



Article

Ataraxia as an Alternative Rationality: Epicurus and the Internal Critique of Greek Rationalism

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Abstract

This article offers a reinterpretation of Epicurean ethics as an immanent critique within the Greek rationalist tradition. Contrary to reductive depictions of Epicurus as a private hedonist or metaphysical minimalist, this article argues that Epicurus deploys reason not to affirm speculative truths. Instead, he dismantles the affective and ideological residues embedded within traditional rationality. Central to this transformation is the concept of ataraxia, defined not merely as emotional tranquility but as a normative condition of freedom from irrational fear, particularly those induced by myths of divine retribution and the afterlife (Warren, 2002, pp. 48–52). Through a comparative analysis with Aristotle's eudaimonia and Stoic apatheia, the article demonstrates that while all three schools uphold the regulative role of reason, Epicurus uniquely reorients its function toward existential healing rather than cosmological alignment or civic virtue. This redirection is grounded in a materialist metaphysics and expressed through practical techniques such as philosophical correspondence, aphoristic distillation, and communal withdrawal. Furthermore, the paper incorporates Foucault's notion of "care of the self" and Hadot's concept of "spiritual exercises" to contextualize Epicurean thought as both ethical and political resistance. Epicurus thus emerges not as a marginal thinker but as a radical dissident within the Hellenic intellectual order, a philosopher who redefines reason as a therapeutic instrument of liberation from epistemic anxiety and institutional control.

Keywords: Epicurus, Ataraxia, Greek Rationalism, Stoicism, Aristotle.

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Introduction

The intellectual trajectory of ancient Greek philosophy has often been characterized by its commitment to logos. This rational principle seeks to liberate thought from the contingencies of myth and unexamined belief. From Thales to Aristotle, Greek thinkers progressively constructed a metaphysical and ethical edifice. In this framework, rationality became the method of philosophical inquiry and telos. However, embedded within this rationalist paradigm, tensions began to emerge, especially in the aftermath of Alexander's empire and the ensuing cultural pluralism of the Hellenistic period. The disintegration of the polis, coupled with the rise of new socio-political realities, demanded a philosophical response that transcended the contemplative aspirations of earlier metaphysical systems.

It¹ is in this historical and philosophical rupture that Epicurus positions himself, not merely as a hedonist advocating pleasure, but as an internal dissident of the Greek rationalist tradition. His redefinition of ataraxia (tranquility) as the telos of life, and his emphasis on eliminating irrational fears (particularly of gods and death), constitute a radical shift from epistemic speculation to ethical therapy. Rather than proposing a total departure from rational inquiry, Epicurus reframes it: rationality is no longer a means toward metaphysical certainty or cosmic order, but a tool to liberate the self from unnecessary suffering.

This paper proposes a reinterpretation of Epicurean ethics as an immanent critique of classical rationalism. Against prevailing portrayals that isolate Epicureanism within the confines of individualistic hedonism, I argue that Epicurus offers an alternative model of reason that is negative, therapeutic, and existentially grounded. In contrast to Aristotelian eudaimonia, which ties virtue to teleological perfection, Epicurus defines the good life by the absence of pain and fear, thereby transforming the aims of philosophy itself. While scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (1994) and James Warren (2002) have emphasized Epicurean thought's therapeutic and atomist dimensions, their interpretations have yet to fully confront Epicurus's internal dissident function within the rationalist episteme.

To this end, the article will proceed in several stages. First, I will delineate the central assumptions of the Greek rationalist paradigm and its ethical implications. Second, I will examine how Epicurean concepts such as ataraxia, static versus kinetic pleasure, and natural desire critique the irrationalities embedded in the rational tradition. Third, I will contrast Epicurus' ethics with the Cyrenaic, Stoic, and Aristotelian doctrines, highlighting both continuities and divergences. Finally, I will explore the political and existential implications of Epicurus' withdrawal into a closed

community of friendship and its relevance to the broader transformation of philosophy in the Hellenistic world.

Literature Review

The classical trajectory of Greek philosophy is rooted in a progressive rationalization of the cosmos and the human being's place within it. From the arch-seeking inquiries of the Pre-Socratics to the dialectical method of Socrates and culminating in the comprehensive systems of Plato and Aristotle, the Greek tradition exemplifies a profound commitment to the idea that human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is attainable through reasoned inquiry and the cultivation of virtue.

At the heart of this rationalist paradigm lies the conviction that truth is accessible through reason, that the cosmos is intelligible, and that ethical life requires the alignment of individual desires with universal, often teleological, principles. For Plato, the soul's ascent toward the realm of Forms necessitated the subordination of bodily desires to reason; for Aristotle, virtue was the mean between extremes, discovered and actualized through rational deliberation (*phronesis*).

