

# Rational Living in a Hellenistic World: A Philosophical Comparison of Stoicism and Epicureanism

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**Thesis:** I argue that Epicureanism is better at establishing morality and maintaining well-being.

## Epicureanism

- Metaphysics
  - Epicurus inherited the theory of atoms and the void from Democritus
  - “Atom” translates to uncuttable, the smallest feasible bits of matter. Atoms are constantly moving and are understood to be *deterministic*. The void is unoccupied space.
    - Atoms = no free will, in so far as atoms exist, without the *swerve*, free will is impossible for human beings.
    - Epicurus states that the soul is embedded in the body in soul atoms, which causes sense perception and function (Letters to Menoeceus, 21); lacking soul atoms = death
  - Lucretius, an Epicurean, stated that atoms fall through the void, randomly swerving, allowing for causal variance, chance happenings—this removes the shackles of determinism.
    - “So I insist that the atoms must swerve slightly, but only to an infinitesimal degree... if there is no atomic swerve to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of an endless chain of causation” (Lucretius, 2.240-2.260)
    - Inducing free will, an important move
  - Epicurus identified pain and pleasure as the primary tools for reasoning, meaning that human beings are inherently directed toward the goal of acquiring pleasure and avoiding pain
  - The overall goal for Epicurus is *eudaimonia*, which is the good life.
    - Epicurus’s teachings focus on *ataraxia*, or tranquility (Letter to Menoeceus, 128)
    - Psychological states as a tool
  - Epicurus states that all humans fundamentally avoid pain and seek pleasure. The matrix of pain and pleasure is a tool for being an ethical agent **but it must be paired with rationality and sober reasoning** (Principle Doctrine, 10)
    - Desires come in the form of natural/necessary, luxury, and empty
    - A focus on prudence, as prudence is the “natural source of all the remaining virtues” (Letter to Menoeceus, 133)
    - Sober reasoning is more important than philosophy itself

## Stoicism

- Metaphysics
  - Fire is the fundamental element of the universe
    - fire → air → water → earth
    - Materialists, only bodies exist and can be acted on
  - *Pneuma* = God, “The Stoics made god out to be intelligent, designing fire that methodically proceeds towards creation of the world, and encompasses all the seminal principles according to which everything comes about according to fate, and a breath pervading the whole world, which takes on different names...” (Aetius 1.7.33 *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*)
    - The *pneuma* carries out fate in a structured, causal way like god’s governing, **deterministic**
    - Internal fire—from conflagration to conflagration; no beginning, no end, it’s always been
  - Self-preservation is the fundamental impulse in creatures
- Ethics
  - The end goal of Stoic teaching is *eudaimonia*
    - Living in accordance with Nature (*phusis*), i.e. god/the cosmos
  - The categories of value are good, bad, and indifferent.
    - The virtues are the perfection of human rationality, the inverse of each virtue (vice) is unworthy, indifferent is preferred but not needed
  - Interconnected virtues lead to happiness
    - Virtues are binary, this is debated by Stoic thinkers
  - No moral responsibility
    - When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity. But if the dog does not follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they don't want to, they will be compelled to follow what is destined.
    - Play the role you were assigned to the best of your ability, regardless of the role itself...
  - Be rational
    - First one should strive to live in line with nature (*phusis* and *pneuma*). Then one ought to temper their emotions and expectations, as to keep in line with nature and the *pneuma*. Realistically, the only thing that a Stoic controls is the emotion and inner state, which should aimed at being in line with nature
      - No matter what the state of the world be rational and reserved. Do not be alarmed if a tyrannical leader is instated, as it was fated to happen by the *pneuma*.
    - Rationality for instrumental goods