

# Prolepsis / Anticipations As Epicurus' Answer to the MENO Problem

Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 1:20 PM

We definitely need to keep working on making prolepsis / anticipations understandable to normal people of ordinary education. In reading a 2023 work which [Matteng](#) brought to our attention, I want to highlight the following passage passage to the effect that both Epicureans and Stoics looked to (their own) view of PROLEPSIS as the answer to "the Meno Problem."

We haven't yet gotten to the Epicurean sections of Cicero's *Academica*, but that's on the horizon for our podcast. By the time we get there we are going to want to have developed our understanding of what the Meno problem is, and how Epicurus addressed it using the concept of prolepsis / anticipations.

In his 2023 article *The Elaboration of Prolepsis Between Epicurus and the Stoics*, Jean-Baptiste Gourinat states:

## Quote

In both schools, preconception is also a preliminary tool for research, discussion and intelligence, as explicitly said for Epicurus by Diog. Laert. X 33 and Cic. DND I 43. 83 Similar views are attributed to the Stoics by Cicero in Acad. II 21 and Acad. I 42, which was seen as a parallel answer to what was coined as the Meno problem:

That the problem advanced in the Meno, namely whether search and discovery are possible (εἰ οἷόν τε ζητεῖν καὶ εὐρίσκειν), leads to a real impasse. For we do not, on the one hand, try to find out things we know –a futile proceeding– nor, on the other, things we do not know, since even if we come across them we do not recognize them: they might be anything. The Peripatetics introduced the conception of “potential intuition” but the origin of our difficulty was actual knowing and not knowing. Even if we grant the existence of a potential intuition, the difficulty remains unchanged. How does this intuition operate? It must be either on what it knows or on what it does not know. The Stoics make the “natural conceptions” responsible (οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς τὰς φυσικὰς ἐννοίας αἰτιῶνται). If these are potential, we shall use the same argument as against the Peripatetics; and if they are actual, why do we search for what we know? And if we use them as a starting-point for a search for other things that we do not know, how do we search for what we do not know? The Epicureans introduce “preconceptions”(οἱ δὲ Ἐπικούρειοι τὰς προλήψεις); if they mean these to be “articulated” (διηρθρωμένας), search is unnecessary; if “unarticulated”(ἀδιαρθρώτους), how do we extend our search

beyond our preconceptions, to look for something of which we do not possess a preconception? (Plutarch, fr. 215f Sandbach = Extracts from the Chaeronean)

Footnote 83 is: " See also Sextus Emp. AM I 57 and XI 21: "according to the wise Epicurus, it is not possible to inquire (ζητεῖν) nor to come to an impasse (ἀπορεῖν) without a preconception".

This post needs to be the beginning of an extensive discussion of what "The Meno Problem" was to Plato, the presumptions that underlay Plato's view of the issue, and how Epicurus addressed the problem with his innovative use of the term "prolepsis." Getting a grip on the original problem should go a long way toward understanding how Epicurus was using the term prolepsis and what he expected us to understand about it. This isn't rocket science - the problem posed by Plato appears to be relatively straightforward, and the answer given by Epicurus should be equally straightforward.

Gourinat continues this way:

Quote

So Epicureans and Stoics seem to have resorted to "natural conceptions" or "preconceptions" as a solution to the Meno problem, 84 alternative to the Platonic doctrine of the reminiscence, and even to the actualization of potential knowledge in the Peripatetic school. Zeno's criticism of Plato's theory of ideas was famous, 85 and he could hardly have adopted one of its corollaries: recollection. It is striking that both Epicurus and the Stoics seem to have borrowed something from some empiricist passages of Plato: the wax analogy in the Theaetetus in the case of the Stoics and the book simile in the [Philebus](#) in the case of the Epicureans. In the Theaetetus, however, Plato explicitly argues that the wax simile is not a sufficient explanation, since these empiricist views cannot explain intellectual errors, especially in the case of mathematics. Thus, the Hellenistic philosophers needed to account for the origins of our knowledge in cases where empirical concept-formation was not a sufficient explanation. According to Plutarch, Chrysippus as well as Epicurus also needed to explain what we start from, when we want to pursue an enquiry: without a preconception of something, we cannot search for it since we would not even know what we are looking for.

I suspect that all of us are not going to find ourselves in full agreement with the way that Gourinat ultimately unwinds the issues, because (as Gourinat says himself) he sees contradictions in Epicurus' view of prolepsis as a criteria of truth. But regardless of that it's clear that we need to go back and reconstruct the question and the possible answers.

In this context I will close the post with Diogenes of Oinoanda's Fragment 5 (Martin Ferguson Smith), which I think is related. We need to ask not only "*Who will choose to seek what he can never find?*" but also "*Who will choose to seek, or who can understand, something of which he has no prior notion whatsoever?*"

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find? Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 3:54 PM

Some background on [Meno's Paradox](#)

### A Puzzle about Definitions

- Socrates has told us he knows how to **reject** faulty definitions. But how does he know when he has **succeeded** in finding the right definition? Meno raises an objection to the entire definitional search in the form of (what has been called) “Meno’s Paradox,” or “The Paradox of Inquiry” (*Meno* 80d-e).

The argument can be shown to be sophistical, but Plato took it very seriously. This is obvious, since his response to it is to grant its central claim: that you can’t come to know something that you didn’t already know. That is, that inquiry never produces new knowledge, but only recapitulates things already known. This leads to the famous Doctrine of Recollection.