However, the stability of this paradigm was not immune to historical upheaval. With the collapse of the polis and the emergence of Hellenistic kingdoms, the communal, civic foundation of ethical life began to erode. Philosophy, once a public concern embedded in the life of the city, increasingly turned inward, seeking private consolation rather than political transformation. As Michel Foucault (1984) observes, philosophy in this period shifted from the pursuit of truth to the care of the self, reflecting a profound transformation in the epistemological and ethical functions of rationality. This transformation also revealed latent tensions within the rationalist project itself. The same *logos* that had freed thought from myth began to generate new forms of dogma, particularly concerning the nature of divinity, death, and cosmic justice. Philosophical systems that posited teleological explanations of nature often failed to account for the existential anxieties experienced by individuals facing a chaotic and impermanent world. In this context, the universality and sufficiency of reason were no longer self-evident but increasingly subject to suspicion.

It is within this philosophical and historical tension that Epicurus formulates his ethics. His rejection of teleological causality, his reinterpretation of the gods as non-interventionist beings, and his insistence on the natural origin of human fears and desires mark a decisive shift from speculative rationalism to a pragmatic and

therapeutic model of philosophy. Epicurus does not abandon reason but redeploys it to achieve a tranquil life free from irrational suffering.

This move constitutes what may be termed an “*internal critique*” of the rationalist tradition: a redirection of reason’s purpose away from ontological mastery and toward existential relief. In this way, Epicureanism anticipates a modern, naturalistic ethics grounded in the human condition rather than metaphysical abstraction. As we shall see, the Epicurean notion of ataraxia embodies this turn, functioning as both a goal and a criterion for ethical rationality.

Methodology

While Epicurus is often categorized as a hedonist, his ethical project constitutes a more profound intervention within the rationalist tradition of Greek philosophy. Rather than rejecting reason, Epicurus seeks to recalibrate its purpose, from a metaphysical and political instrument to a therapeutic guide to liberating the individual from unnecessary suffering. In this respect, Epicurean ethics represents not a negation of classical rationality, but its internal redirection toward existential functionality.

Central to this redirection is ataraxia, a serene imperturbability Epicurus identifies as the telos of ethical life. Unlike Platonic eros, which aspires to the eternal Forms, or Aristotelian eudaimonia, which presupposes a teleologically ordered cosmos, ataraxia is defined negatively—as the absence of pain (aponia) and mental distress. In this view, rationality is not employed to discover transcendent truths but to dispel irrational fears, particularly those related to death and divine retribution.

Epicurus’ atomist metaphysics provides the ontological foundation for this ethical critique (Asmis, 1984, pp. 93–94). By positing that the soul is material and perishes with the body, he eliminates the metaphysical basis for fear of an afterlife. Similarly, by redefining the gods as blissful and indifferent entities who do not intervene in human affairs, Epicurus dissolves the psychological bondage imposed by theological dogma. This demystification of cosmic order is not merely a metaphysical assertion but a moral imperative: to live well, one must free oneself from beliefs that produce suffering. This strategic use of reason against the irrational consequences of traditional rationalism exemplifies Epicurus’ position as an internal dissident. His ethical discourse retains the rational method, distinguishing natural from vain desires, evaluating pleasures and pains, and emphasizing self-knowledge. However, it serves from its classical aspirations toward objective metaphysical truth or civic virtue. In doing so, Epicurus reorients philosophy toward its therapeutic origins to attain subjective tranquility in a contingent world.

Moreover, Epicurus's emphasis on measure and moderation aligns him with, yet also distances him from, classical ethics. Like Aristotle, he advocates for a life of measured desires and rational control. However, unlike the Aristotelian ideal of a politically engaged life governed by *phronesis*, Epicurus confines ethical activity to individual and communal well-being among friends. The retreat from public life, far from signifying apathy, reflects a deliberate ethical stance: a refusal to participate in political systems that perpetuate anxiety, competition, and instability.

Thus, Epicurean ethics functions as a critique internal to the rationalist tradition, repurposing its tools for a different telos, peace of mind rather than civic virtue, liberation from fear rather than pursuit of perfection. This shift from transcendental ambition to existential modesty marks Epicurus as a dissident within the tradition he inherits.

Discussion

Ataraxia and the Critique of Irrational Rationality

Epicurus' concept of *ataraxia* has often been interpreted narrowly as a psychological state of tranquility. However, recent scholarship has underscored its function as an epistemological corrective within the Greek philosophical tradition (Nussbaum, 1994; Warren, 2002). *Ataraxia* does not merely denote emotional serenity; it signals the culmination of a process in which reason is repurposed to dispel culturally inherited irrationalities, specifically, the fear of divine punishment and the terror of death.

