

# Time in Epicurus, Lucretius, and Aristotle

Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2023 at 9:42 AM

## [Quote from Don](#)

Edit: see also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accident\\_...%29?wprov=sfla1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accident_...%29?wprov=sfla1)

Now, this being said, I think Cassius 's primary issue with "accident" as a translation being problematic is that it could be misunderstood by the casual reader to imply chance, luck, or fortune as in common parlance. I do think that could be an issue. It is a philosophical jargon word per that Wikipedia article.

Yes that is exactly the point.

In the mechanical aspects of the universe, things are not "accidental/fortuitous" in the sense that the exact same combinations of the same atoms in the same way at the same places will accidentally/fortuitously produce different results - they produce repeatable and reliable results, and that is why we see the regularity in the universe. The word "accident" can imply that the result could be otherwise for unknowable factors, and I would say that that is why Lucretius uses the word "eventum," "Event" at least today has more of an expected quality to it than does accidental. "Today's events will include and eclipse of the sun" means something different than "Today there will accidentally be an eclipse of the sun." It is not at all an accident that there will be an eclipse today, and based on what Epicurus says in the letter to Herodotus things like eclipses have been mechanically set in motion since the time the "world" came into being. Now no doubt there are also some truly "accidental" things, but those are more where the swerve ends up allowing for free will in living things, not in the billiard-ball functioning of much of the universe. If the swerve made all things totally unpredictable and if that is what we infer from the word "accidental" then the whole physics would be destroyed because nothing could ever be predicted. This aspect of the difference between words like chance and fortune etc is discussed in detail in the AA Long article I swear by on this topic: "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism."

And relevant to our recent discussions of Cicero, Long points out that of all of Cicero's many criticisms of Epicurus, Cicero never argued that the swerve destroys the regularity of the physics. From the absence of this argument Long concludes that Cicero declined to include it because everyone (including Cicero) understood that Epicurus did not consider the workings of the universe to be "accidental." The universe isn't "intentional" or "intelligent" but it's not "accidental" either.

This is the frequently out-of-tune Bailey using "accident"

## Quote

**[B-1:449] For all things that have a name, you will find either properties linked to these two things or you will see them to be their accidents. That is a property which in no case can be sundered or separated without the fatal disunion of the thing, as is weight to rocks, heat to fire, moisture to water, touch to all bodies, intangibility to the void. On the other hand, slavery, poverty, riches, liberty, war, concord, and other things by whose coming and going the nature of things abides untouched, these we are used, as is natural, to call accidents. Even so time exists not by itself, but from actual things comes a feeling, what was brought to a close in time past, then what is present now, and further what is going to be hereafter. And it must be avowed that no man feels time by itself apart from the motion or quiet rest of things.**

This is Brown 1743 wavering but clearly preferring "event":

## Quote

[449] All other things you'll find essential conjuncts, or else the events or accidents of these. I call essential conjunct what's so joined to a thing that it cannot, without fatal violence, be forced or parted from it; is weight to stones, to fire heat, moisture to the Sea, touch to all bodies, and not to be touched essential is to void. But, on the contrary, Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like, which not affect the nature of the thing, but when they come or go, the thing remains entire; these, as it is fit we should, we call Events. Time, likewise, of itself is nothing; our sense collects from things themselves what has been done long since, the thing that present is, and what's to come. For no one, we must own, ever thought of Time distinct from things in motion or at rest.

And this is Lucretius' Latin using "eventa":

Nam quae cumque cluent, aut his coniuncta duabus  
rebus ea invenies aut horum eventa videbis. 450  
coniunctum est id quod nusquam sine perinitiali  
discidio potis est seiungi seque gregari,  
pondus uti saxi, calor ignis, liquor aquai,  
tactus corporibus cunctis, intactus inani.  
servitium contra paupertas divitiaeque, 455  
libertas bellum concordia cetera quorum  
adventu manet incolumis natura abituque,  
haec soliti sumus, ut par est, eventa vocare.  
tempus item per se non est, sed rebus ab ipsis  
consequitur sensus, transactum quid sit in aevo, 460

tum quae res instet, quid porro deinde sequatur;  
nec per se quemquam tempus sentire fatendumst  
semotum ab rerum motu placidaque quiete.

I gather the word "accidens" exists too and maybe it appears in some other parts of the texts, but here where the key issue is being discussed the word appears to be eventum.

Also, given Brown 1743's word choice here, this is why I like to check that translation for comparisons, because this edition arguably seems to me to be sometimes more "in tune" with tone or word choice that Epicurus might have used given a broad view of all the texts.