolution of Hedonism:** Compare and contrast the extreme hedonism of the Cyrenaics with the moderated hedonism of the Epicureans. Discuss the qualitative distinctions Epicurus made between "higher" and "lower" pleasures and why he found them necessary.
3. **The Role of Conventionalism:** Explore the theme of conventionalism in Epicurean thought as it applies to language, science, and justice. How does the belief that these structures are merely "social conventions" impact the Epicurean's engagement with society?
4. **The Influence of Pre-Socratic Thought:** Detail how the Stoics and Epicureans synthesized the ideas of Pre-Socratic philosophers like Heraclitus and Democritus. Explain how these earlier metaphysical theories were adapted to serve the ethical goals of the Hellenistic period.
5. **Freedom in a Mechanistic Universe:** Evaluate the effectiveness of the "Lucretian swerve" as a solution to the problem of human freedom within a deterministic, materialist framework. Discuss the distinction between "randomness" and "free agency" as raised in the lecture.

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#### Section 4: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Ataraxia</b>	A state of tranquility characterized by freedom from physical pain and mental anxiety; the goal of Epicureanism.
<b>Atomism</b>	The metaphysical theory that the universe is composed entirely of tiny, indivisible particles (atoms) moving in a void.
<b>Cynicism</b>	A school of thought emphasizing self-sufficiency and a return to nature, often expressed through a "counter-establishment" rejection of social customs.

<b>Cyrenaics</b>	An early Socratic school that advocated for extreme, egotistical hedonism and the pursuit of immediate sensory pleasure.
<b>Egotistical Hedonism</b>	The ethical theory that the individual's own maximum pleasure is the highest good.
<b>Ex nihilo nihil fit</b>	A Latin dictum meaning "out of nothing, nothing comes," expressing the Greek belief that the basic elements of the universe are eternal.
<b>Logos</b>	In Stoicism (borrowed from Heraclitus), the rational ordering principle or structure that governs the cyclical changes of the universe.
<b>Nomos</b>	A Greek term referring to law, custom, or social convention; often contrasted with <i>phusis</i> .
<b>Phusis</b>	A Greek term referring to nature or the natural order of things.
<b>Primary Qualities</b>	Objective properties of matter, such as size, shape, and weight, that exist independently of a perceiver.
<b>Secondary Qualities</b>	Subjective properties such as color, taste, and sound that exist only in the experience of the perceiver.
<b>The Swerve</b>	An unpredictable, uncaused sideways movement of an atom that breaks the chain of causal necessity.