

## Feedback From A User

**Post by "Lee" of January 16, 2020 at 11:07 PM**

Cassius,

I am on chapter 13 of Epicurus and His Philosophy by De Witt and thoroughly enjoying this impressive book. Thank your for taking the initiative to direct me.

In addition to learning much more about Epicurus and Epicureanism, I have also benefited from De Witt's perspective on the relationships among the competing Greek philosophy schools.

I have several questions that I am saving until I have finished the book and more carefully read through the the copious amount of information you have posted.

What you and others are doing here at Epicurean Friends is impressive, inspiring and important. I am delighted to see philosophy flourish in a practical form in our time and independent of the technical and self-serving work done in most modern universities.

Wishing you the fullness of life's pleasure.

JLR

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 16, 2020 at 11:14 PM**

Thank you for the kind words JLR! Don't feel the need to accumulate the questions unless you prefer it that way. Ask them anytime, together or separately, here or in any specific subforum.

Glad to have you, and thank you for affirming my confidence that DeWitt's contribution to Epicurean studies really does stand out from the pack.

And also, thanks for the reference to the "others" - it's community and participation which make this work and there is no way we could be here without the active support of our moderators and regular users.

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## **Post by “Lee” of January 16, 2020 at 11:33 PM**

The most pressing question I have is how Epicureanism accounts for the universal concepts of similitude which we formulate in the mind based on our sense experience. I am referring to ideas like horse, tree, or person. How can these only be material?

I believe Plato says we recall ideas after having sense experience because they are already present as innate ideas in our soul.

I recall that Aristotle updated the Platonic theory by saying the intellect abstracts the universal forms that exist in each particular sensible thing after repeated experience.

I find both accounts difficult to accept and yet it seems incontrovertible that we recognize the sameness of things. Otherwise, the world would appear to be filled with only particular things which we perceive through sense.

This ability to categorize particular things as the “same thing” (horse, human, etc.) seems to point to universal concepts that are difficult to account for as strictly material (atomic) in origin.

Are universal concepts real? If not, why/how do we all use them? If they are real, how can they be only material yet exist as the same in each thing and in our minds?

I hope I have formulated the question clearly.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of January 17, 2020 at 12:04 AM**

Great question JLR, and of course I cannot answer it with certainty, but I can tell you the direction i think the answer will be found: anticipations, in the DEWITT model, not the Bailey / Laertius model.

I think DeWitt is clearly correct that anticipations cannot simply result AFTER experience, or else they would never have been called PRE-Conceptions (and for other reasons DeWitt mentions).

I think the physics rules out "universal concepts" as being possible, even from atomic origin. However as DeWitt argues (I think I recall in several places) it is valid to talk about "human nature" as the accumulation of something over large amounts of time, and I think the answer is in following that line of thought.

DeWitt's chapter on anticipations I think is one of his most important contributions.

I will also say personally that I think he occasionally goes too far in calling them innate "ideas." I do not think they constitute innate "ideas" but rather dispositions toward the formation of ideas, not ideas themselves.

I do not expect you to take the time to follow this suggestion, but in my own mind I associate this with a theory that I have seen asserted in a particular place in a particularly engaging way: Jackson Barwis' 1776 work: "Dialogues on Innate Principles" written in response to John Locke's theories (and the "blank slate" argument in general). It seems to me that Barwis is correct in distinguishing innate "principles" from innate "ideas" which is the thrust of that fairly short but very entertaining dialogue.

I am not sure how I came across that but I found it on Archive.org, and set up this website to make it easier to read: <https://jacksonbarwis.com> Each of his works is very well written, but "Dialogue on Innate Principles" makes an argument that I think Dewitt would have done well to follow. Strip away the obviously superficial references to a creator and religion in Barwis' work and I think the potential parallels to anticipations being an "innate" facility are obvious.

I also relate this in my mind to Thomas Jefferson's observation of a similar type as to there being an innate faculty that does not rest on "knowledge" or "Experience" but on something else, which is again not "divine" but a part of human nature:

Moral Philosophy. I think it lost time to attend lectures on this branch. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. **He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.** In this branch, therefore, read good books, because they will encourage, as well as direct your feelings. The writings of Sterne, particularly, form the best course of morality that ever was written. Besides these, read the books mentioned in the enclosed paper; and, above all things, lose no occasion of exercising your dispositions to be grateful, to be generous, to be charitable, to be humane, to be true, just, firm, orderly, courageous, &c. Consider every act of this kind, as an exercise which

will strengthen your moral faculties & increase your worth.

#### [Quote from JLR](#)

This ability to categorize particular things as the "same thing" (horse, human, etc.) seems to point to universal concepts that are difficult to account for as strictly material (atomic) in origin.

So in sum I think your sentence there is very important, but that what you are observing does not point to "universal concepts" but to a human **faculty** - the faculty of anticipations, which disposes us in the direction you are looking - and gives us the disposition, which not all of us use, to exercise the ability to organize things into relationships, even though there is no divine order, no "essence," and no possibility of truly universal concepts.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 17, 2020 at 12:22 AM**

Ha - I am going to make a somewhat embarrassing admission as to the Jackson Barwis material: Even though it is a computer voice, I had the Dialogue on Innate Principles rendered into "ivona voice" format, and linked it from that website to this location on Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/JacksonBarwisCollectedWorks>

At that location you can listen to a computerized British female voice read the Dialogue, and there is something about the presentation that I find mesmerizing to listen to - it is almost like Shakespeare or some kind of poetry, and to my personal taste it just sounds very compelling. It reminds me somewhat of the way

Frances Wright wrote about Epicurus in "A Few Days In Athens," which i also think was written in fine literary style even apart from the excellent content.

