

Epicurus vs Aristotle: the Role of Reason vs Sensation Seeking?

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 8, 2025 at 1:47 PM

In reaction to a recent post with a song titled "Cheese on Bread", I've been thinking about the role of reason, and for Epicureans we have the Letter to Menoeceus... but also I've been wondering about reason according to Aristotle...and I did a quick search:

Quote

The following is an AI response:

Aristotle articulated the idea that humans find their highest fulfillment in exercising reason, especially through contemplation, making it a key part of a flourishing life.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Book 10, he defines the highest human good ([eudaimonia](#) or flourishing) as the excellent exercise of reason, culminating in the contemplative life, which he saw as the most divine and self-sufficient human activity, superior to political or practical life.

Here's a breakdown of where to find these concepts:

- **[Nicomachean Ethics](#)**, Book 1, Chapter 7: Aristotle introduces the idea that human flourishing (eudaimonia) involves fulfilling our unique function ([ergon](#)), which he identifies as the activity of the soul in accordance with reason or virtue.
- **[Nicomachean Ethics](#)**, Book 10, Chapters 7-8: This is where Aristotle makes his strongest case for contemplation (the life of the intellect and philosophical inquiry) as the highest form of human activity, superior to the practical life of politics or ethics because it's more self-sufficient, continuous, and akin to the gods.
- **Core Concept: [Eudaimonia](#)**: His entire ethical framework, detailed in the [Nicomachean Ethics](#), centers on *eudaimonia*, the idea that true happiness isn't fleeting pleasure but a state of living well and doing well, achieved through virtuous activity, especially intellectual virtue.

In essence, Aristotle argues that while living virtuously in society (practical wisdom, moral virtues) is crucial, the ultimate fulfillment comes from exercising our highest faculty—reason—through contemplation, making it the pinnacle of a flourishing human life.

Epicurus talks about the life of reason and philosophy in the Letter to Menoeceus, and so he would agree with Aristotle about the importance of reason, and yet we have the idea that Epicurus said that the highest good is "pleasure"... and which can end up pointing to "cheese on bread".

So how do we make sense of this? Maybe we need a deeper compare and contrast between Epicurus and Aristotle? And also I think we need to have a more clear definition of "pleasure" and specific activities of what the mind should be engaged in? Wouldn't Epicurus think that reason is more important than the types of food one eats?

And...Is there any truth to thinking that "sensation seeking" is in competition with "exercising the mind of reason"?

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2025 at 3:39 PM

This is an issue that is addressed at length by DeWitt in several chapters, and it's part of the reason why his book is so important.

I think it's also mentioned by Emily Austin by I'd have to go back and search for where.

A large part of the essential point is that Epicurus is all in favor of the use of practical reasoning based on evidence that can be verified through the senses.

What Epicurus is opposed to is the contention that "logic" (the construction of logical propositions such as $A + B = C$) is useful only so long as the meaning of A and B and C can be verified ultimately by observations confirmable by the senses. You don't have to see everything directly, but you have to have a chain of evidence that ultimately ends up with something that's observable. That's how Epicurus could be so certain of the existence of "atoms" even though no one at his time (or now, without equipment) has ever seen or touched an individual atom.

And Aristotle's problems often derive from the fact that he was willing to reach conclusions about the existence of a "Prime Mover" that are not verifiable by, and conflict with, the evidence of the senses.

Post by “Don” of December 8, 2025 at 5:56 PM

fwiw, here's my contribution to this...

[Epicurean Sage - An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics](#)

This is an exploration of Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle through an Epicurean lens. The Aristotle translations used are by Martin Ostwald (1962, Liberal Arts... sites.google.com

Work in progress, naturally.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 8, 2025 at 7:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Work in progress, naturally.

Wow Don, that's amazing! I will check it out! 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 8, 2025 at 7:10 PM

[Cassius](#) my question deals both with "the telos" and with the definition of "pleasure"...of course we have talked about these many times in many threads here on the forum.

