

# **Ben's personal outline of Epicurean philosophy**

**Post by “Mousikos” of May 15, 2019 at 10:24 AM**

This is my personal outline and interpretation of Epicurean philosophy:

## **On the nature of reality**

1. Nature, being the physical universe consisting of matter, energy, and void, is all that exists. The supernatural does not exist.
2. There are no gods, in the traditional religious sense of supernatural beings that interact with our universe.
3. The mind is an emergent function of the physical body, most importantly the brain. When the body dies and disintegrates, so does the mind. There is no afterlife in which the mind survives the death of the body.

## **On the nature of knowledge**

4. Nature is knowable. We observe it using our senses. And we use our mind to order these observations and integrate them into knowledge.
5. Our feelings of pleasure and pain inform us as to what is beneficial and what is detrimental to us.
6. We are born with certain innate ideas, such as a sense of justice. These form a kind of genetically transmitted knowledge which is beneficial to our life.
7. We should test our mental conclusions against these three sources of knowledge, and adjust them accordingly.

## **On the nature of the good life**

8. The goal of a good life is to achieve the greatest possible happiness.
9. To enhance happiness, we should pursue pleasure, and avoid pain.
10. It may at times be necessary to accept temporary pain in order to achieve greater pleasure later, or to avoid a pleasure in order to avoid a greater pain later.

11. We should not fear death, as in death we will no longer have sensations and feelings. So, we should make the most of this life.

12. There is no absolute morality, and each person should freely make their own hedonistic calculations. That said, because of the nature of knowledge, we can make general statements about which choices would bring greater pleasure and happiness to the majority of people.

13. Virtues are only good and worth pursuing insofar as they contribute to greater happiness through avoiding pain and offering pleasure. A choice is not virtuous if it does not lead to greater happiness.

14. In order to better understand pleasure and pain, we need to study nature. A better understanding of reality will help us achieve greater happiness.

Comments?

---

### **Post by “michelepinto” of May 15, 2019 at 10:48 AM**

I agree everything but this:

[Quote from Mousikos](#)

6. We are born with certain innate ideas, such as a sense of justice. These form a kind of genetically transmitted knowledge which is beneficial to our life.

It seems not correct neither Epicurean. Look at point 12.

---

### **Post by “Mousikos” of May 15, 2019 at 11:00 AM**

This is my understanding of prolepsis (anticipations) as per <https://newepicurean.com/resources/libr...s-and-feelings/>

In what sense do you think it is not correct?

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of May 15, 2019 at 11:48 AM**

The anticipations issue is very complex and I don't think that Michelle and I have gone through it in detail, so I look forward to reviewing where he and I are on that topic, and how it compares with the DeWitt version, which is of course not the same as other versions.

I have to run to lunch as I type this but I do want to go ahead and suggest that I too question that "ideas" is the right word, although I think DeWitt does use that word. My personal preference to describe the issue is "disposition" or something to that effect, in an analogy to eyesight -- the eyes are programmed / disposed to see in certain ways (wavelengths) but not at others. So the eyes are not born with the content of seeing a tree, but they are born with the equipment that is programmed in a way that allows us to see trees,

There is a lot to discuss here.

---

### **Post by "michelepinto" of May 15, 2019 at 11:48 AM**

I think there are not innate ideas or genetically transmitted knowledge. I think there is not an universal sense of justice.

---

### **Post by "Mousikos" of May 15, 2019 at 12:07 PM**

Instincts are similar forms of genetically transmitted knowledge (or perhaps it would be better to say behaviours). And little children appear to have a sense of fairness and justice that seems not to be learnt but innate.

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2019 at 1:15 PM**

We're pretty much at this point stating positions before getting into details, so here's another "position" that i think is deeply involved in this -- and that is the "blank slate" position that I gather Aristotle took..

