

Circumstantial (Indirect) and Direct Evidence / Dogmatism vs Skepticism

Post by "Cassius" of March 6, 2026 at 8:30 AM

I modified the title of the thread just slightly to make clear that there are two kinds of evidence that must be considered in evaluating when we can be dogmatic and reach a conclusion and when we cannot.

Direct evidence is direct observation. We determine honey is sweet and snow is white by direct observation through the senses.

Indirect evidence is also called circumstantial evidence. We conclude that atoms (indivisible particles) exist even though we cannot see or touch them directly because the things we do observe directly (the circumstances or indirect observation) are seen to operate consistently with atoms being the cause of the regularity of what we do see. We therefore know atoms exist only circumstantially, but we are nevertheless sure that they do exist. We do not "wait" for more information or hold open the possibility that "maybe rather than atoms there are supernatural forces we have not yet discovered" because to do so would be sheer speculation. The decision to reject sheer speculation is at the heart of what it means to be Epicurean.

You can easily be a Muslim, Christian, or Jew and understand that eating too much ice cream will bring pain that outweighs the immediate pleasure. You cannot easily be a Muslim, Christian, or Jew and reject "faith" - which is regularly understood to be belief without "evidence."

And as Joshua brought up in our recent conversation about reasoning in Lucretius, this issue is why it is important to be able to do more than give a blank stare when the Stoics or Thomas Aquinas or others start insisting that there is a supernatural realm based on "arguments from design" or "ontological arguments" that amount to assertions based purely on speculation or word games. It is essential to have a clear understanding of when it is proper to consider something as "conclusive" and when it is not.

It is sound to conclude that atoms exist. It is not sound to conclude that supernatural forces exist.