Making a quick comparison between Epicurus and Aristotle could look like this:

Epicurus = "pleasure" is the telos (end) of the best life and the word "pleasure" leads most people to hear that Epicurus gave more importance to bodily sensation.

vs.

Aristotle = "living well and doing well" is the telos (end) of the best life and humans find their highest fulfillment in exercising reason, especially through contemplation.

[Don](#) Have you looked at Aristotle's book 10 ? (which is where the Google AI suggested).

Post by “Don” of December 8, 2025 at 7:20 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Don't have you looked at Aristotle's book 10 ?

Have not made it to Book 10. I was trying to go beginning to end, but it's a slog for all the things I have to rant about against Aristotle.

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2025 at 8:06 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Epicurus = "pleasure" is the telos (end) of the best life and the word "pleasure" leads most people to hear that Epicurus gave more importance to bodily sensation.

In my view you're no doubt right that "most people hear Epicurus to be saying that he gave more importance to bodily sensation" and in my view also those people are making very incorrect about what Epicurus was saying. There are ample reliable texts indicating how wrong they are.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Aristotle = "living well and doing well" is the telos (end) of the best life and humans find their highest fulfillment in exercising reason, especially through contemplation.

And yes that is a key point about Aristotle, the response to which has many aspects but one of the primary of which is that there is nothing divine about human reason, and by focusing on it to the exclusion of the rest of the human, and of nature itself, is to divorce the mind from the body in a way that is totally unjustified, improper, and disastrous. One writer who makes that point very well is Cosma Raimondi. This was directed to the Stoics but much of it applies to Aristotle too:

Quote

If we were indeed composed solely of a mind, I should be inclined to call Regulus "happy" and entertain the Stoic view that we should find happiness in virtue alone. But since we are composed of a mind *and* a body, why do they leave out of this account of human happiness something that is part of mankind and properly pertains to it? Why do they consider only the mind and neglect the body, when the body houses the mind

and is the other half of what man is? If you are seeking the totality of something made up of various parts, and yet some part is missing, I cannot think it perfect and complete. We use the term 'human', I take it, to refer to a being with both a mind and a body. And in the same way that the body is not to be thought healthy when some part of it is sick, so man himself cannot be thought happy if he is suffering in some part of himself. As for their assigning happiness to the mind alone on the grounds that it is in some sense the master and ruler of man's body, it is quite absurd to disregard the body when the mind itself often depends on the state and condition of the body and indeed can do nothing without it. Should we not deride someone we saw sitting on a throne and calling himself a king when he had no courtiers or servants? Should we think someone a fine prince whose servants were slovenly and misshapen? Yet those who would separate the mind from the body in defining human happiness and think that someone whose body is being savaged and tortured may still be happy are just as ludicrous.

I find it surprising that these clever Stoics did not remember when investigating the subject that they themselves were men. Their conclusions came not from what human nature demanded but from what they could contrive in argument. Some of them, in my view, placed so much reliance on their ingenuity and facility in debate that they did not concern themselves with what was actually relevant to the inquiry. They were carried away instead by their enthusiasm for intellectual display, and tended to write what was merely novel and surprising — things we might aspire to, but not ones we should spend any effort in attaining. Then there were some rather cantankerous individuals who thought that we should only aim for what they themselves could imitate or lay claim to. Nature had produced some boorish and inhuman philosophers whose senses had been dulled or cut off altogether, ones who took no pleasure in anything; and these people laid down that the rest of mankind should avoid what their own natural severity and austerity shrank from. Others subsequently entered the debate, men of great and various intellectual abilities, who all delivered a view on what constituted the supreme good according to their own individual disposition. But in the middle of all this error and confusion, Epicurus finally appeared to correct and amend the mistakes of the older philosophers and put forward his own true and certain teaching on happiness.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 9, 2025 at 8:12 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

my question deals both with "the telos" and with the definition of "pleasure"...of course we have talked about these many times in many threads here on the forum.