Ok I forgot I set this page up: <https://newepicurean.com/resources/jack...ate-principles/>

Probably I will never forget these two paragraphs, particularly the second one:

**The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, *moral principles*. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.**

**When we are told that *benevolence is pleasing*; that *malevolence is painful*; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.**

That last paragraph resonates with me as exactly the way I feel after reading Epicurus explain the nature of things -- I "feel" that his appeal to feeling as the guide is correct, and I think to myself that not all the reasoning in the world could ever explain to me why I take pleasure in the things I take pleasure in, and the way I am repelled away emotionally by the things I find painful. And whatever this faculty or mechanism is, it is at least partly mental, and I don't think it is active only in the area of pleasure and pain.

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**Post by "Lee" of January 17, 2020 at 10:41 PM**

Thank you for taking the time to provide such a thoughtful and clear answer to my questions about universals Cassius. I will definitely listen to the Jackson Barwis dialogue and study the principles page you created about anticipations. I am impressed and immensely appreciative that you take the time to share your considerable knowledge with me and others.

I suspected the answer to my question would center on anticipations because when I read that chapter in De Witt, it seemed to encompass general concepts- especially the treatment of justice. I found the argument about the importance of social relations and justice to be compelling. If bees can cooperate so exquisitely in the hive it seems that nature can cause us to engage in even more complex social behavior or rules by anticipations.

I also find it quite plausible that a material mechanism could account for how we are born with a recognition of such things. It reminds me of the amazing experience of watching my newborn son search out his mother's breast and begin to nurse only minutes after being born. I remember thinking how astonishing it was that nature had clearly endowed him with knowledge before he had even seen the world beyond the womb!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

**...and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.**

...And whatever this faculty or mechanism is, it is at least partly mental, and I don't think it is active only in the area of pleasure and pain.

I am beginning to see the wisdom in the Epicurean teachings included in your quote above. I was always a bit uncomfortable with the apparent circularity in Aristotle's arguments that what appears good is that which we desire and that we naturally desire what is good. Pleasure and pain seem to be the essential natural guides (or telos) that provide the way to really determine the ultimate good.

I have a further question about anticipations that is a continuation of my original question. I find myself understanding these anticipatory "concepts" or "ideas" as having some sort of real existence- even if only in the mind. I continue to wonder if they are immaterial. Maybe this is just the prejudice of my Platonic and Aristotelian education but it is difficult for me to understand how we can predicate the same anticipatory "concept" of many things and for it to have a common meaning unless the concept itself (like justice) has some sort of real existence. I may be over thinking this but I have spent years studying to make sense of the intellectual world and struggle to understand what kind of existence these things have in Epicureanism materialism. Can you explain this existence any further?

Appreciatively,

Lee (JLR)

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 18, 2020 at 4:10 AM**

Lee:

Not sure I can "explain" anything but I can certainly try to give me current understanding from my reading:

### [Quote from JLR](#)

It reminds me of the amazing experience of watching my newborn son search out his mother's breast and begin to nurse only minutes after being born. I remember thinking how astonishing it was that nature had clearly endowed him with knowledge before he had even seen the world beyond the womb!

I would be very interested in comments from [Elayne](#) on this, as she is a pediatrician. Is it a matter of smell or touch or some other sensation?

### [Quote from JLR](#)

I was always a bit uncomfortable with the apparent circularity in Aristotle's arguments that what appears good is that which we desire and that we naturally desire what is good. Pleasure and pain seem to be the essential natural guides (or telos) that provide the way to really determine the ultimate good.

I completely agree - it is embarrassingly circular, and to that I would add that I think the "golden mean" analysis is embarrassingly devoid of substance! 😊

### [Quote from JLR](#)

I find myself understanding these anticipatory "concepts" or "ideas" as having some sort of real existence- even if only in the mind.

1. If what we are talking about is a faculty of anticipations with which we are born, I definitely think you are correct to use scare quotes around those words, as I think it is probably bright line unacceptable to believe that we are born with fully-formed concepts of ideas in the way those words are generally used. I believe the "blank slate" is wrong to assert that we are born essentially with nothing, but I don't think it is tenable to assert that we are born with anything requiring words or definitions, which is probably a requirement of the words concepts or ideas. That's why I like the word "preconceptions" almost better than "Anticipations," since this emphasizes that what we are talking about is something that precedes a concept, not something that IS a concept or is some kind of application of a concept.

2. As for "real existence" that's a hard one too, since that term implies materiality, and everything that goes on in the mind is ultimately traceable, or ultimately based on, things that are material "atoms." I think what we are probably talking about here are "qualities" of combinations of atoms, rather than "properties" of the atoms themselves, or as some people say "emergent properties" or "emergent qualities." This would be similar to the observation that the atoms themselves do not have color, but when combined into bodies, bodies have color and many other qualities that did not exist in the atoms standing alone.

### [Quote from JLR](#)

. I continue to wonder if they are immaterial.

I think this is the issue of "emergent qualities" that I just mentioned. Emergent qualities are not any less "real" because they arise from combinations of atoms rather than being a property of individual atoms at the atomic level.

### [Quote from JLR](#)

Can you explain this existence any further?

