

Discussion of Blog Post: The Continuing Vitality of Epicurean Physics

Post by "Cassius" of April 28, 2026 at 12:10 AM

1 - Do you input those texts and papers and "query" that as it's training model? Yes that's exactly how I am starting. I am telling it specific papers to review (mainly Sedley but also others) and I am also building a list of "instructions" on things to avoid and things to prefer, and I have also fed it many of the papers/pages/blog articles which we've prepared in the past and told it to use these as the base for its writing (rather than just letting it make its own way as to what positions to favor.

2 - Do you ask it specific queries section by section? Pretty much yes here too, but I am more providing it an outline of the structure of the document and what I expect it to say. Now of course it would be useless if it just told me what i wanted to hear, so I often give it particular citations and directions for each section.

3 - Do you simply use it for grammar and syntax or to come up with "turns of phrase"? Many of the "turns of phrase" are come up with by it. It seems like it has a style of writing (which I also tell it to be firm or not-so-firm) that does seem like an advanced form of grammar-checking. It doesn't provide "grammar" so much as it provides "manners of arguing"

4 - In a way it's just going for and compiling citations, but it's far beyond that. It's very hard for me to distinguish between what it is doing and having a "real person" compose the argument.

Of course one of the keys here is that at least in most cases I know the material, know what to expect, and can recognize if it botches a quotation, so I have pretty firm quality control over it for that reason. Of course if i were asking it about brain surgery I would have no clue how to watch it for errors.

I have another one close to ready to go which will go specifically through the opposition to geometry. It's even more specialized than this one, but the argument is very logical and understandable and even if some detail of a person gets botched, it's still very possible to understand the logical force of the general argument and know that it's solid even if a detail is botched.

I've come near a line today however. I decided I would take advantage of it to go back and study this issue of what Aristotle said against Democritus, and how Epicurus adjusted his views of atomism to account for that. Years ago I had read some articles on that by Farley but it didn't make impression on me at the time and I've never had time to dig into Aristotle far enough to even find the references, much less understand them.

So the third article that will come will address Epicurus' advocacy for "minimal parts" of the atom. After reading what Claude has compiled I think I finally see the issue and how indeed Epicurus did make significant advances beyond Democritus on that part of atomism. The key seems to be that Aristotle strung together four or five highly logic-based objections to Democritus that - if not dealt with - were held to be persuasive against atomism. After all, Aristotle was a pretty smart guy and he rejected atomism.

Claude was able to find the citations for each of those Aristotle objections, explain their meaning in pretty plain language, and then explain how Epicurus answered them. The key to the answer is that they all require reference to "parts" of an atom and not consider atoms to be a monolithic blob, as Democritus "apparently" had done.

So this excursion has proven to be very helpful to me in addition to producing a useful article. (And that's the point of the output right now - to get some reasonable articles out there where we've never been able to get anything for ten years.) But on the "minimal parts of the atom" in particular, i think we're going to find that this will prove to be an illustration of Epicurus really getting head-to-head on the logic games, which is making me more confident that when Sedley says (inferential basis of epicurean ethics article) that the division of feeling into pleasure and pain is much influenced by dividing nature into matter and void.

Anyway now I am rambling but the basic point is that if you feed in the authorities you want it to summarize, and you also issue specific instructions as to the outline of the article, and you have enough command of the subject to know that the article is what you want it to say, it can produce very good output. Not ideal - the ideal in my case would be to find a time machine, go back to college and spend a career specializing in classical philosophy and physics, and write every word myself. That's not going to happen, so we have another back and forth about "the perfect" fighting with "the good" and how to reconcile them.

Closing on this point Don: As you yourself have said, there would be very little benefit in flooding the world with AI generated pamphlets. But here we are using it to pull together research on matters that we largely understand, and we can take that and use it on the podcast and in discussions to advance real live conversations.