Here is a recent thread which brings up good points:

Post

["Their God Is The Belly" / "The Root of All Good Is The Pleasure Of The Stomach" And Similar Attributions](#)

This weekend in our Sunday zoom which was devoted substantially to food issues we tangentially discussed the statements that I gather are traditionally attributed to Metrodorus to the effect that the stomach or belly is of particular significance.

I thought I'd paste the following here as what appears to be the major source of this, and repeat my belief that general statements of this type should be viewed with caution. These sources (particularly Plutarch) are substantially hostile, and I am...



Cassius

November 24, 2025 at 9:55 AM

Post by "Don" of December 10, 2025 at 11:29 PM

Admin. Note: This post has been copied from thread [Their God is Their Belly](#).

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

who mind earthly things.

Oh the horror! That we should "mind earthly things"!? [/s]



The KJV "earthly things" makes it sound like a moral slight (earthly, base things.. And I'm sure that's part of it), but the word is literally "things on the earth, things in the world."

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on *earthly things*. (NRSV updated ed.)

ἐπίγειος "on or of the earth, terrestrial" I'm assuming in contrast to things of heaven.

Post by “Joshua” of December 11, 2025 at 12:07 AM

Admin. Note: This post has been copied from thread [Their God is Their Belly](#).

Quote

"earthly things"

I made a passing reference in [episode 284](#) of the podcast (15:43 mark) to the connection between Cicero and Christianity on this point. Here is the passage from Tusculan Disputations, II, XIII:

Quote

For you must either admit that there is no such thing as virtue, or you must despise every kind of pain. Will you allow of such a virtue as prudence, without which no virtue whatever can even be conceived? What then? will that suffer you to labour and take pains to no purpose? Will temperance permit you to do anything to excess? Will it be possible for justice to be maintained by one who through the force of pain discovers secrets, or betrays his confederates, or deserts many duties of life? Will you act in a manner consistently with courage, and its attendants, greatness of soul, resolution, patience, and **contempt for all worldly things** [*rerum humanarum despicientiae*]? Can you hear yourself called a great man, when you lie groveling, dejected, and deploring your condition, with a lamentable voice; no one would call you even a man, while in such a condition: you must therefore either abandon all pretensions to courage, or else pain must be put out of the question.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 11, 2025 at 7:49 AM

I've just copied two good posts from that other thread, as they serve as part of an exploration regarding "reason vs. sensation". And this goes beyond just Epicurus vs Aristotle, and my hope is that we can shed light on some subtleties within Epicurean philosophy. Can talk more about these two posts I copied over from this standpoint

Because in some religious contexts reason *is* an earthly thing. There is the emphasis on faith within Christianity. And even in Buddhism there are some teaching that urge the practitioner to let their thinking mind drop away (meaning that reason doesn't bring enlightenment).

I would like to suggest that Epicurus embraces many aspects of sensation but also rejects certain aspects (such things as "dionysian" frenzy). And Epicurus embraces many aspects of reason but also rejects certain aspects. And I think it would be very important for us to get clear about what is embraced and what is rejected...perhaps a visual table would be helpful (with references).