How much of Lucretius have you read? There are some really interesting sections that bear on these issues, one of which that comes to mind is the reference to Helen of Troy around line 420. Here Lucretius/Epicurus is saying that "Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like," are "events" of atoms (a word I think is much more accurate than "accidents") rather than "essential conjuncts" (properties) of atoms. The point that I think is important to realize is that "Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like," are not any less real to us because they are not properties of the atoms themselves. It's at the "body/combination" level that we experience life, which is what is ultimately important to us, and it should not be a problem for us to understand how the two levels interrelate. The reason I think it IS a problem for most of us is our corruption through religion that we have become acclimated to believe that nothing is really important unless it has some kind of stamp of "divine eternal god-given existence" which is a totally false and nonsensical frame of analysis:

*[420] All nature therefore, in itself considered, is one of these, is body or is space, in which all things are placed, and from which the various motions of all beings spring. That there is body common sense will show, this as a fundamental truth must be allowed, or there is nothing we can fix as certain in our pursuit of hidden things, by which to find the Truth, or prove it when 'tis found. Then if there were no place or space, we call it void, bodies would have no where to be, nor could they move at all, as we have fully proved to you before.*

*[431] Besides, there is nothing you can strictly say, "It is neither body nor void," which you may call a third degree of things distinct from these. For every being must in quantity be more or less; and if it can be touched, though ne'er so small or light, it must be body, and so esteemed; but if it can't be touched, and has not in itself a power to stop the course of other bodies as they pass, this is the void we call an empty space.*

*[439] Again, whatever is must either act itself, or be by other agents acted on; or must be something in which other bodies must have a place and move; but nothing without body can act, or be acted on; and where can this be done, but in a vacuum or empty space? Therefore,*

*beside what body is or space, no third degree in nature can be found, nothing that ever can affect our sense, or by the power of thought can be conceived. 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.*

*[460] 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.*

*[465] For when the poets sing of Helen's rape, or of the Trojan State subdued by war, we must not say that these things do exist now in themselves, since Time, irrevocably past, has long since swept away that race of men that were the cause of those events; for every act is either properly the event of things, or of the places where those things are done.*

*[472] Further, if things were not of matter formed, were there no place or space where things might act, the fire that burned in Paris' heart, blown up by love of Helen's beauty, had never raised the famous contests of a cruel war; nor had the wooden horse set Troy on fire, discharging from his belly in the night the armed Greeks: from whence you plainly see that actions do not of themselves subsist, as bodies do, nor are in nature such as is a void, but rather are more justly called the events of body, and of space, where things are carried on.*

I stumbled over this section for a long time as something that made little sense to me, and of course I am sure that my understanding of this now is still far from complete. But I think that the point of arguing that the rape of Helen / Trojan war "do not exist now in themselves" is essentially to point out that they are no longer "real" in the sense of existing in some eternal plane of existence like you (Lee) are talking about.

I used to wonder if this was related to our modern Idea that the Trojan War might have been "myth" and didn't really happen, but now I think the OPPOSITE. I think Lucretius was citing this founding story of Rome as something that was immensely important to the Romans, as something essential to their understanding of themselves, that was nevertheless not "real" in the sense of existing currently as atoms or bodies that could be touched. I think that Lucretius was pointing out to a Roman / to the Romans that the story of the Trojan War, which was of immense "real" importance to them, was important without being something that was "real" in another (Platonic? Religious Heavenly?) dimension. He was pointing out that despite its importance the Trojan war did not possess eternal bodily existence, a fact that we should not be disillusioned by, in the way we are trained by religion to feel disappointed, or to feel nihilistically defeated, when we realize that this "eternal existence" is not really so.)

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## Post by “Elayne” of January 18, 2020 at 7:04 AM

Cassius, the newborn behavior is best described as innate pattern recognition, which is different from both a faculty and a concept. Newborn recognition of the mother and the breast is similar to a sea turtle recognizing the ocean as the desired direction unless lights from humans disrupt the visual appearance.

A concept would require the infant to have an abstract thought about what they are seeing, smelling, feeling.

These pattern recognitions in other animals have been called instinct, and the prevailing belief was that humans didn't have instincts, lol.

It is more than a faculty-- it is an expectation of a particular pattern appearing and a recognition when it does. So there is definitely a sort of innate knowledge of those patterns, but non conceptual.

That is why the first time I read about the prolepses, I was flabbergasted that Epicurus figured this issue out. And then it was forgotten, and the "blank slate" took hold.

I will go even further and say that our innate pattern knowledge is connected to pleasure and pain. We have innate recognition of the sensory data indicating where to go for the pleasure of food. This was retained through evolution, as a memory of our species' common sources of pleasure and pain. Of course with individual variation, because we are not clones.

As we develop, other innate pattern knowledge emerges on a consistent schedule. Fear of the dark, for instance, is universal in early childhood. If a pattern knowledge were learned or required specific triggers, we wouldn't see it universally.

The innate pattern recognitions are added to by individual experiences over time.

Epicurus didn't say enough about the prolepses for me to be 100% certain he was referring to this issue. Part of my thought that he did might be because the word anticipations fit -- not just the ability to recognize a pattern but a prior anticipation of that pattern, followed by instinctive matching.

However, even though we can't be sure he understood this, which to me is as phenomenal as understanding indivisible particles, what he said is compatible with modern understanding of human development.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2020 at 7:18 AM**

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I will go even further and say that our innate pattern knowledge is connected to pleasure and pain.

I agree with that too. The nature of pleasure is a highly interesting issue. Sometimes people talk about Epicurus being connected with the term "smooth motion" (although I forget what cite they are pointing to) and that may be related too.