An Objection to Inquiry

The argument known as “Meno’s Paradox” can be reformulated as follows:

1. If you know what you're looking for, inquiry is unnecessary.
2. If you don't know what you're looking for, inquiry is impossible.
3. Therefore, inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible.

An implicit premise: **Either you know what you're looking for or you don't know what you're looking for.**

**And this is a logical truth. Or is it? Only if "you know what you're looking for" is used unambiguously in both disjuncts.**

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### **Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2024 at 6:15 PM**

So far this video by Matthew Lampert is the best I have found setting forth Meno's issue. There is also a Greg Sadler video on this one, and I will link it below, but I don't consider it as good as the first one. I'll keep looking for a better video that sets out the basic issue.

Matthew Lampert: if you only watch one video, watch this one:

<https://youtu.be/yXKnS7YXOv4>

Greg Sadler:

<https://youtu.be/QrIYClniEHc>

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### **Post by "Don" of October 31, 2024 at 6:26 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

If you know what you're looking for, inquiry is unnecessary.

If you don't know what you're looking for, inquiry is impossible.

Therefore, inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible.

An implicit premise: Either you know what you're looking for or you don't know what you're looking for.

I'll admit I haven't watched the video yet, but this seems to me just pure sophistry and rhetorical doublespeak.

We interact with the world as it is. We have a finite number of experiences. With those experiences, we confront new experiences. We use the experiences we have to understand novel experiences. Lather, rinse, repeat.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 6:53 PM**

I agree it's sophistry, but it does raise deep questions about "what's the starting point for how you are sure you know anything." Plato and the rest apparently took it very seriously, and I guess I can understand why they did, and therefore why Epicurus and the rest had to treat it later on.

Presumably this is also where the Academy descended later into rank skepticism, because they didn't have a better answer to this than "recollection," which very few accept. Apparently that's why both Stoics and Epicureans proposed similar but different solutions.

Also, I see that lots of the Youtube videos spend a lot of time talking about the specific example of "virtue," as if there's something unique about virtue, and that wastes a lot of time. The real issue applies to knowing \*anything\*, and whether what you think is the truth about something is the full truth, the partial truth, or what. It's the old question about what is "truth?" Do we know truth by example, by definition, or by what "test of truth?"

We need a clear and concise presentation of the problem Plato thought had been identified (and apparently this didn't start with him) and then how prolepsis helped Epicurus respond to the perceived dilemma, along the lines of the article referenced in the first, without falling into skepticism himself.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 8:26 PM**

I just rewatched the Matthew Lampert video above, and I was impressed all over again. He does a very good job explaining how the real issue is what it means to "know" something without getting sidetracked on other issues.

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2024 at 8:39 PM

I see that the Matthew Lampert video posted above is the second of two videos he did discussing Plato's Meno. This first video gives you the background and makes the excellent point that the dialogue is not really about virtue at all (which is the way people generally talk about it), but is about knowledge. He makes the point that "virtue" is just a particularly hard subject, so that makes it a good test case for how we know about anything. Plato could just as easily have talked about "the gods," rather than virtue, and made the same point. In fact, that's what I think Hume decided to do in his "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion."

I recommend this one as well, in case anyone is concerned that "Meno" is mainly about virtue rather than knowledge.

These are two very good videos. Good clear style, graphics, presentation, etc. Unfortunately I don't see that he has done any on Epicurus.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq4Y7UI1wfY>

And note that at the very end he points that where Plato/Socrates is really going is to praise "dialectic" as the way to get to the truth all questions. That's something again where Epicurus would beg to disagree, and thus we come full circle to Epicurus' "canon" as the test of truth rather than "dialectic."

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## Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2024 at 9:21 PM

In this context, it's hard to ignore that this quote from Aetius doesn't point in the same direction as other references which indicates that "images" are the driving force behind Epicurus' view of the ultimate source of prolepsis:

### Quote

Aetius Placata 4.8 On Sensation and Sense-Objects

§10 Leucippus Democritus Epicurus (say) that sensation and thought arise from images that approach from outside, for neither of these can occur to anyone without the image falling upon him.

And it therefore seems to me that an argument could be made that Epicurus is saying, not just in regard to gods but in regard to anything else, that it is the impact of images on the mind that give rise to the origin of prolepsis and therefore much of thinking. Were it not for the need to go beyond the visible images that are received by the eyes, and to incorporate Epicurus' view of non-visible images received directly by the mind, it might not even be very controversial to accept that this is still a correct view by the majority of empiricists today. This would be combined with the Cyclops example discussed in the Gourinat article (I will need to find a part of that to quote) as an example of how humans see things and extend their qualities (such as size in the case of Cyclops).

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### **Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 9:24 PM**

Part of the Cyclops references, this in a quote from Sextus Empiricus

#### Quote

(Sextus Emp. AM IX 45-46)

The origin of the thought that god exists came from appearances in dreams, or from the phenomena of the world, but the thought that god is everlasting and imperishable and perfect in happiness arose through a process of transition from humans. For just as we acquired the thought of a Cyclops, who was not “like a corn-eating man, but rather a peak well-wooded High on the mountain-tops, when it loometh apart from its fellows” 50 by enlarging the common human being in imagination, so too having started to think of a happy human being, blessed with all the goods, then having intensified these, they thought of god as their highest point. (46) And again, having formed the impression of a long-lived human, the ancients increased their time-span to infinity by combining the past and future with the present; and then, having thus arrived at the notion of eternity, they said that god was eternal too.