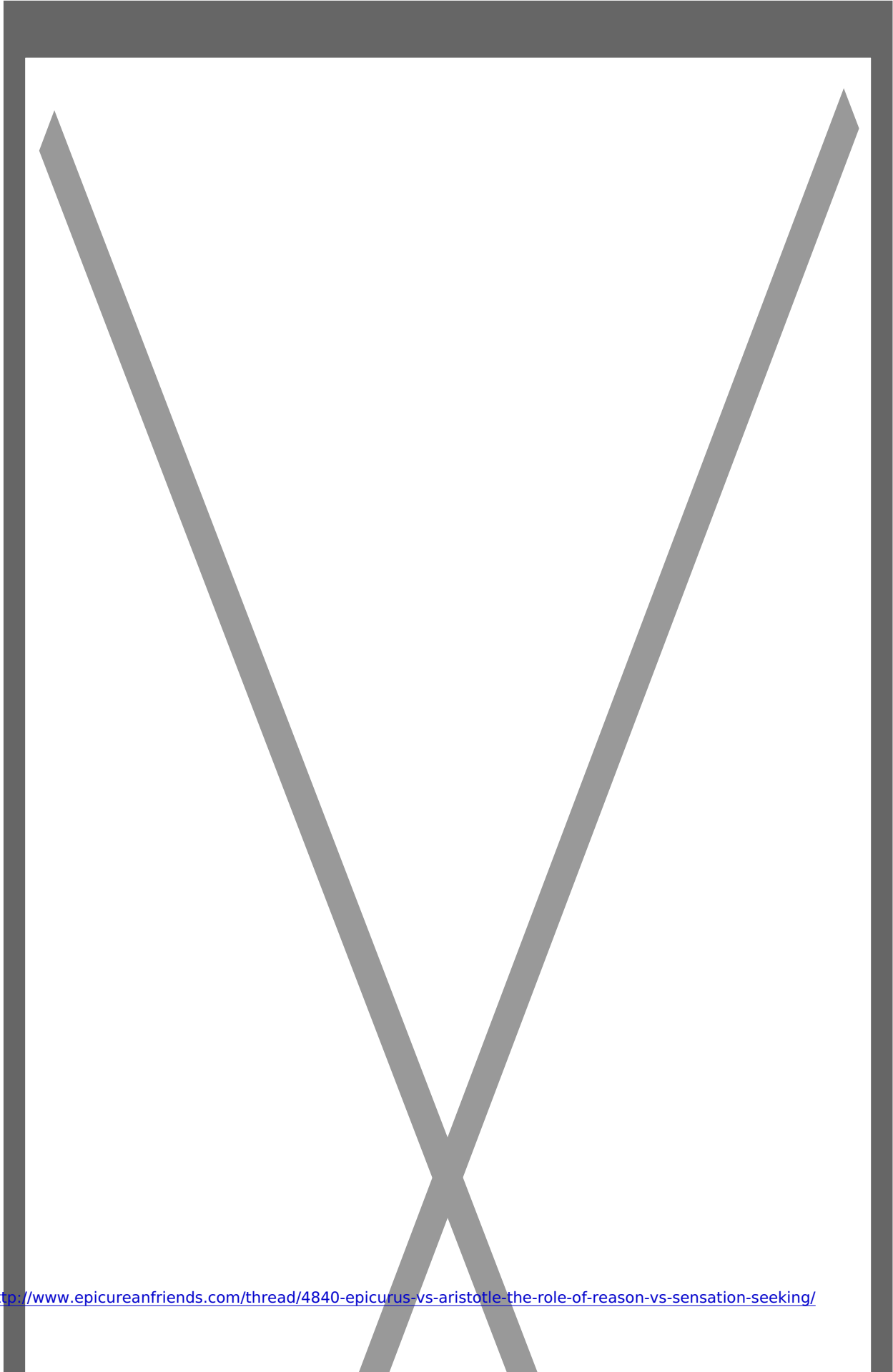
Post by “Don” of December 11, 2025 at 7:59 AM

Oh, this is a little interesting, the phrase was used by Varro in his work being written contemporaneously with Cicero:

Quote

all worldly things [rerum humanarum...

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[Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

"It was written in the 50s or 40s BC.[2]"

Cicero's "contempt for all worldly things [rerum *humanarum* despicientiae]" seems even worse than Philipians "επίγαιος". That's at least generally "on or of the world" but Cicero is advocating specifically contempt for all "human" things. Isn't virtue itself a concern of humans?

Post by “Cassius” of December 11, 2025 at 8:20 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Isn't virtue itself a concern of humans?

Presumably he'd say that animals don't have the same kind of virtue and classify virtue with the divine (?)