As to pattern recognition, which I think is an excellent term, I am thinking that a similar distinction between ideas and principles probably applies --- In other words we have a FACULTY of being able to recognize patterns, which some people do better than others or animals do differently than humans etc, rather than that we are born with a particular set of patterns already inscribed in our minds.

Just as the eyes are born with the faculty of being able to see, but as yet have seen nothing at birth.

Would you agree with that?

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### **Post by “Elayne” of January 18, 2020 at 12:29 PM**

Not quite, and that is why it's different from a faculty. The evidence suggests that there is a pre-populated \_specific\_ pattern expectation. That is, not just the ability to recognize patterns in general but the expectation and then recognition of particular patterns. This is not a concept-- no words or abstract thought is happening. Non-human animals do it.

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## Post by "Lee" of January 18, 2020 at 11:27 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The point that I think is important to realize is that "Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like," are not any less real to us because they are not properties of the atoms themselves. It's at the "body/combination" level that we experience life, which is what us ultimately important to us, and it should not be a problem for us to understand how the two levels interrelate. The reason I think it IS a problem for most of us is our corruption through religion that we have become acclimated to believe that nothing is really important unless it has some kind of stamp of "divine eternal god-given existence" which is a totally false and nonsensical frame of analysis:

Hello Cassius. I see the point and agree with you that I carry a bias from years of education (religious and otherwise) which taught the existence of an eternal and immaterial world of ideas. I am beginning to see how emergent properties of atomic combinations and preconceptions could account for our experience and provide a more familiar and plausible description of our cognitive experience.

The intellectual journey I am traveling is such a surprise. I started at the state university as a student of modern empirical science and a staunch materialist. Then I attended a liberal arts college which emphasized philosophy and the tradition of immaterial ideas about which I then became convinced. Now I am circling back around and reconsidering the merits of the materialist argument.

I appreciate that you took the time to include the passages from Lucretius. Although I have read his work a couple of times over the last 25 years, I didn't fully grasp the complexity and sufficiently of those passages until you pointed them out to read more carefully.

I see now that the passing of time or the existence of the Trojan war can be considered "events of body" without the need for them to exist in an eternal and immaterial plane.

Here's another question that has been nagging me: how can The Swerve account for our volition? If all of reality is atoms and void it is difficult to understand how I seem to be able to change my mind at will? If my thinking is subject to the swerve of the atoms, how is it that I seem to be controlling my choices? Is this an illusion of choice? Am I somehow controlling the movement of atoms when I choose?

## Post by “Lee” of January 18, 2020 at 11:36 PM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

Not quite, and that is why it's different from a faculty. The evidence suggests that there is a pre-populated `_specific_` pattern expectation. That is, not just the ability to recognize patterns in general but the expectation and then recognition of particular patterns. This is not a concept-- no words or abstract thought is happening. Non-human animals do it.

Elayne,

Your clear and insightful description of innate pattern recognition was extremely interesting. It was helpful that you contrasted this with the blank slate hypothesis because I hadn't made the connection to compare the blank slate with Epicurean anticipations or prolepses.

Thank you for providing more interesting ideas for rumination!

Lee

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## Post by “Joshua” of January 19, 2020 at 1:04 AM

Good evening, Lee.

Regarding your question about indeterminacy and free will, I'll offer an explanation. But *Caveat Emptor*—I do consider myself to be less well-versed in the technical side of the philosophy than most who post here. I've read all the really relevant literature, but sadly the better part of learning is trying to remember what you already know 😊

It can be difficult to approach Epicurus without an understanding of the mental universe of the Greeks with whom he argued. Cassius, and by no means he alone, has observed the degree to which the philosophy of Epicurus is simply a systematic dismantling of Platonism. It's not much different here.

In the case of free will, the necessary thing to engage with is the *objection* to free will that was current in Epicurus' time. There are two that come to mind. First, in Greek religion and literature the idea of fate was well-entrenched. The Oedipus Cycle, known to secondary school

students everywhere, presents the case memorably.

The second objection was philosophical and metaphysical. If you take the view as Democritus did that the cosmos was perfectly material and mechanical, then the mechanical universe would push you around like clockwork. In an ancient metaphor, your mind would jostle about in the chariot of your body with no one at the reins.

Epicurus dismisses the first objection as a corollary to dismissing fate and the participation of the gods. He dismisses the second objection by proposing the Swerve. An indeterminate cosmos is to that extent non-mechanical. Instead of lifting your arm against the full tide and current of atomic motion, there is enough 'play' in the system to allow you to lift your arms through the atomic matrix.

This doesn't exactly answer your question. Nor have I explored modern objections to free will. But my eyelids are drooping, and this much will be enough to get things started.

Josh

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 19, 2020 at 4:02 AM

### [Quote from JLR](#)

Here's another question that has been nagging me: how can The Swerve account for our volition? If all of reality is atoms and void it is difficult to understand how I seem to be able to change my mind at will? If my thinking is subject to the swerve of the atoms, how is it that I seem to be controlling my choices? Is this an illusion of choice? Am I somehow controlling the movement of atoms when I choose?

I agree with Josh and will try to add a little more, but this is such a huge subject that there is a separate subforum for it here: ["Free Will" - Freedom of Choice Within Limits And Bounds vs. Determinism](#)

The first think I would focus on is the part of the question "how can the swerve **account**...." I don't think that the swerve "accounts" for free will as much as it "allows" for free will. There is no explanation offered for the mechanism of the swerve in Lucretius, and it is strictly a logical deduction of the "it must be" variety in order to explain how atoms began bouncing rather than continuing in straight lines in the first place, plus as you say accounting for the fact that we observe that we do have some degree of agency / control over our actions.