If I recall correctly near the end of the article Gourinat extends this in regard to the gods in a way favorable to the Stoic "argument from design," which I think Epicurus would have rejected and would not be the best reading

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### **Post by “Don” of October 31, 2024 at 9:55 PM**

I still see the most cogent explanation of prolepsis as being the pattern recognition faculty that gives order to the cacophony of sense perception, including *eidola* falling on the mental sense perception faculty.

1. *Eidola* bombard our senses from the external world.
2. Perceiving those sensations are our confirmation there is a material, existing world.
3. So it is true there is a material universe existing.
4. Patterns of sensations that indicate individual objects and concepts are given shape by the prolepses.
5. That there are individual discernible objects and concepts is true through the prolepses of them.
6. Prolepses are reinforced and refined by repeated sensations.
7. Sensations and prolepses automatically evoke feelings of pleasure or pain prior to any reasoning.
8. Pleasure and pain are criteria of truth because they arise before reason kicks in, and the those external phenomena evoke feelings within us, again reconfirming the existence of a world outside ourselves.

That's how I make sense of prolepses and how they fit into being criteria of truth.

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## Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 10:14 PM

I think that's right, but all of that fits in the context of answering how it is we can know something without a pre-existing example or definition. .

I see that as a very good summary of the mechanics, with the significance that it all adds up to the replacement for "recollection" theory and the skepticism into which the Aristotelians and Academics fell - and still fall.

As far as making it understandable to larger numbers, the framework is that this Platonic attitude of seeing this as an unsolvable problem is why the world is so overwhelmingly skeptic. Epicurus was working on a rational clear explanation of how confidence in knowledge is possible.

It remains today to explain this in persuasive terms so that the campaign against skepticism and the implications that go with it (radical empiricism / nihilism) can resume.

Apparently there aren't many or any academic writers who accept this as a valid response to Plato. So even though changing their minds isn't our concern, the general attitude that this isn't an important part of Epicurean philosophy is a problem to be addressed. People don't care

much about Plato anymore, but radical skepticism is a huge problem. Many people have been persuaded by radical skepticism they we never be sure of anything.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of November 1, 2024 at 3:12 AM**

Also, I think we can consider that concepts like "good," or "the good" or "the highest good" or "pleasure" (when viewed as a concept) or " the highest pleasure," or "gods" are, like virtue, good examples of the issue.

Determining what these things at the start of our quest is not an easy thing. People disagree on what those words mean, and it is exactly the definition of them that we don't have as a test. How will we know we are correct when we assert that "x" or "definition X" of the highest good is correct? Same with "absence of pain." If we knew we wouldn't have to ask, and if we don't know then how do we know when we have arrived at the correct definition?

One way to do it is to use our experience of "images" we have received in the past as the basis for extending out a definition. We can suggest formulations such as "a god is a living being blessed and imperishable" or "pleasure is the absence of pain," because these are reaonable extensions of more limited past experiences. Once extended as a formulation, we can then test those extensions logically against more actual experiences to confirm or contradict that formulation as a workable definition. But where did the proposed definition come from in the first place? From "extending out" descriptions of actual experiences received as images, either in our own past after birth or encoded in rudimentary fashion genetically before birth from past generations.

Experiencing men six feet tall and living 60 years allows us to conceive of the possibility of men 60 feet tall and living 600 years, even if we have never seen such ourselves. We have seen some men spend more of their time living pleurably than others, so we can conceive of living beings who spend \*all\* their time living pleurably.

But we cannot even conceive of anything coming from nothing because we have logically concluded based on much experience that this is not possible at all. And we cannot logically conceive of a totally happy being finding itself in a situation where its total happiness is interrupted by getting mad at enemies or feeling any lack to be filled by "rewarding" friends.

It's not necessarily supernatural to live 100 years or 600 years, but it would be supernatural to create anything from nothing, or to create the universe as a whole from scratch, or for the universe to have an end in space, or for a spirit to exist apart from a living body.

I presume Epicurus would point to prolepsis and your explanation of a sequence in which it would work as a much better approach than "recollection of knowledge from before birth" or "it's impossible to know anything so let's admit we know nothing," or "let's talk about it using the dialectical method."

Appealing to Prolepsis along the lines you describe (plus making clear that "images" are not limited to "visible images") gives us an approach that allows us to be confident of basic conclusions where evidence is strong. It also gives us a workable test to determine when evidence is insufficient, requiring us to "wait" before being confident a single opinion is true.

As Lucretius wrote, even the gods could not conceive of creating a universe if they had never previously received an image of a universe, therefore the gods could not predate and be the creator of the universe. But even we as humans can conceive of terraforming Mars, because that idea is a reasonable extension of images we have in fact received in human experience reshaping things here on Earth.

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### **Post by “Root304” of November 1, 2024 at 7:53 AM**

Don't want to interject too much, as I don't want to derail the great conversation. I just want to say that if any reader is having trouble understanding *prolepsis* like I did for years, I merely invite thinking a bit bigger about the words associated with it, such as anticipations and understanding it perhaps not just as a decidedly cognitive process but also an expression of material processes.