Post by “Don” of December 11, 2025 at 8:24 AM

Along these lines, I'm going to quote Obbink in his *On Piety by Philodemus* translation and commentary:

Quote

traditional forms of worship are viewed by Epicurus as natural responses to the recognition of divine nature, and are not merely tolerated but recommended to his followers. Numerous acts of worship are attested for Epicurus and individual Epicureans, including sacrifice, prayer, and oaths, 1 adoration of statues, dedications, mystery initiation,• participation in calendrical festivals,s and rites of private and ancestral cult. Their opponents, considering such practices were incompatible with the Epicurean rejection of natural teleology, divine providence, and divination, viewed them as insincere parodies designed to cultivate popular favour. Epicureans, however, maintained that participation in such practices was intended to illustrate the Epicurean theory of

religion and social cohesion, and the degree to which cultural phenomena (including false beliefs) could be accounted for; for Epicurus, like Prodicus and Democritus, viewed cult as a natural outgrowth of cultural history. Similarly, we find Epicureans, in an attempt to rationalize and thereby vindicate popular belief (thus demonstrating a clear philosophical understanding of even the most primitive of ideas), maintaining the proposition that 'gods' are actually capable of doing men harm (i.e. the wicked, as a result of their own depraved conceptions of the gods).

These practices seem well-attested by the author of *On Piety* (it could have been [Phaedrus](#) or Philodemus, but now traditionally attributed to the latter) but they seem at odds with Lucretius in his scorn for religious practices in book V: 1198-1203: "It is no piety to show oneself / Bowing with veiled head towards a stone, Nor to be seen frequenting every altar, Nor to fall prostrate on the ground, with palms outspread ..." It seems Epicurus himself would have done these and encouraged his school to do so. I'm certain Epicurus ascribed different motivations for bowing, sacrificing, etc than would the hoi polloi but he seems to have taken part in all that.

Post by "Don" of December 11, 2025 at 8:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Isn't virtue itself a concern of humans?

Presumably he'd say that animals don't have the same kind of virtue and classify virtue with the divine (?)



Agreed. And isn't that *convenient* for him.

Post by "Joshua" of December 11, 2025 at 10:36 AM

In fairness to Cicero, he is writing specifically in the context of *courage*. Livy's mythical story of the [Lacus Curtius](#) in the Roman Forum might shed some light on what he meant by the phrase;

Quote

The most popular story (~362 BCE), and also the one Livy deemed most likely, was a myth glorifying the nation: Rome was endangered when a great chasm opened on the Forum. An oracle directed the people to throw into the chasm “that what constituted the greatest strength of the Roman people,” and doing so would make the Roman nation last forever. After various things had been dropped into the ravine without result, a young horseman named Marcus Curtius (again, of the Curtia gens) saved the city by realizing that it was *virtus* that the Romans held most dear. In full armour on his horse, he jumped into the chasm whereupon the earth closed over him and Rome was saved.

Post by “Joshua” of December 11, 2025 at 2:06 PM

More in response to Kalosyni's original question, I think Epicurus' view of 'reason' is complicated from our point of view by his eccentric approach to vocabulary as described in the *Letter to Herodotus*:

Quote

First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning.

[38] For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference. And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.

And we can see this at work in the distinctly Lucretian phrase *vera ratio*, true reason or true philosophy.

Epicurus rejected reason as a criterion of epistemology, he rejected dialectic as a method of inquiry, and he was suspicious of the cult of formal logic. But in Lucretian terms, *true reason* is

synonymous with Epicurean philosophy, and for Epicurus the outward expression of this true reason is the practical wisdom of φρόνησις, phronesis. The fruits of phronesis, in turn, are good choices and avoidances. This is fundamentally reason in service of the blessed life of pleasure (which again is to be considered according to his eccentric approach to vocabulary).

So far I've discussed the Epicurean view of reason as it relates to Canonics (where DeWitt says it has been "dethroned") and to Ethics, where it is part of practical philosophy. Reason obviously has a place also in the Physics, but I'll have to return to that later.