There really is no attempt to explain a precise mechanism other than to relate speculations about atoms of "soul" or "spirit" being particularly smooth and light and relating atomic aspects like that to particular dispositions of particular animals.

Two things that come to mind to suggest for further reading would be AA Long's "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" article, which I think is significantly insightful to observe that we need to be careful about how much impact to give to the swerve. The part that has stuck with me is that we need to remember that most things DO in fact operate "mechanically" and that the swerve is so slight that it only "breaks through" in rare occasions (such as allowing for free will and getting the universe started). Long observes I think correctly that the swerve cannot be operating to make everything indeterminate, or else it would destroy the rest of the Epicurean system, which is based on observing that regularity in nature arises from regular movements of atoms rather than from gods or ideal forms.

Another thing that is deep is I think best summarized in Frances Wright's A Few Days in Athens Chapter 15 where she observes that the implication of Epicurean philosophy is that we much reach and base conclusions on observations WITHOUT attempting to resolve every link in the chain back an infinite distance. [Check out the argument here](#) - it is probably best to read the full chapter, but especially the part that begins "'I apprehend the difficulties," observed Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend."

So that's the most i can offer at the moment, other than this argument from Thomas Jefferson, which I think is consistent:

**Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820:** [\(Full version at Founders.gov\)](#)

.... But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It's crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, **I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.' I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void*, or *nothing*, or *immaterial space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.** I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism* of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of *immaterial* existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no god,**

**no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.

At what age of the Christian church this heresy of *immaterialism*, this masked atheism, crept in, I do not know. But a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it. He told us indeed that 'God is a spirit,' but he has not defined what a spirit is, nor said that it is not matter. And the ancient fathers generally, if not universally, held it to be matter: light and thin indeed, an ethereal gas; but still matter. Origen says 'Deus reapse corporalis est; sed graviorum tantum corporum ratione, incorporeus.' Tertullian 'quid enim deus nisi corpus?' and again 'quis negabit deum esse corpus? Etsi deus spiritus, spiritus etiam corpus est, sui generis, in sua effigie.' St. Justin Martyr '{to Theion phamen einai asomaton oyk oti asomaton—epeide de to me krateisthai ypo tinos, toy krateisthai timioteron esti, dia toyto kaloymen ayton asomaton.}' And St. Macarius, speaking of angels says 'quamvis enim subtilia sint, tamen in substantia, forma et figura, secundum tenuitatem naturae eorum, corpora sunt tenuia.' And St. Austin, St. Basil, Lactantius, Tatian, Athenagoras and others, with whose writings I pretend not a familiarity, are said by those who are, to deliver the same doctrine. Turn to your Ocellus d'Argens 97. 105. and to his Timaeus 17. for these quotations. In England these Immaterialists might have been burnt until the 29. Car. 2. when the writ de haeretico comburendo was abolished: and here until the revolution, that statute not having extended to us. All heresies being now done away with us, these schismatists are merely atheists, differing from the material Atheist only in their belief that 'nothing made something,' and from the material deist who believes that matter alone can operate on matter.

Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind. A single sense may indeed be sometimes deceived, but rarely: and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. They evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms. **I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.** I am sure that I really know many, many, things, and none more surely than that I love you with all my heart, and pray for the continuance of your life until you shall be tired of it yourself.

Edit: Also, if someone were going to devote themselves to fleshing out arguments in favor of how human consciousness and free will arise from atoms, I would study the arguments collected and made by Jefferson's friend [Thomas Cooper](#). I have found Cooper's "[The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism](#)" to be particularly interesting in dealing with my Christian upbringing. But again, this is philosophy, not an explanation of the workings of the brain.

## Post by “Elayne” of January 19, 2020 at 7:43 AM

Right now, I am reading "The Biology of Wonder" by Andreas Weber-- only midway through, but I was thrilled to learn that there are biologists who now recognize that subjectivity is not just a side effect of organic matter (living organisms) but integral to it. No study of organisms which attempts to segregate behavior from subjective experience and feeling is complete. He talks about not just mechanical evolutionary selection for fitness but the organism's own internal drive for existence -- and about behavior being driven by pleasure. Matter which can subjectively choose has to be recognized as different from matter which cannot- and it has to be researched with that recognition. I'm going to email the author when I'm done and ask if he is interested in how the science agrees with Epicurean Philosophy!

IMO, biology is part of physics and has been artificially divided.

I don't think Epicurus' literal description of the swerve has turned out accurate, but the general understanding that the future is not pre-determined is still the prevailing view-- and that is what I personally would take away from his thoughts about the swerve. The current prevailing view in physics is that future events are probabilistic. Exactly how that works, we don't know. Exactly how matter which can experience itself participates in those probabilities, we don't know. We do know it is not in the form of a ghost in a machine, because there's no interface for that-- which rules out the kind of free will almost all modern people are talking about, where they imagine choices of a self which has become completely unhinged from prior events. It is more like what we call agency. But nobody yet has any idea how that is accomplished.

If the future were predetermined, however, even agency would be an illusion.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 19, 2020 at 8:30 AM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I'm going to email the author when I'm done and ask if he is interested in how the science agrees with Epicurean Philosophy!

Excellent idea!