I don't want to let the discussion pass without recognizing that I believe *prolepsis* is a very illuminating concept, even more so than developing reasoning from *pathos* was for me. I've roughly explained elsewhere on the forum the beginning of my thinking that *prolepsis* has become replacement for what I found to be the vacuous word "consciousness", which making this move tosses out a lot of philosophical false problems related to the baggage associated with that term. I've also been exploring notions of linking *prolepsis* to ideas of "simulation", the material "soul" and "unconscious" processes outside of thinking. I'm beginning to suspect that a lot about phenomena we experience is based in fundamental principals of recursion, self-reference, anticipation, and incremental and iterative processes quite a long ways down the path of exploring the nature of biological life and "being"; yet to set all that wild-eyed speculation aside it's really nice to see my untrained, often unhinged, formulations getting some much needed tempering by fruitful discussion grounded in the Philosophical tradition. 😊

## Post by "Don" of November 1, 2024 at 8:06 AM

I'm going to start my response/rebuttal/reaction by saying that we do not sense things through the impact of *eidola* on our sense organs. Our bodies - all bodies - are not casting off "films of atoms" that travel through space. Yes, our eyes interact with photons. Our noses interact with molecules in the air. Our tongues interact with chemicals. And so on. Is it interesting to understand how Epicurus was reacting to his contemporaries' philosophical ideas? Sure. No argument there. However, Epicurus called his students to study nature and "how things work" in the material world. On that track, I think it behooves Epicureans living in the 21st century to understand how sensations and the brain work to their best of our ability in the here and now as well.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Also, I think we can consider that concepts like "good," or "the good" or "the highest good" or "pleasure" (when viewed as a concept) or "the highest pleasure," or "gods" are, like virtue, good examples of the issue.

Determining what these things at the start of our quest is not an easy thing.

Those are different concepts from my understanding:

"good" is used by Epicurus to simply mean "that which brings pleasure." There is no other meter by which to determine "good" or "bad" other than the feelings of pleasure and pain.

"the good" or "the highest good" is simply "that to which all other actions/things point." Why do we do anything? We do it for our pleasure. Whether one agrees with this statement or not is irrelevant, because I have come to believe that it is simply a statement of fact. At the end of all questions of "Why?" the final answer is going to be "because it makes me feel pleasure." Substitute "satisfaction, well-being, etc." as the penultimate answer before saying "pleasure" but I believe that's the final answer you're going to have to give if one truthfully and honestly answers the question.

The "zarkoflex" example in the first video does nothing to alleviate my contention that this is all sophistry. If I tell you to go out into the world and find a lehmä, you won't know what that is. Where do I look? As the speaker said, maybe you google it. Maybe it doesn't come up. You keep looking. Eventually, you find out it's the Finnish word for "cow." So you go to the farmer's field and point to the lehmä. You had heard about cows and seen cows and pictures of cows, you just didn't know the word lehmä. Same with a zarkoflex. If it exists in the world, it can still exist without your knowing the word for it.

This seems to be one reason Epicurus was teaching that we need to look at the most basic definition of things and why he didn't like Socrates'/Plato's obfuscation and redefining terms willy-nilly.

More later....

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2024 at 8:56 AM

I don't think we have any major disagreement Don but as to this:

### [Quote from Don](#)

saying that we do not sense things through the impact of eidola on our sense organs. Our bodies - all bodies - are not casting off "films of atoms" that travel through space. Yes, our eyes interact with photons. Our noses interact with molecules in the air. Our tongues interact with chemicals. And so on. Is it interesting to understand how Epicurus was reacting to his contemporaries' philosophical ideas? Sure. No argument there. However, Epicurus called his students to study nature and "how things work" in the materials world. On that track, I think it behooves Epicureans living in the 21st century to understand how sensations and the brain work to their best of our ability in the here and now as well.

As I see it, the important issue is whether the mind and the sense work through material / bodily means or through some other means. We aren't a biochemistry group, and it would be as unproductive for us to get into the details of biochemistry as it would be to get into the latest discussions of particle physics. Epicurus' general approach remains perfectly valid: the things we are talking about are happening as a result of the movement of physical "real" things of some kind, and are neither the result of supernatural forces nor are they essentially unsolvable (such as moving too fast for any apprehension, as referenced by Diogenes of Oinoanda). The task of philosophy is to get a reasonable understanding of the big picture, and the final details are best left either to others who want to spend the time exploring that, or simply to the theory of multiple explanations, in which so long as we have one or more reasonable non-supernatural theories, then we can dismiss the worst of the problems (gods, fate, zero regularity) and get on with living our lives as best we can.

To get too far into the details of whether a photon constitutes a particle or not isn't going to contribute much to that, although I am all in favor of reading about it in the appropriate place. I've always enjoyed reading science magazine and hearing the theories.

The real problem is that the majority of people who get exposed to philosophy are polluted with these false major theories, and they need to be provided responsive and persuasive theories that point the way to what is true. Whether the data that we receive through perceiving particles is encoded in "shape" (by means of film like the skin of a snake) or otherwise, the real issue is whether the data comes to us through the particles and our senses receive it and our minds interpret it, or not.

Yes you're probably right to say that the Meno paradox is sophistry. But simply saying that it is sophistry doesn't persuade the legions of normal people outside this group who need to be provided both an explanation as to why it is sophistry and an alternative that makes sense from an Epicurean point of view. There are reams of videos out there today further causing confusion on these issues, and it will be necessary for people who want more "Epicurean Friends" in their real world lives to go out and explain that the Meno problem does have one or more reasonable solutions.