Post by "Cassius" of December 11, 2025 at 2:31 PM

I think I am agreeing with Joshua when I say that I think most of us are on the same page that small "r" practical reason based on the evidence of the senses, anticipations, and feelings is a good thing to Epicurus, and he use it all the time.

The bad thing seems to be focused on propositional logic where the propositions are not tied to repeatable sensations, anticipations and feelings.

And that's related to why there can be "true reason" as opposed to "false reason." It's possible to do reason right and to do reason wrong. But the general term of "reason" as a reference to mental calculation in itself is not always a negative term at all.

Post by "Joshua" of December 11, 2025 at 2:37 PM

This is fundamentally the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* claims of knowledge, with Epicurus largely rejecting the former but endorsing his own philosophical interpretations of the latter.

Post by "Kalosyni" of December 11, 2025 at 3:07 PM

Quoting Joshua, quoting the Letter to Herodotus:

[38] For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference. And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

the difference between a priori and a posteriori claims of knowledge

I looked up the difference because I don't use those words in everyday life, and wanted to get a better understanding:

Quote

The following is from Google AI:

A priori and a posteriori claims are types of knowledge distinguished by how they're justified:

A priori knowledge is independent of experience (e.g., math, logic, definitions like "bachelors are unmarried"), known through pure reason; **A posteriori** knowledge depends on empirical experience and observation (e.g., "it's raining," scientific facts). The former relies on thought, the latter on senses or data from the world.

A Priori Knowledge (From the Earlier)

- **Definition:** Knowledge justified independently of experience, often through understanding concepts or definitions.
- **Key Idea:** You don't need to go out into the world to verify it; understanding the terms is enough.
- **Examples:**
 - "All triangles have three sides."
 - " $2 + 2 = 4$."
 - "All bachelors are unmarried men." (True by definition)

A Posteriori Knowledge (From the Later)

- **Definition:** Knowledge justified through empirical evidence, observation, or experience.
- **Key Idea:** Requires stepping outside of pure thought to gather facts about the world.
- **Examples:**
 - "The sky is blue."
 - "Water boils at 100°C at sea level."
 - "Socrates is drinking wine." (Requires seeing or knowing about Socrates's actions)

Key Differences Summarized

- **Source:** A priori comes from reason/logic; A posteriori comes from senses/experience.
- **Justification:** A priori is conceptual; A posteriori is empirical.
- **Necessity:** A priori truths often seem necessary (couldn't be otherwise); A posteriori truths are often contingent (could have been different).

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of December 11, 2025 at 5:37 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

This is fundamentally the difference between a priori and a posteriori claims of knowledge, with Epicurus largely rejecting the former but endorsing his own philosophical interpretations of the latter.

On the earlier point that Kalosyni raised and Joshua addressed, we probably should discuss at some point whether saying that Epicurus was opposed to "formal logic" would also be accurate:

Quote

Formal logic, the abstract study of [propositions](#), statements, or assertively used sentences and of [deductive](#) arguments. The [discipline](#) abstracts from the content of these elements the structures or logical [forms](#) that they embody. The logician customarily uses a symbolic [notation](#) to express such structures clearly and unambiguously and to enable manipulations and tests of [validity](#) to be more easily

applied. Although the following discussion freely employs the technical notation of modern symbolic logic, its symbols are introduced gradually and with accompanying explanations so that the serious and attentive general reader should be able to follow the development of ideas.

Formal logic is an [a priori](#), and not an [empirical](#), study. In this respect it contrasts with the natural [sciences](#) and with all other [disciplines](#) that depend on observation for their data. Its nearest [analogy](#) is to pure [mathematics](#); indeed, many logicians and pure mathematicians would regard their respective subjects as indistinguishable, or as merely two stages of the same unified discipline. Formal logic, therefore, is not to be confused with the empirical study of the processes of [reasoning](#), which belongs to [psychology](#). It must also be distinguished from the art of correct reasoning, which is the practical skill of applying logical principles to particular cases; and, even more sharply, it must be distinguished from the art of persuasion, in which invalid [arguments](#) are sometimes more effective than valid ones.