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I don't think Epicurus' literal description of the swerve has turned out accurate,

Since I am not sure that he really gave a "literal description of the swerve" then I might not go that far. As far as I know there is very little left about it except a couple of passages in Lucretius, all of which are high level descriptions on the order of "we see this effect, and so it 'must' be..." But clearly yes, Epicurus' theories about atoms have to be considered more 'high level analysis' than exact clinical science.

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## Post by "Lee" of January 19, 2020 at 11:37 PM

Josh,

Thanks for your willingness to share your understanding of the indeterminacy in Epicurean materialism.

### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

It can be difficult to approach Epicurus without an understanding of the mental universe of the Greeks with whom he argued. Cassius, and by no means he alone, has observed the degree to which the philosophy of Epicurus is simply a systematic dismantling of Platonism. It's not much different here.

This dismantling of Platonism seems to be an important theme. As I read De Witts book I see more and more how Epicurus was arguing against the errors of idealism.

### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

Epicurus dismisses the first objection as a corollary to dismissing fate and the participation of the gods. He dismisses the second objection by proposing the Swerve. An indeterminate cosmos is to that extent non-mechanical. Instead of lifting your arm against the full tide and current of atomic motion, there is enough 'play' in the system to allow you to lift your arms through the atomic matrix.

The two objections you referenced help put in context the purpose of the Epicurean argument. It isn't to explain HOW the indeterminacy operates as much as it describes that it MUST be happening in the context of the atomic matrix. Although we would all like more details, I accept the fact that our understanding of the mechanics is limited and that something which we can call The Swerve must be at work.

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## Post by "Lee" of January 19, 2020 at 11:57 PM

Hello Cassius. Your answer was helpful as always.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The first think I would focus on is the part of the question "how can the swerve **account**...." I don't think that the swerve "accounts" for free will as much as it "allows" for free will. There is no explanation offered for the mechanism of the swerve in Lucretius, and it is strictly a logical deduction of the "it must be" variety in order to explain how atoms began bouncing rather than continuing in straight lines in the first place, plus as you say accounting for the fact that we observe that we do have some degree of agency / control over our actions.

There really is no attempt to explain a precise mechanism other than to relate speculations about atoms of "soul" or "spirit" being particularly smooth and light and relating atomic aspects like that to particular dispositions of particular animals.

I now better understanding what level of precision to expect from the theory of The Swerve. The fact that we do not have a more detailed account from Epicurus is understandable given that even with the scientific progress in our time we still debate the phenomenon of human agency. It is even now common for people to doubt it exists.

The Thomas Jefferson passage you shared was delightful! His substantial intellectual talents always impress me. I will take your advice and read Frances Wright's A Few Days in Athens Chapter 15 and Cooper's "The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism". I wish there were more free hours in the day to devote to all the delectable readings you are suggesting. ☐☐

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## Post by "Lee" of January 20, 2020 at 12:17 AM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I don't think Epicurus' literal description of the swerve has turned out accurate, but the general understanding that the future is not pre-determined is still the prevailing view-- and that is what I personally would take away from his thoughts about the swerve. The current prevailing view in physics is that future events are probabilistic. Exactly how that works, we don't know. Exactly how matter which can experience itself participates in those probabilities, we don't know.

Hello Elayne. I believe you are referring to the quantum world of matter when you mention probabilities. I have read a little of Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy* about the surprising behavior of matter in the microcosm/quantum level of reality. I keep thinking that this indeterminacy of particle behavior may eventually help explain the indeterminacy of human agency. We seem to understand very little about much of the workings of matter.

I also find it intriguing that Aristotle described matter as "potential" all those years ago. I'm tempted to call it simply coincidence and yet his insight into the world was extraordinary for his time and I wonder if he was inferring this behavior of primary matter by observing change at the macro level in everyday life.

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### Post by "Cassius" of January 20, 2020 at 6:20 AM

[Quote from JLR](#)

The Thomas Jefferson passage you shared was delightful!

If you found that interesting, then i would add [Jefferson's "Head and Heart" letter](#) to your reading list too for a comparison of reason vs emotion that most people with a casual understanding of Jefferson will find very surprising, Although it does not reference Epicurus directly, I think it helps illustrate how deeply Jefferson understood the Epicurean viewpoint on the role of reason, which probably one of its positions that Academia / the Platonic establishment hates the most.

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### Post by "Elayne" of January 20, 2020 at 7:01 AM

JLR, yes, that's exactly what I am referring to ☐☐

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### Post by "Lee" of January 22, 2020 at 4:08 PM

Cassius,

I read chapter 15 of A Few Days in Athens and it hit what my appetite for the rest of the work. It is impressive that Frances Wright composed such an insightful book at the age of 18!

I also enjoyed listening to the Jackson Barwis Dialogues Concerning Innate Principles that you posted. I wonder if you think the final three paragraphs are in agreement with Epicurean teachings on pleasure and pain. I have pasted them below for reference.

Code

~~please read the dialogue and you will see that it is not at all consistent with Epicurean teachings on pleasure and pain. I have pasted them below for reference.~~  
~~True, said I. But do you, then, deny that pain is evil, and pleasure is good, in an abstracted sense?~~  
~~In these abstruse questions, replied he, we are apt to be puzzled by the abuse of words; and~~

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### Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2020 at 6:07 PM

Excellent question Lee. No, certainly not fully consistent, but I think if you re-read from the beginning of the dialog, and especially if you were to read the "Three Dialogues on Liberty" that are similar in form, you would conclude as I do that Barwis' is at best a Deist and maybe not even that, and that his religious references are more superficial than fundamental. In fact in Three Dialogues on Liberty he makes lots of references to how religion is a foe to liberty.