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2024 at 2:33 PM

Another aspect of this issue of focusing on what is most important is as explained in Asimov's article "[The Relativity of Wrong](#)". The full article explains the point in detail and gives example after example to show how Asimov is correct, but this excerpt is probably the most concise statement of the Asimov's ultimate position:

### Quote

The young specialist in English Lit, having quoted me, went on to lecture me severely on the fact that in every century people have thought they understood the Universe at last, and in every century they were proven to be wrong. It follows that the one thing we can say about our modern "knowledge" is that it is *wrong*.

The young man then quoted with approval what Socrates had said on learning that the Delphic oracle had proclaimed him the wisest man in Greece. "If I am the wisest man," said Socrates, "it is because I alone know that I know nothing." The implication was that I was very foolish because I knew a great deal.

Alas, none of this was new to me. (There is very little that is new to me; I wish my corresponders would realize this.) This particular thesis was addressed to me a quarter of a century ago by John Campbell, who specialized in irritating me. He also told me that all theories are proven wrong in time.

My answer to him was, "John, when people thought the Earth was flat, they were wrong. When people thought the Earth was spherical, they were wrong. But if *you* think that thinking the Earth is spherical is *just as wrong* as thinking the Earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together."

Our problem is that the view of the "young specialist in English" is the predominant position among "educated" people today. They are not certain of anything other than that it is impossible to be certain of anything - *that* they are certain of. And as Azimov is echoing Epicurus in saying, *that* is the most nonsensical position of all. Yes we should adopt the latest terminology whenever the audience is looking to hear views on the latest terminology, but what the vastly larger audience needs to hear is Epicurus' explanation of how knowledge is possible. For that an approximation of the physical details is what is called for, not an explanation of how the science is constantly changing which plays into the "young specialist in English's" position.

We routinely say that the earth is a "sphere" even though technically it's not. Whether we can call photons or sounds "particles" or "images" or "waves" is something that we can explain when the context calls for it, and when we want to talk about the latest details. But the big picture is that vision and the other senses, and the processing of the mind itself, work through "material means" rather than through supernatural or incomprehensible means. That point needs to be hit on in new ways that don't require us to go to Scientific American for the best ways to discuss them, and as far as I can see we can profitably talk about both "atoms" and "images" today even though those words have been replaced in strictly scientific jargon.

The real tragedy would be if someone who is otherwise motivated to produce responsive youtube videos or general interest articles explaining the benefits of the Epicurean perspective decided not to do so because they were concerned that "atoms" and "images" are the equivalent of saying that the world is flat. No one in this thread would urge that, but we're writing these threads not only for ourselves but for readers we don't even know, and that's why I belabor this point. By all means explain the differences between atoms and images and modern terminology, but don't let that interfere with the basic point that of all the philosophers in western civilization it was Epicurus who first pointed the way to a rational system of knowledge-building.

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## **Post by "Pacatus" of November 1, 2024 at 6:09 PM**

"I had fallen victim to the fallacy of the 'growing edge;' the belief that only the very frontier of scientific advance counted; that everything that had been left behind by that advance was faded and dead. ... There is not a discovery in science, however revolutionary, however

sparkling with insight, that does not arise out of what went before.”

- Isaac Asimov

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## Post by “Don” of November 1, 2024 at 7:14 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

As I see it, the important issue is whether the mind and the sense work through material / bodily means or through some other means. We aren't a biochemistry group, and it would be as unproductive for us to get into the details of biochemistry as it would be to get into the latest discussions of particle physics.

Oh, I wouldn't suggest we become a biochemistry or particle physics forum; however, we've had any number of threads on neuroscience and physics. I don't advocate getting into the weeds of any specific science, but I think we have to keep distinct the ancient theories and the current theories (*as in "a formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or of ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event or, more generally, an opinion or explanation; as in evolutionary theory" and NOT "it's just a theory"*).

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus' general approach remains perfectly valid...

Absolutely. I will be the first to contend that there is a through-line from Epicurus to modern scientific theories in that ALL are based on the truth of there being a material, physical universe \*and\* the laws governing said physical universe are knowable \*and\* there's no mystical, supernatural woo underlying the universe.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

But simply saying that it is sophistry doesn't persuade the legions of normal people outside this group who need to be provided both an explanation as to why it is sophistry and an alternative that makes sense from an Epicurean point of view.

So what's your solution to this problem other than to point out the natural, material basis for sensations? I fully realize there's [Chalmer's supposed "hard problem" of consciousness](#) where he seems to want to smuggle in supernatural or mystical bases for consciousness. I still think consciousness is just the sum total of our physical sensations, neurons, gut bacteria, and what

not working in concert. Sure, it's complex!! But, in the end, we're still just physical beings sensing a physical world just trying to get through the day.

And I agree with Asimov's spectrum of "wrongness." BUT while eidola were less wrong than Plato's flashlight idea of sensation, it still was more wrong than our current understanding. There's nothing "wrong" with that, and I find it interesting to delve into how Epicurus came up with that approach. BUT we also need to understand why it was wrong, how it was wrong, and be humble enough to know how far we STILL have to go to understand how the universe works on all levels.

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 1, 2024 at 7:46 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

BUT we also need to understand why it was wrong, how it was wrong,

Along the lines of the Asimov quote that Pacatus listed, I would not admit that Epicurus was "wrong" at all. Incomplete as to details, yes, but that does not make the overall theory "wrong." We don't need the details nearly as often as we need the overall outline. When necessary we will correct the outline, but, again per the Asimov quote, it is not the latest formulation of the details that is all that matters. The higher level outline, so long as it can be interpreted as a high-level summary of the details, is the place we normally live our lives.