For Epicurus, irrational beliefs are not simply errors of thought but affective forces that undermine human flourishing. Chief among these is the fear of death, which he deconstructs through his materialist atomism. Since the soul is composed of atoms and dissolves upon death, there can be no posthumous suffering. As he writes in his Letter to Menoeceus, "*death is nothing to us*" because when we exist, death is not, and when death is, we do not exist (Epicurus, trans. Inwood & Gerson, 1994). This logical argument is emblematic of Epicurus' method: employing reason to dismantle existential illusions, not to speculate on transcendental realities.

Martha Nussbaum (1994) emphasizes that *ataraxia* is the result of a philosophical therapy that targets sources of psychic disturbance. Rather than aiming for omniscience or metaphysical certainty, Epicurean reason serves a therapeutic telos. This model subverts the Platonic view of rationality as ascent and the Aristotelian view of rationality as civic deliberation. Epicurus shifts the axis from knowing more to suffering less. Similarly, James Warren (2002) argues that Epicurean ethics should be

understood as an “*archaeology of fear*,” where ataraxia functions as both the process and product of removing irrational beliefs from the psyche. In this sense, ataraxia is epistemic: it results from a rational reconfiguration of how we understand nature, gods, and death. However, it is also normative: it sets the standard for good judgment, ethical choice, and existential orientation.

Foucault’s (2005) notion of the care of the self further illuminates Epicurus’ ethical project. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault identifies Epicurean philosophy as emblematic of a late ancient shift in which philosophy becomes a “*techné tou biou*”, a technique of life. For Epicurus, reason is a practice that heals rather than reveals, comforts rather than commands. It no longer functions as an instrument of epistemic conquest but as a form of existential hygiene.

This epistemological recentering positions Epicurus as a subversive within the rationalist tradition. Whereas earlier philosophers used reason to impose cosmic order, Epicurus uses it to free the individual from imposed fictions. In doing so, he critiques not irrationality per se, but a form of rationality that becomes irrational in its moral and emotional consequences. Thus, ataraxia becomes the absence of suffering and the presence of a rationality purged of its own dogmatic excesses.

Comparison with Aristotle, the Stoics, and Related Schools

Despite their divergent philosophical orientations, Epicurus, Aristotle, and the Stoics engage with the central Hellenic concern of achieving a good life (eudaimonia). Each proposes a distinct model of ethical rationality, grounded in specific anthropological and cosmological assumptions. However, while they share a commitment to reason and virtue, Epicurus subverts both subtly yet consequentially.

Aristotle’s ethical framework in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is eudemonistic and teleological. For him, the good life consists in the actualization of human capacities in accordance with virtue (arete), efficient wisdom (phronesis), in a political and communal context (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 1999). He insists that virtue is its reward, and happiness arises through activity (energeia) consistent with reason. While moderation (sophrosyne) is central to Aristotelian ethics, it is a function of a dynamic balance achieved through rational deliberation in civic life.

In contrast, Epicurus collapses the distinction between virtue and pleasure, claiming that all virtues are instrumental insofar as they contribute to ataraxia. As he famously states, “*virtue is inseparable from pleasure*,” and wisdom is “*the greatest good because it brings pleasure*” (Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, trans. Inwood & Gerson, 1994). Whereas Aristotle sees ethical action as perfecting human nature within the polis, Epicurus redefines ethics as a private endeavor aimed at psychic stability.

This divergence is further sharpened in comparison to the Stoics, for whom virtue is not only sufficient for happiness but is independent of pleasure altogether. Stoic ethics, as articulated by thinkers like Epictetus and Chrysippus, emphasizes autonomy (*autarkeia*), rational control over passions (*apatheia*), and alignment with universal reason (*logos*) (Long & Sedley, 1987). For the Stoics, the good life entails living according to nature, but this “nature” is conceived as a rational, providential order that demands endurance and moral fortitude.

Epicurus, by contrast, rejects the Stoic conception of divine reason and providence. He accepts nature as a source of norms but defines it purely materialistically and empirically. Human nature seeks pleasure and avoids pain; thus, ethics must accommodate natural limits rather than impose cosmological ideals. Moreover, while the Stoics valorize civic duty and engagement with fate, Epicurus advocates for withdrawal from political life, viewing it as a source of anxiety and moral compromise (Long, 1974).

Despite their differences, all three systems acknowledge the necessity of regulating desire. However, Epicurus stands apart in advocating the quantitative minimization of desire rather than its qualitative refinement or spiritual sublimation. He classifies desires as natural and necessary, natural but unnecessary, and vain—an analytical framework that seeks not moral elevation but existential efficiency (O’Keefe, 2010, pp. 117–121).