Further, on this precise question, he also seems to be dealing with the definitions of "good" and "evil" which need to be dealt with. It seems to me that while he is admitting that pleasure and pain are the fundamental drivers, he is trying to carve out a caveat for the words "good" and "evil" as more broad terms, maybe in the way that we can describe physical exercise as good (in being productive of ultimate pleasure) while being painful while we do it. It seems to me that he wants to use good and evil to describe "actions" to account for the fact that the same action as we know can sometime be pleasurable and sometimes be pleasurable.

So in the end I think to answer the question by asking Barwis whether, if he is not referring good to pleasure, what IS he referring it to? And in reading the text he does not give a clear answer, other than maybe some lofty words. Now lofty words are trademarks of Stoicism / Platonism / Religion, so I would not argue with someone who wants to fault him for that. But my guess after reading this many times is that the kind of fault that he deserves is the kind that belongs to someone who knows the truth, but doesn't want to express it straightforwardly for

reasons of his own. (Afraid?)

So yes taking this passage out of context it definitely rings with problems. But when you look at the rest of the text, and see that the purpose of the work is to undercut the "blank slate" theory by focusing on feeling, without giving any real credit to standard religion or standard idealism, I think the final result is something that I do think is very helpful for someone who is thinking about how to apply the Epicurean insight that "feeling" is the real standard of Nature.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2020 at 6:15 PM

### [Quote from Lee](#)

True, said I. But do you, then, deny that pain is evil, and pleasure is good, in an abstracted sense?

Further, I would probably agree with Barwis that the answer to this question is "No" if we are talking "pain = evil" and "pleasure = good." Just as Barwis said, "that must depend upon the signification we give to the word good" and issues of terminology are important to honor, just as we have to deal with terminology issues in "absence of pain" not being equal to "pleasure" in every respect.

If Barwis were wanting to replace John Locke's blank slate by a strong call to return to "religion" or to "virtue in the Platonic/Stoic sense" in a way that Epicurus would have strongly objected to, this passage, here at the end of the book, is where Barwis would have hammered home the point.

And ONE MORE THING! You did not quote the FINAL WORDS OF THE DIALOGUE! ---->

***Here we were interrupted by the presence of the ladies who came out to meet us; when our conversation turning upon more agreeable things, our discourses on these subjects ended, and were not renewed during my stay in the country.***

### **FINIS**

No hammering home of the virtues of religion and devotion to god and religion - instead they *turn to the ladies, and to more agreeable (pleasing!) discussions, and the conversations "were not renewed during my stay in the country."*

I do think that ending speaks legions as to what Barwis really thought!



Boy that reminds me of how much I like that Dialogue, and consider it almost to be a work of art in itself!

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 22, 2020 at 7:04 PM**

#### Quote

But when we say that pleasure is good, that must depend upon the signification we give to the word good. If by good we mean only pleasant, then it is indisputable, but if by good we mean morally right, just, or reasonable, or in a physical sense, conducive to health, nothing can be more clearly false.

I've not read the entire dialogue, so I'm speaking out of context. With that in mind, this quote does sound very Platonic, also maybe utilitarian. The response that comes to mind is to read PDs 5, 8, 10, 17, 20, 22, 25, 26, 29 and 30 regarding pleasure and 31-39 regarding justice/morality. The statement that pleasure is not conducive to physical health contradicts the very basis of pleasure! 🤔

The ending does point in a different direction though 😄

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 22, 2020 at 7:13 PM**

Note: this may serve as an example of what can happen when fragments of the ancient scrolls are cited and the context isn't clear. What may be intended as humor instead becomes a redefinition or repudiation.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2020 at 10:30 PM**

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

What may be intended as humor instead becomes a redefinition or repudiation.

I very much agree with that. I feel sure that the Epicurean texts could not have been totally straight and humorless - that would contradict everything we should expect. No doubt they would be earnest, but also incorporate humor and joking.

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### **Post by “Lee” of January 25, 2020 at 6:32 PM**

Thanks for the helpful explanation Cassius. I suspected you would have such an assessment but wanted to confirm given my neophyte status as an Epicurean. I will take a look at "Three Dialogues on Liberty". I was impressed with Barwis and excited to learn more since he is completely new to me.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

But my guess after reading this many times is that the kind of fault that he deserves is the kind that belongs to someone who knows the truth, but doesn't want to express it straightforwardly for reasons of his own. (Afraid?)

I agree with your assessment. I have the impression that many writers of the past have employed esoteric styles to avoid running afoul of the authorities in their time.

One of the things I respect about Thomas Paine is the courage he showed when writing “The Age of Reason”. His honesty tarnished his reputation even to this day.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2020 at 6:57 PM**

Yes the "Age of Reason" had about as much impact on me as any book I have ever read. It is a real Eye-opener for anyone who grows up thinking the "founding fathers" were conservative religiously.

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### **Post by “Lee” of February 2, 2020 at 2:57 PM**

Thanks for the helpful explanation Cassius. I will take a look at "Three Dialogues on Liberty". I was impressed with Barwis and excited to learn more since he is completely new to me.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But my guess after reading this many times is that the kind of fault that he deserves is the kind that belongs to someone who knows the truth, but doesn't want to express it straightforwardly for reasons of his own. (Afraid?)