In philosophy it's going to be the conceptual framework, the broader outline, that matters, not the details of implementation. I would leave the details to those who want to follow the day to day revisions of the science, and I would teach people the overall correctness of the logical basis and the factual outlines (the nature worlds through particles and material means) of Epicurus's approach. The final details of implementation will *always* be revised, and in the meantime we have to have a firm conceptual framework to live our lives. The conceptual framework of particles striking our senses, and then the body processing them in natural logical ways toward conclusions we can be confident about, is the key.

But again, my reasoning here is based on the premise that we are looking to build Epicureans who can live happily, not the latest particle physicists or neurosurgeons. If and when they think they have found something supernatural, then we would need to take special notice of that (and refute them), but as to the day to day advancement of their individual techniques those aren't really relevant to most human beings. I don't mean to be overly presumptuous in saying this and of course some people will want to devote themselves to being physicists and neurosurgeons, but they will confront the problem Polyaeus ran into -- and they will want to

reflect on whether they are pursuing science for the sake of science alone, and in doing so, failing to live the best life that would be possible to them if they would listen to philosophy.

Quote

*I had fallen victim to the fallacy of the 'growing edge;' the belief that only the very frontier of scientific advance counted;*

The main problem posed by the Meno question is a logical one, and so I would say that it has to be met on logical grounds.

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### Post by “Pacatus” of November 1, 2024 at 8:19 PM

[Don](#) :

I don't think that one has to go to some supernatural/mystical “woo” to recognize that there are hard questions of consciousness – which is probably worth a thread of its own. For example: **intentionality**. Whence my actual *intention* to write these words, with the notion that I am consciously attempting to convey some meaning? And this also goes to that fraught question of so-called “free will” (a phrase I have come to dislike, and for which I would offer alternatives such as “intentional – if constrained – agency”). Is such intentionality a kind of epiphenomenon? Or just an illusion?

That is probably all worth a thread of its own. And there have been extended discussions on here of “free will.”

But, as [Cassius](#) argues (I think), such questions are secondary (even if profoundly interesting) to how I can (as a layperson) draw on Epicurean philosophy to live my life. In that framework, I *assume* intentionality and agency because (to draw on Robert Parker's *Spenser* detective character 🕶️) the alternative doesn't get me anywhere.

~ ~ ~

Vatican Saying 9 comes to mind: “Necessity is an evil, but [there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity.](#)”

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### Post by “Pacatus” of November 1, 2024 at 8:39 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The main problem posed by the Meno question is a logical one, and so I would say that it has to be met on logical grounds.

In terms of inductive (evidence-based – as opposed to purely deductive) logic, current evidence is *indicative* of the most fruitful lines of inquiry. Such inquiry may or may not be falsified by future evidence. I'm not sure that the ancients (including the Stoics) had yet grasped the difference between deductive and inductive logic – but I suspect that Epicurus had at least an inkling ...

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## Post by “Don” of November 1, 2024 at 10:56 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Along the lines of the Asimov quote that Pacatus listed, I would not admit that Epicurus was "wrong" at all. Incomplete as to details, yes, but that does not make the overall theory "wrong." We don't need the details nearly as often as we need the overall outline.

Hmmm... I don't know about this: "not 'wrong' at all"? Maybe in broad outline, as in physical processes were at work in the eidola theory, it was not wrong. I don't think calling eidola theory "incomplete" is even the way to express it. It's not like we've added to more details about the eidola and how they're produced. I would contend that we ignore details at our peril. The sound waves and chemical compounds and photons and particles and so on that lead to sensation are not eidola. Our minds are not impacted by subtle eidola, engraving channels in the subtle atoms of our *psykhē*.

I give credit to Epicurus for positing a step on the way to our incomplete but fuller understanding.

I give credit to Epicurus for staying firm on physical material processes of sensation.

I agree on all that and its importance in the evolution of understanding how things work.

So, if you're saying that the "high-level summary of the details" is that "sensation and consciousness is the result of knowable physical processes" then, okay, that's not wrong. But as to whether I'm going to think of my thoughts as the result of eidola impacting my *psykhē* or whether they're electrical neural activity with input from other internal and external stimuli, I'm

taking the latter.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The conceptual framework of particles striking our senses, and then the body processing them in natural logical ways toward conclusions we can be confident about, is the key.

I see that as so broad though that I ask "Could that just as easily correspond to [Plato's flashlight/emission model of vision?](#)"

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

my reasoning her is based on the premise that we are looking to build Epicureans who can live happily

Agreed, but Epicurus also said "Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who *devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this*, have prepared for you just such an epitome and manual of the doctrines as a whole." So, it seems to me he felt the broad outline was important to keep in mind at all times, but investigating how the world worked with "continuous energy" gives one the confidence to have "calm enjoyment of life."

#### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

I don't think that one has to go to some supernatural/mystical "woo" to recognize that there are hard questions of consciousness - which is probably worth a thread of its own. For example: intentionality.

Just to be clear: I don't think answering the "how" consciousness is easy. It's a "hard problem." But I understand Chalmers as saying there's something "more" in addition to neurons and the brain and body to account for it. That's what I meant by woo. I come down on the late Daniel Dennett side (mostly) when it comes to looking for nonphysical mechanisms (ie, there's not any/it's all physical/material stuff). I fully admit I could be wrong about Chalmers, but that's the direction I saw him heading in in what I've seen or read.