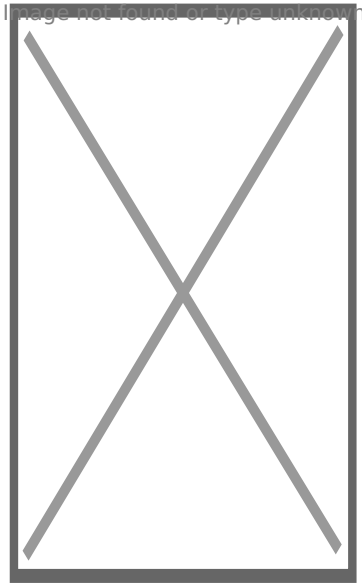
[Formal logic | Definition, Examples, Symbols, & Facts | Britannica](#)

Formal logic, the abstract study of propositions, statements, or assertively used sentences and of deductive arguments. The discipline abstracts from the...

www.britannica.com

Post by “Don” of December 11, 2025 at 5:41 PM

[Cassius](#) : Your experience with Philodemus' *On Methods of Inference* seems like it would be directly relevant here:



[Philodemus: On methods of inference: a study in ancient empiricism : Philodemus : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](http://uf.catalog.fcla.edu/uf.jsp?st=UF001032148&ix=nu&l=0&V=D)

<http://uf.catalog.fcla.edu/uf.jsp?st=UF001032148&ix=nu&l=0&V=D>
archive.org

(No, I have not read it yet)

Post by “Cassius” of December 11, 2025 at 5:53 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Your experience with Philodemus' On Methods of Inference seems like it would be directly relevant here:

Ah yes and you are reminding me that we have never made much effort to go through that, even though there are long and well preserved sections.

[Joshua](#) we are going to have to figure out where to put this in the list of things to talk about. Probably we need to pull out David Sedley's "On Signs" in addition to all the extensive discussion in the Delacy translation!

Given the interest in this subject maybe we need to bump it up on this list, but it will definitely take preparation, and probably some review of Sextus Empiricus as well. And it may even be possible that we ought to visit "Academic Questions" first because in a sense that's really the issue that Cicero summarizes for us there.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 12, 2025 at 9:01 AM

I just found this, which has a lot more on a priori and a posteriori:

[A Priori and A Posteriori | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

It seems like we must have some level of logic when we use words and speak - an example is "all bachelors are unmarried" which doesn't require sensation to understand. "On Methods of Inference" seems like an important source to incorporate.

Post by “Cassius” of December 12, 2025 at 11:54 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I looked up the difference because I don't use those words in everyday life, and wanted to get a better understanding:

A priori and a posteriori claims are types of knowledge distinguished by how they're justified:

A priori knowledge is independent of experience (e.g., math, logic, definitions like "bachelors are unmarried"), known through pure reason; **A posteriori** knowledge depends on empirical experience and observation (e.g., "it's raining," scientific facts). The former relies on thought, the latter on senses or data from the world.

I want to strongly agree with this comment. "A priori" and "A posteriori" are certainly very useful terms in the right circumstances and of course thanks to Joshua for pointing them out. But as Kalosyni says, practically no normal person in real life uses these terms or anything close to them. Not that I am a good model for anything but they just don't connect with me even after years of reading them. I therefore think they aren't the best way to explain this issue to the kind of regular people who are the target audience of Epicureanfriends.com .

On the other hand the issue being discussed is of huge importance to our target audience. I am hoping we can continue to refine how we explain these issues without reference to Greek or Latin words which smack of "lingo" with which normal people will never be able to be comfortable.

This is maybe the key distinguishing feature of what Epicurean Canonics is all about and we need clear and ordinary terms by which to explain it.