Another issue that has to be resolved is what to make of Diogenes Laertius' description of Anticipations:

"By preconception they mean a sort of apprehension or a right opinion or notion, or universal idea stored in the mind; that is, a recollection of an external object often presented, e.g. Such and such a thing is a man: for no sooner is the word "man" uttered than we think of his shape by an act of preconception, in which the senses take the lead. Thus, the object primarily denoted by every term is then plain and clear. And we should never have started an investigation, unless we had known what it was that we were in search of. For example: The object standing yonder is a horse or a cow. Before making this judgment, we must at some time or other have known by preconception the shape of a horse or a cow. We should not have given anything a name, if we had not first learnt its form by way of preconception. It follows, then, that preconceptions are clear. The object of a judgment is derived from something previously clear, by reference to which we frame the proposition, e.g. "How do we know that this is a man?" Opinion they also call conception or assumption, and declare it to be true and false; for it is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence, and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by evidence. Hence the introduction of the phrase, "that which awaits" confirmation, e.g. to wait and get close to the tower and then learn what it looks like at close quarters."

This description has to mean something, even if we follow the DeWitt view.

In my view, this description by Diogenes Laertius is a description of the process of "conceptual reasoning." We gather input, we form an "idea" in our mind, and we store it and pull it out in the future where applicable.

I do not think that this process is what Epicurus would have considered to be a PREconception, or an anticipation. I think that we are talking about two separate things (1) conceptual reasoning, which we all understand to be the process of forming and using ideas, and (2) a faculty that disposes us to organize observations in particular ways, resulting in ideas later, but more akin to "feelings" about the idea, and separate from the idea itself. In other words, I may not be able to describe a situation in words as being just or unjust, but as I gather observations about a situation I begin to organize them "subconsciously" at which point I am already aware of feelings about what I am organizing. And my mind in processing these inputs is processing them along pathways that are set in motion innately, just as my eyes process light in ways that are innately determined by the makeup of my eyes.

In my view, the DeWitt position is strongly rejected by people like Bailey and most modern academics because they accept the Aristotelian blank slate, and they consider "reason" and "logic" to be the important thing about the human mind-- so they identify preconceptions with the art of conceptual reasoning.

But it is clear that Epicurus did not hold "reason" and "logic" in the same esteem that these others hold it, and so it seems very likely to me that Epicurus held a view of preconceptions which don't fit into the Socratic/Platonic/Aristotelian paradigm.

---

### **Post by “Mousikos” of May 15, 2019 at 1:31 PM**

I would need to delve deeper into Epicurus' usage of *prolepsis*, but I cannot imagine he would have meant *abstract ideas* (conceptual reasoning). It seems unnecessary and unexpected to slap a word like *prolepsis* onto that.

Let me just mention before I head to bed, that I consider the idea of the blank slate to be scientifically indefensible. My thinking on this matter has very much been formed by Steven Pinker's book *The Blank Slate*.

<https://stevenpinker.com/publications/blank-slate>

[https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_p...the\\_blank\\_slate](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_p...the_blank_slate)

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of May 15, 2019 at 2:00 PM**

I have heard of that book by Pinker and seen it cited, but not read it. I tend to think that "blank slate" is somewhat like "free will." it's one thing to say that babies are not born knowing the complete works of Shakespeare, or even that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But to say that they are born as absolute blank pieces of paper, without any predispositions to understanding how paper and writing instruments can be used, is also going way to far. And when we consider how easy it is for us to accept that animals are born with certain patterns of behavior, it becomes pretty close to preposterous to think that humans are not born with similar faculties.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of May 15, 2019 at 2:04 PM**

So when Michele says this:

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

I think there are not innate ideas or genetically transmitted knowledge. I think there is not an universal sense of justice.

I think we all would agree that not every person has the same sense of justice, nor is everyone born with specific "knowledge" of particular facts. But that's far from the end of the story, and it is probably equally clear that human minds are born with capacities and patterns of behavior just as are human eyes, ears, noses, and the rest. None of our faculties have come into contact with outside stimuli at birth, but all of them are genetically coded to operate within set guidelines and capacities.

---

**Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2019 at 2:06 PM**

I note that we got right off onto the topic of anticipations due to Michele's comment, but I should also say that I think the rest of the outline too is very good.