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**Post by "Pacatus" of November 2, 2024 at 12:19 AM**

[Don](#)

I admit I was not responding to Chalmers per se. Just to the notion that there are no such “hard questions” (or that they are readily answerable by our current understandings of neurobiology). For the rest, my post – and the example of intentionality – stands. 😊 (Do I need to reaffirm that I don't ascribe to any "supernaturalism"?)

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## Post by “Don” of November 2, 2024 at 5:12 AM

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

#### [Don](#)

I admit I was not responding to Chalmers per se. Just to the notion that there are no such “hard questions” (or that they are readily answerable by our current understandings of neurobiology). For the rest, my post – and the example of intentionality – stands. 😊 (Do I need to reaffirm that I don't ascribe to any "supernaturalism"?)

Fully, completely, and totally agree there are some really difficult, hard questions to answer about how the world works! Zero argument there. Including, of course, in neuroscience. But like Alexander the Oraclemonger's snake god, I'm sure, in the end, there's a rational physical explanation for them... It just might take awhile longer to find the explanation to topics like intentionality, for example.

And you're officially on record for anti-supernaturalism 😊👍 Of that, I never doubted. 😊 and, mea culpa, if my post came off as combative. Certainly not my intention 😊

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2024 at 6:45 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

So, if you're saying that the "high-level summary of the details" is that "sensation and consciousness is the result of knowable physical processes" then, okay, that's not wrong.

Yes, that is what I am saying, just like I would still argue that it is useful to talk about "atoms" even though we use that term today to mean something other than what Epicurus would have meant.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

So, it seems to me he felt the broad outline was important to keep in mind at all times, but investigating how the world worked with "continuous energy" gives one the confidence to have "calm enjoyment of life."

Yes, I agree here too, but I would say that just like Polyaneus apparently pulled back from total focus on geometry / mathematics, it's only a certain type of person, and a relatively small number, who are going to want to focus on bleeding edge research as their primary focus. It looks to me like even Epicurus himself spent most of his time on higher-level / logical questions on how to fit the big picture together, and communicate the results to normal people so they could all live better lives in the time that they had. And I do think there's a theoretical problem that can occur from bleeding edge research. In a universe that is either actually infinite or essentially infinite, it needs to be understood and accepted at the start that it is absolutely impossible to know \*everything\* about \*everything\*. We therefore need a realistic attitudinal framework to incorporate that fact - that while we know we are not and never will be omniscient, we understand that some level of higher-level accuracy is "good enough," and that it is absolutely unnecessary and counterproductive to constantly doubt the big picture that has come into focus already.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

But like Alexander the Oraclemonger's snake god, I'm sure, in the end, there's a rational physical explanation for them...

That passage is one of the best examples from the ancient texts that we can cite. The mechanism of the snake may elude us now, or for a very long time, or even to our last moment of our life, but all the way through to that last breath we ought to be confident that there is a non-supernatural explanation for what we are seeing.

That's where we are going here - we're articulating a persuasive framework for understanding the nature of the universe that gives us that confidence. To get back a question raised in another recent thread, we're not pursuing pleasure because we have arbitrarily and unthinkingly decided that "pleasure" sounds good. We're pursuing "pleasure" because we have thoroughly considered the alternatives and decided that even though we need to be clear about what pleasure means and how to pursue it, the term "pleasure" - properly understood in a much wider sense than simply the sensual pleasures of the moment - is the best description that reflects the reality of nature.

## Post by “Don” of November 2, 2024 at 7:39 AM

I freely confess I haven't read Plato's Meno, but glancing at the ol' Wikipedia article, this made me LOL:

Quote from Meno article on WP

Meno's theme is also dealt with in the dialogue Protagoras, where Plato ultimately has *Socrates arrive at the opposite conclusion*: virtue can be taught. Likewise, while in Protagoras knowledge is uncompromisingly this-worldly, in Meno the theory of recollection points to a link between knowledge and eternal truths.

So can Plato be taken seriously if he comes to opposite opinions? I'm all for reconsidering opinions and beliefs in light of new evidence, but how can there be a "Meno problem" if even its author provides multiple answers?

Quote

Socrates rephrases the question, which has come to be the canonical statement of the paradox:

[A] man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire.

— translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1871

There's the old, I believe, Weinberger quote about:

- Known knowns
- Known unknowns
- Unknown unknowns

We can investigate "known unknowns" through prior experience. Unknown unknowns can eventually come to light as we experience more. We can investigate unfamiliar phenomena, test, observe, etc. via knowledge we have. "Meno" isn't really a problem unless one defines terms in such a way as to create a problem. Or so it seems to me.

PS. And when we "learn" something, we're not recollecting from a past life. We build on experience and knowledge that we've acquired or that we have a genetic predisposition for. Take language. Babies have an innate ability to make sounds, then to imitate sounds or communicative gestures (I always remember video of the baby with deaf parents inserting their hand, open close open close, "babbling" in sign language), then we learn how to formally put

sounds and words and sentences together. That's just one example, but I believe at least an illustrative one.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2024 at 11:01 AM**

Part of the issue seems to be that while you are discussing in the last post "investigating" or "making progress" toward greater understanding, the problem is that you don't really know when you have arrived. The problem reeks more of "black" and "white" resolution. Talking about shades of grey can be fun, but how do we find the full and complete definition of black or white by trial and error. If you don't watch out for the implications you end up like Cicero or other academic skeptics saying that the "probable" is the best you can do, and from there you are in a slippery slope toward total skepticism.

