

# Episode 330 - EATAQ 12 - In Contrast With Epicurus, The Stoics Opt For Virtue At Any Cost And Make Controversial Claims About The Senses

Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2026 at 7:45 PM

In this episode we begin a general overview comparison of Epicurean vs Stoic views of obtaining knowledge. Our theme will revolve around the different views and uses of the senses between the two schools, with the Stoics asserting that there are some sensations that are so strong that they essentially reveal self-evident truth. We're going to be looking for help from the usual sources (Long & Sedley, etc) to analyze this material as we go forward to finish Book One next week and dive deeper into the Stoic assertions beginning around Section Seven of Book Two. in the meantime, here is a Claude summary of the situation which seems likely to provide the outline we are looking for:

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## Sedley's Work on Epicurean Canonics vs. Stoic Epistemology

Sedley has addressed this comparison across several publications rather than in a single dedicated article. The most directly relevant pieces are:

**"Epicurus' theological innatism"** (2011), in Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (eds.), *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 29--52. This is where Sedley engages most directly with the concept of *prolepsis* and compares the Epicurean and Stoic treatments of it. You can find bibliographic confirmation of this piece on his publications page at:

[Articles and chapters - David Sedley](#)

**"Zeno's definition of *phantasia kataleptike*"** -- listed on the same publications page, in Scaltsas and Mason (eds.), *The Philosophy of Zeno* (2002). This addresses the Stoic side of the comparison directly.

**The *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*** (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 353--411 -- Sedley contributed the epistemology chapter, which covers both schools comparatively and remains the standard scholarly treatment.

**Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Vol. 1*** (Cambridge, 1987) -- Chapter 17 covers Epicurean epistemology and Chapter 40 covers Stoic epistemology including the

cataleptic impression. The parallel structure is deliberate and the commentary volumes (Vol. 2) make the comparisons explicit.

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## **The Core Comparison: Prolepsis vs. Cataleptic Impression**

Here is the substantive picture drawn from Sedley and the related scholarship:

**The Epicurean *prolepsis*** (preconception) is a general concept formed by the accumulation of repeated sense-experiences of the same kind of thing. It is entirely empirical in origin -- built up from sensation, not innate, not implanted by reason or God. When you have seen enough humans to recognize an unfamiliar one as human, you have a *prolepsis* of "human being." Epicurus and Zeno had different epistemological agendas: the core of Zeno's epistemology was the *phantasia kataleptike*, while *prolepsis* was at the centre of Epicurus' epistemology. For Epicurus, *prolepsis* is one of the three criteria of truth alongside sensation and feeling -- and crucially, it derives its authority entirely from sensation rather than operating independently of it.

**The Stoic *phantasia kataleptike*** (cataleptic or cognitive impression) is a very different animal. The main Stoic epistemological theorist was Zeno of Citium, who developed his ideas in response to a series of challenges from the Academic sceptic Arcesilaus. His key term is *katalepsis* -- "apprehension" or "cognition" -- the infallible grasping of some truth, usually by use of the senses. The key distinguishing feature is the Stoic claim that certain impressions carry their own mark of truth -- they are so vivid and so clear that they cannot be wrong. *Katalepsis* is infallible, in that it successfully applies a simple guaranteed cognitive mechanism shared by virtually all human beings: the truth stares you in the face, and you assent to it without the slightest possibility of being wrong.

The Epicurean objection to this is direct: the claim that certain impressions are *self-certifying* -- that their vividness alone guarantees their truth -- is exactly the kind of philosophical overreach that the Canon rules out. For Epicurus, no impression certifies itself. Every impression must be tested against other observations. Vividness is not a truth-criterion.

**The question of innatism** is where the comparison gets particularly interesting for Sedley. Chrysippus obviously borrowed *prolepsis* from the Epicureans, while, in the second generation of Hellenistic philosophers, Cleanthes had elaborated his own views on the *ennoia* of the gods. How did the two schools conceive *prolepsis*? What do they have in common and how and to which extent do they differ or influence each other? [WorldCat](#) Sedley's 2011 essay on theological innatism examines the specific case of the concept of the gods: Epicurus says that the *prolepsis* of the gods -- the concept of beings who are blessed and immortal -- is universal among humans, but he grounds it empirically (through dreams, through analogical reasoning from human happiness enlarged). The Stoics pushed *prolepsis* in a more rationalist direction, treating certain preconceptions as implanted by nature or reason in a way that gives them a

status closer to innate ideas. Sedley argues this is a significant departure from the Epicurean framework.

**The practical upshot** Sedley draws out -- most clearly in the Long and Sedley volumes -- is that the two schools represent opposite strategies for securing human knowledge against skepticism. The Stoics found their security in the self-certifying character of the cataleptic impression: when reality strikes you with sufficient force and clarity, you cannot be wrong. The Epicureans found their security in the cumulative reliability of sensation itself: not any single vivid impression, but the consistent testimony of the senses across repeated observations, which no argument can overturn without also overturning the foundation of all knowledge.

In epistemology, all Stoics agreed that there is a kind of infallible grasp which they call the cognitive or cataleptic impression. Although there were many variations on how that could best be defended against skeptical attacks, it remained an article of faith. The Epicureans take the absolutely opposite position that the world is an unorganized, or self-organizing but irrationally structured, collection of atoms, and any values are ones which have come out of it in an unplanned way.

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The best single freely accessible starting point for the comparison is the podcast interview with Peter Adamson at the History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, where Sedley discusses exactly this contrast in plain language: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/stoics-sedley>. The Long and Sedley *Hellenistic Philosophers* volumes are the indispensable scholarly reference and are widely held in university libraries.