---

**Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2019 at 2:21 PM**

[Quote from Mousikos](#)

That said, because of the nature of knowledge, we can make general statements about which choices would bring greater pleasure and happiness to the majority of people.

I just noticed this part. It's good and i would not suggest changing it. But when reading it , it occurs to me that it's possible that it might not be clear what the "nature of knowledge" means in this context. I am thinking that what we're really saying here is that because of the nature of reality (including humans) being a combination of things that are determined and "mechanical" and things that are not determined and mechanical, we are able to form opinions about future events based on experience with past events.

I say this largely because I am always on guard against the implication that "knowledge" is something that exists in the air as part of some network of ideal forms, or something that comes from gods, or even something that we are born with (in our anticipation discussion). I think it's more proper to think of "knowledge" as opinions formed in our minds that we are

confident are true.

We form opinions about what is likely to happen in the future (not "certain" to happen, because there is no "fate") because we can accurately observe what has happened in the past, and over time we form understandings about how things generally work. And as we gain more experience we get more confident in predicting what that mix is likely to produce a result in the future. The consciously held opinions are probably what we refer to as "knowledge."

But I don't think we would ever get to the point of being able to say that anything is "knowledge" if our minds were not first programmed with some kind of organizing operating system to combine observations into concepts in certain ways. I continue to think it is a valid analogy to compare this process to our eyes being programmed to observe shapes and colors and shades in particular ways. The eyes then report that data to our minds, where the mind processes the data into something that ultimately we turn into concepts and words. I think the analogy is that there is a faculty of anticipations which leads us to observe "relationships" that we would not otherwise ever recognize as having any useful aspect to them. Try as they might, my cats and dogs are unable to arrange the things they see and hear and smell into the same kind of eventual conclusions that a human baby can do, and in observing the distinctions between humans and animals I think we are talking about a "faculty" that Epicurus thought deserved a category of its own.

---

### **Post by “Hiram” of May 15, 2019 at 4:52 PM**

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

I agree everything but this:

It seems not correct neither epicurean. Look at point 12.

I think this is what is called "archetypes of the collective unconscious" in Jungian psychology.

Jung cited the example of newborn tiny birds from Galapagos that exhibited panic when a large plane flew over them ... but there are no birds of prey that eat that species of tiny birds. Which means they must have inherited this panic instinct from ancestors from South America, who WERE eaten by Condors.

---

### **Post by “Mousikos” of May 16, 2019 at 1:47 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I just noticed this part. It's good and i would not suggest changing it. But when reading it , it occurs to me that it's possible that it might not be clear what the "nature of knowledge" means in this context. [...] I say this largely because I am always on guard against the implication that "knowledge" is something that exists in the air as part of some network of ideal forms, or something that comes from gods, or even something that we are born with (in our anticipation discussion). I think it's more proper to think of "knowledge" as opinions formed in our minds that we are confident are true.

I am pondering if there is a better way to phrase this. I certainly wouldn't want to suggest a Platonic understanding of disembodied ideas that exist in an ideal world. But what I am trying to get at in my statement #12, is that while there is no absolute morality, that doesn't mean every moral choice is equally valid, and that we cannot make any valid statements about morality (the typical "if you're an atheist and don't believe there is a god stopping you, why don't you go around raping and killing?" argument).

Because of what we know about reality, and our naturalist understanding of it, we can formulate certain guidelines that will be generally true for all humans, even if the details vary per individual. Things like: self-delusion is bad, an exclusive focus on short-term pleasure without considering the consequences is bad, only considering your own pleasure regardless of the happiness of other people is bad, etc.

---

## **Post by “Mousikos” of May 17, 2019 at 12:20 PM**

### [Quote from Hiram](#)

I think this is what is called "archetypes of the collective unconscious" in Jungian psychology.

Jung cited the example of newborn tiny birds from Galapagos that exhibited panic when a large plane flew over them ... but there are no birds of prey that eat that species of tiny birds. Which means they must have inherited this panic instinct from ancestors from South America, who WERE eaten by Condors.

Having thought a bit more about this, I think this could be related, yes.

Has anyone else explored connections between Epicurus and Jung?