And to repeat the point made in the videos, this is not a question that derives from issues of "virtue" alone. That is merely an interesting example. The problem is that of coming to grips with whether it is ever possible to "know" anything - and that is exactly what Lucretius is addressing in Book 4. But there are all sorts of other references to the same problem scattered throughout.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2024 at 11:03 AM**

And Don I think you're remembering Rumsfeld rather than Weinberger

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REWeBzGuzCc>

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### **Post by “Don” of November 2, 2024 at 1:31 PM**

One issue I see in this discussion is "What do you\* mean by 'know'?"

\* btw "You" in the general sense, not you specifically.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The problem is that of coming to grips with whether it is ever possible to "know" anything

There are various senses of that word "know" so I would be curious to know (LOL) what word Plato used specifically. For example:

I know I'm alive

I know where I am

I know  $2+2=4$

I know the capital of the US is Washington DC

I know the universe was in a hot dense state at one point

And so on

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### **Post by "Pacatus" of November 2, 2024 at 1:32 PM**

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

- Walt Whitman

~ ~ ~

I think we can take the word "mystical" metaphorically here (or relating to feelings of awe, and not necessarily supernatural). I recall that Whitman was at least acquainted with Epicurean philosophy.

Not that scientific (and philosophical) inquiry and debate are not valuable (and sometimes pleasurable) - but that we, in the end, live in the day-to-day "real world". Feeling pleasure in the "moist night air" and the starry expanse overhead. Where we make daily decisions about

how we are to live: how to weave a life enriched by pleasure whilst minimizing pain and anxiety; how to celebrate simplicity; how best to love the ones we love; how to support our friends in troubled times; etc.

And that is, for me, where the meat and marrow of philosophy are.

And, yes, of course: “A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that, without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed.” (PD 12)

And: “We must not pretend to study philosophy, but study it in reality, for it is not the appearance of health that we need, but real health.” (VS 54)

And: “Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.” (U221)

~ ~ ~

And, [Don](#) : If I came off as defensive, mea culpa. Didn't mean to. 🥲😊

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## Post by “Pacatus” of November 2, 2024 at 3:13 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I know I'm alive

Just as an (hopefully not too distracting) aside: Wittgenstein argued that, in normal everyday discourse\* (as opposed to academic philosophy) that “know” is, at best, superfluous. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he imagines a passerby who overhears a discussion in which W's interlocutor says: “I *know* that's a tree!” (Note the emphasis.) W says to the puzzled passerby: “Don't worry. This fellow isn't crazy. We're just talking philosophy.”

Imagine again the addition of emphasis: “I *know* I'm alive.” How could there be any doubt? The same with the other examples. If there *were* doubt, to what could you appeal?

And this is where I think the Meno Paradox becomes a sophistic misapplication of deductive syllogistic – hence my post about inductive versus deductive logic.

[W's *On Certainty* was an extended exploration of this question, in response to G.E. Moore.]

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\* Which W argued was adequate to most of our everyday communication, and that academic philosophy (epistemology) often confused what is apparent.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2024 at 4:43 PM**

#### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

And this is where I think the Meno Paradox becomes a sophistic misapplication of deductive syllogistic

We've used the term sophism many times in this thread , but as part of writing for the future it's likely that there is no common understanding among normal people what that term really means either, other than the vague connotation that the person labeled a Sophist is somehow a bad person. It's a continual struggle to make all this clear and that's why we ultimately take it back to the senses and a general description of thinking processes with as little jargon as possible.

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of November 2, 2024 at 6:16 PM**

#### [Cassius](#)

You're right. And, in using that adjective, I was imputing some intention to obfuscate or sway with false logic. My bad.

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### **Post by “Don” of November 2, 2024 at 7:08 PM**

Good point

For me, whether I'm technically correct or not, I've been using sophistry to mean someone, or an argument that, uses clever unnecessarily complex language to sound smarter and more erudite than they actually are. "If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bs."

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 1, 2024 at 6:38 AM

*Only the wise can judge the wise... therefore we should all be skeptics?*

Here is the Meno problem stated another way, In Cicero's Academic Questions (the person speaking is Cicero himself, speaking as an Academic Skeptic, if I read this correctly):

### Quote

Nor is there any difference between ourselves and those who think that they have positive knowledge except that they have no doubt that their tenets are true, whereas we hold many doctrines as probable, which we can easily act upon but can scarcely advance as certain ; yet we are more free and untrammelled in that we possess our power of judgement uncurtailed, and are bound by no compulsion to support all the dogmas laid down for us almost as edicts by certain masters. For all other people in the first place are held in close bondage placed upon them before they were able to judge what doctrine was the best, and secondly they form judgments about matters as to which they know nothing at the most incompetent period of life, either under the guidance of some friend or under the influence of a single harangue from the first lecturer that they attended, and cling as to a rock to whatever theory they are carried to by stress of weather. For as to their assertion that the teacher whom they judge to have been a wise man commands their absolute trust, I would agree to this if to make that judgement could actually have lain within the power of unlearned novices (for to decide who is a wise man seems to be a task that specially requires a wise man to undertake it) ; but granting that it lay within their power, it was only possible for them after hearing all the facts and ascertaining the views of all the other schools as well, whereas they gave their verdict after a single hearing of the case, and enrolled themselves under the authority of a single master. But somehow or other most men prefer to go wrong, and to defend tooth and nail the system for which they have come to feel an affection, rather than to lay aside obstinacy and seek for the doctrine that is most consistent. Academica II iii Lucullus