In sum, whereas Aristotle and the Stoics envision reason to achieve objective virtue or cosmic harmony, Epicurus construes reason as an instrument of psychological liberation. He retains the structural elements of Greek ethics, virtue, moderation, and rational deliberation, but detaches them from their classical ontological and political scaffolding. Rather than constituting a radical rupture, this internal divergence reveals the flexibility and crisis of the rationalist tradition in late antiquity.

Philosophical, Ethical, and Political Implications

Epicurean ethics, though often interpreted as a doctrine of personal serenity, carries significant philosophical and political implications. At its core, Epicurus’ call to retreat from public life and cultivate tranquility within a community of friends constitutes a critical response to the socio-political and metaphysical conditions of Hellenistic Greece. In this sense, his philosophy articulates an alternative mode of subjectivity that refuses the obligations of the polis, the burden of metaphysical speculation, and the anxieties of civic virtue.

Epicurus did not merely withdraw from politics; he redefined what it meant to live well outside its framework. His Garden (kēpos) functioned as a microcosm of ethical life, an intentional community structured around friendship (philia), equality, and shared philosophical inquiry, as Diogenes Laertius records. Women and even enslaved people were admitted into the Garden, indicating a radical departure from the exclusionary politics of the classical polis (Diogenes Laertius, trans. Hicks, 1925). This openness underscores the egalitarian and anti-hierarchical ethos of Epicureanism.

The decision to disengage from public life is not a sign of political apathy but a deliberate ethical stance. Epicurus' advocacy of minimal desire, limited speech, and secure friendship can be seen as a form of philosophical resistance in a world marked by imperial expansion, civic instability, and epistemic overreach. His ethics represents what Pierre Hadot (1995) would call a way of life that opposes the performative and agonistic norms of Greek public culture.

Furthermore, Epicurus' naturalistic metaphysics undermines the ideological foundations of the city-state. By denying divine providence and rejecting fate (heimarmenê), Epicurus rejects the theological justifications for hierarchical social order. He thus dismantles the cosmological scaffolding upon which Stoic and Platonic political theories often rest. His ethics presuppose not a divine logo, but a human capacity for intelligent withdrawal and mutual care. This² ethical minimalism can be understood as a political critique through negation. Rather than proposing an alternative political program, Epicurus undermines the necessity of any such program by locating a good life in the self-sufficient bios. The political implications of this stance are twofold: first, it challenges the moral legitimacy of public institutions that produce fear and dependency; second, it claims agency for the individual as a rational, desiring, and social being capable of shaping his own ethical environment.

Epicureanism offers a proto-modern conception of life not grounded in participation or hierarchy, but in autonomy, friendship, and measured pleasure. It reorients the philosophical enterprise from normative prescription to existential emancipation. This subtle yet profound reorientation marks Epicurus as not only a critic of speculative reasons but also for the political forms it often upholds.

Conclusion

Epicurus emerges from this analysis not as a marginal hedonist, but as a subversive figure within the tradition he inherits. Epicurus formulates an immanent critique of Greek rationalism by redirecting reason from pursuing ontological or civic perfection toward the relief of existential suffering. His ethical model, centered on

ataraxia, redefines rationality itself, not as a tool of cosmic speculation or social control, but as a therapeutic instrument for achieving tranquility.

The distinctiveness of Epicurean ethics lies in its negative formulation of the good: the absence of pain, fear, and irrational desire. This formulation challenges the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia as flourishing through virtue and the Stoic ideal of harmony with divine reason. Epicurus neither rejects reason nor virtue; instead, he reinterprets them through the lens of human finitude and psychological vulnerability. In doing so, he anticipates modern ethical concerns with autonomy, naturalism, and criticizing ideological structures.

Moreover, the Epicurean model of ethical life, centered on friendship, simplicity, and self-limitation, constitutes a subtle yet profound political stance. The Garden becomes a space of counter-life, opposing the performative, agonistic, and hierarchical norms of the classical polis. Epicurus thus enacts what might be called an “apolitical ethics,” one that withdraws from power without becoming politically inert.

In a world increasingly dominated by systems that produce anxiety and commodify desire, Epicurus offers a vision of freedom grounded not in mastery, but in intelligent restraint (Symposium, 2020, pp. 32–54). His philosophy is not merely an ancient therapeutic practice but a sustained effort to reimagine what it means to live rationally. As such, Epicurean ethics deserves renewed attention not only as a historical artifact, but as a living possibility within—and against—the dominant paradigms of rationality. Its focus on autonomy, therapeutic reasoning, and the critique of institutionalized fear anticipates modern discussions on freedom, mental well-being, and resistance to socio-political hegemony.

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