

Cicero's "Academic Questions"

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2026 at 11:53 AM

The following is an outline I have prepared for our use in the upcoming series of Lucretius Today podcasts devoted to exploring Epicurean Canonics through Cicero's Academic Questions. The following version of this outline is going to be updated so over time please refer to it [in its final location here](#).

Lucretius Today Series - "Exploring Epicurean Canonics Through Cicero's Academic Questions"

The Title Of This Series of Episodes Could Also Be: *"The Question of Skepticism vs Truth, How It Destroyed Plato's Academy And Plagues Humanity Even Today, And How Epicurus Answers The Problem."*

"Academic Questions" is a turn-off name for a book, but the issues discussed in it are critically important to everything else. It's not particularly long but it provides an overview of the issues that led to Aristotle breaking away from Plato's school and for many further divisions thereafter.

Throughout this discussion we are going to use the word "dogmatic" as meaning "holding that truth is possible." This is not to be taken negatively as the word is used today. "Snow is white" and "Honey is sweet" are examples of dogmatic statements. ***If you want to argue about those you're in the wrong place and you will not be invited to participate in the following discussion unless and until you adopt a more reasonable non-contradictory position.***

- [PD22](#). We must consider both the real purpose, and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.
- [PD23](#). If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false.
- [Lucretius 4:469-521](#). Now, if someone thinks that nothing is known, one thing he doesn't know is whether that can be known, since he admits to knowing nothing. *I shall therefore not bother to argue my case against this man who has himself stood with his own head in his footprints.* And anyway, even allowing that he knows this, I'll still ask him: Given that he has never before seen anything true in the world, from where does he get his knowledge of what knowing and not knowing are? What created his preconception of true and false? And what proved to him that doubtful differs from certain? You will find that the preconception of true has its origin in the senses, and that the senses cannot be refuted. For something of greater reliability must be found, something possessing the

intrinsic power to convict falsehoods with truths.

Key Points To Be Covered In The Lucretius Today Podcast Review

1. Cicero's purpose in writing "Academic Questions" was to explain the main controversy that led to the disputes between the schools and to point Cicero's view of the way to resolve them.
2. The book that comes down to us today apparently went through a number of revisions so it is not in its original complete form. What survives today is incomplete: Book 1 of the later version and substantial portions of the earlier version. As a result, the work does not come down to us in a single, original, complete form, and some structural and doctrinal inconsistencies reflect this compositional history.
3. The sides of the argument are:
 1. Varro speaking for Antiochus of Aschalon. Antiochus presents a *reconstructed* "Old Academic" position that blends Plato and Aristotle and incorporates some aspects of Stoic epistemology. This view affirms that certain truths can be grasped with certainty via sense-perception with great emphasis on reason and methods such as formal logic and geometry / mathematics.
 2. Cicero speaking for Philo of Larissa, representing the New Academy. Philo embraced much more skeptical view of truth. This view denies that certainty is attainable, even by the use of the Stoic criterion of the *kataleptic impression*, and maintains instead that judgments must be guided by what is *probabile* or *verisimile* (persuasive or likely). Even formal reasoning cannot guarantee certainty on this account.
 3. Atticus does not advocate a systematic philosophical position but helps structure the dialogue and prompt for clarifications.

Outline Of The Argument

BOOK I

I. Cicero Introduces The Topic And Gives The Method To Be Followed

Acad. I.1-12

- Cicero explains why the question of how to obtain knowledge (epistemology) is the foundational philosophical problem.
- Cicero justifies the Academic method by presenting opposing views without dogmatic commitment.
- Cicero emphasizes inquiry (*quaerere*) rather than assent (*adsensus*).

II. Cicero Relates the History Of The Academy

Acad. I.13-18

- Cicero says Plato aimed at truth through reasoned inquiry.
 - Cicero says that the early Academy was engaged in serious investigation and not argument for the sake of argument.
 - Cicero explains how this background led to later disagreements over certainty.
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III. Varro Explains Antiochus' Account of the "Old Academy"

Acad. I.19-29

- Varro introduces **Antiochus' reconstruction** of Academic doctrine.
 - Varro claims that Plato and Aristotle shared a fundamentally dogmatic epistemology.
 - Varro says that knowledge is possible and this position was historically affirmed by the Academy.
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IV. Varro Provides A Defense of The Possibility Of Cognitive Certainty

Acad. I.30-41

- Varro argues that the senses, when sound and processed rationally, are capable of grasping truth.
 - Varro argues that Reason confirms, organizes, and corrects the senses.
 - Varro says that the wise man *can* assent securely to what is known.
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V. Varro Criticizes Academic Skepticism

Acad. I.42-46

- Varro argues that Skepticism makes philosophy and life impossible.
- Varro argues that if nothing can be known, inquiry loses purpose.
- Varro says that Antiochus restored stability to philosophy.

VI. Cicero States His Initial Skeptical Reservations To The Possibility of Affirming Anything As True

Acad. I.47-49

- Cicero expresses admiration for the coherence of Antiochus' system.
- But Cicero then raises doubts about whether certainty has actually been demonstrated.
- Cicero begins his argument for skepticism.

BOOK II

VII. Cicero Presents And Argue The Skeptical Position That True Knowledge Is Impossible

Acad. II.1-12

- Cicero restates the problem of knowledge in sharper form.
- Cicero focuses on the Stoic criterion of truth as the real target of his opposition.
- Cicero argues that Skepticism is not nihilism.

VIII. Cicero Attacks the Stoic Claim Of The Truth of “Kataleptic Impression”

Acad. II.13-32

- Cicero argues that no perception is so clear that it could not be false.
- Cicero argues that illusions, dreams, madness, and error undermine certainty.
- Cicero argues that the Stoic criterion of truth collapses under scrutiny.

IX. Cicero Asserts That Reason Itself Is Fallible

Acad. II.33-42

- Cicero says that logical inference and reasoning depend on premises drawn from perception.
 - Cicero argues that memory and inference are equally fallible.
 - Cicero argues that even disciplines like geometry rely on assumptions not immune to doubt.
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X. Cicero Presents the Argument In Favor Of “Probability” Based on Carneadeas and Philo

Acad. II.43-60

- Cicero asserts that probability (*probabile / verisimile*) is the practical way to approach every issue.
 - Cicero argues that degrees of plausibility allow rational discrimination without certainty.
 - Cicero argues that the wise man gives his assent only cautiously, proportioned to evidence.
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XI. Cicero Replies To The Argument That Skepticism Leads To “Inaction” (He Denies That It Is Impossible To Actually Live As A Skeptic)

Acad. II.61-67

- Cicero says that Skepticism does not prevent action.
 - Cicero argues that ordinary life already proceeds on appearances, not certainty.
 - Cicero asserts that rational agency requires judgment, not infallibility.
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XII. Cicero Takes Sides With Carneades and Philo (The Academic Skeptics) And Criticizes Antiochus

Acad. II.68-78

- Cicero says that Antiochus offers reassurance but overreaches on the question of whether knowledge is possible.

- Cicero argues that skepticism preserves intellectual integrity while allowing action.
 - Cicero argues that dogmatism mistakes psychological confidence for knowledge.
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XIII. Cicero Gives His Closing Argument For Academic Skepticism

Acad. II.79-88 (end)

- Cicero aligns himself with the skeptical Academy in method and rejects the claim that knowledge is possible.
- Cicero says that philosophy is best practiced as disciplined inquiry without premature assent.
- Cicero claims that the highest philosophical virtue is restraint in judgment.