I agree with your assessment. I have the impression that many writers of the past have employed esoteric styles to avoid running afoul of the authorities in their time. One of the things I respect about Thomas Paine is the courage he showed when writing

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**Post by "Lee" of February 2, 2020 at 3:00 PM**

Cassius,

I completed "A Few Days in Athens" and wanted to thank you again for your excellent reading suggestions. I have benefited greatly from the new information and look forward to continuing to work through your suggestions.

Lee

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**Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2020 at 4:33 PM**

Good to hear, Lee! If you have any fresh observations on it please feel free to add them here as that would be helpful to others in the future: [A Few Days In Athens - By Frances Wright](#)

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**Post by "Lee" of February 13, 2020 at 2:49 PM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So in sum I think your sentence there is very important, but that what you are observing does not point to "universal concepts" but to a human **faculty** - the faculty of anticipations, which disposes us in the direction you are looking - and gives us the disposition, which not all of us use, to exercise the ability to organize things into relationships, even though there is no divine order, no "essence," and no possibility of truly universal concepts.

Hello Cassius, and anyone else who is willing to help to me gain a better understanding of an important issue. I am continuing to ponder universal concepts and how human behavior can be understood by anticipations in a world made of atoms and void.

I accept the quote above from Cassius and am attempting to reconcile the position with some of the other reading I have done which argues convincingly that we have an intellectual capability which allows us to understand and generalize the sameness (commonality) in things. Moreover, this intellectual ability allows us to understand these concepts as subjects of thought rather than simply recognizing them. For example, we can recognize "triangularity" in things **AND** we go beyond just recognition by understanding the concept of what it means to be a three-sided figure.

It seems clear that Epicurus thought Justice, for example, was a real thing and I am trying to better understand the kind of reality this and other concepts have.

Attached to this post is "Chapter 2: The Intellect and the Senses" from a book called "Ten Philosophical Mistakes" by philosopher Mortimer Adler. I would be delighted if any members would care to read it and comment on the arguments made. However, I recognize the indulgence of this request and have pasted two passages below in this post. I hope to learn if others agree with me or may dissuade me of the opinion that these arguments are valid in the context of Epicurean physics and that the intellectual capabilities described could be a result of a completely material reality.

#### **Quote 1**

*To affirm that what is common to two or more things, or that what is the same about them, can be apprehended, is to posit an*

*object of apprehension which is quite distinct from the object apprehended when we perceive this or that singular particular*

*as such. But this is precisely the position which opponents of nominalism regard as the correct solution of the problem;*

*namely, that there are objects of apprehension other than perceived particulars. Yet it is precisely this which is initially denied*

*by those who deny intellect and, with it, all abstract concepts or general ideas.*

*Rejecting nominalism as a self-defeating doctrine, one need not go to the opposite extreme, the extreme to which Plato went.*

*Attributing to man an intellect independent of the senses, Plato also conferred an independent reality on its intelligible objects—the universal archetypes. In his view, it was these universal and eternal archetypes—of triangle and cow and everything else—that truly have being, and more reality than the ever-changing particulars of the sensible world.*

*It is not necessary to go to that extreme to correct the mistaken view of the human mind that regards it as a wholly sensitive*

*faculty and that, denying intellect, is compelled to adopt an untenable nominalism. To say that the objects of conceptual*

*thought are always universals is not to assert that these universals exist as such in reality, independent of the human mind*

*that apprehends them.*

## **Quote 2**

*Not all the concepts that the intellect is able to form are abstractions from sense-experience, as our concepts of cow, tree,*

*and chair are. Some are intellectual constructions out of the conceptual materials that consist of concepts abstracted from*

*sense.*

*In this respect, the intellect functions in a manner parallel to the imagination. Some of our images are memories of sense perceptions,*

*but some are constructs of the imagination—images constructed out of the materials of sense-experience;*

*for example, the constructed image of a mermaid or a centaur. We call these fictions of the imagination. So, too, conceptual*

*constructs might be called fictions of the intellect, with this one very important difference. We acknowledge at once that*

*the fictions of our imagination are objects that have no actual existence in reality. But many of the conceptual constructs that*

*we employ in scientific and in philosophical thought concern objects such as black holes and quarks in physics, and God,*

*spirits, and souls in metaphysics. These are objects about which it is of fundamental importance to ask about their existence*

*in reality.*

*Since these conceptual constructs can have no perceptual instances, the attempt to answer this question must be indirect*

*and inferential. The real existence of instances of such objects can be posited only on the grounds that, if they did not exist,*

*then observed phenomena could not be adequately explained.*

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## **Post by “Cassius” of February 13, 2020 at 4:49 PM**

Excellent question and very deep subject Lee. I will be interested to see what others have to say.

It would probably help a lot to attempt to come up with a more clear statement of what the "problem of universals" really means, because I agree that you are right to see all this as of critical importance.

Plato suggested that some form of universals exist in his realm of ideas; Aristotle suggested that some form of universals exist in his "essences" - I am not sure we have really established what exactly Epicurus held on the subject other than inferentially from the observation that nothing has eternal unchanging existence except the elemental particles. I think that has very clear implications for certain definitions of "universals," but the full impact of the foundation

depends entirely on the definition given to that term.

I would think that we could find some academic articles on the subject too, so we can look for that over time.

In the meantime, the place that I am familiar with that has the most bearing on this and where Epicurus comes in is the section beginning at the link below from DeLacey's analysis of Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus, in Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" -

<https://archive.org/stream/philode...ge/120/mode/2up>

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### **Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2020 at 5:00 PM**

Lee:

I am vigorously hoping that someone is going to drop in and enlighten us and in a few sentences answers all our questions.

Failing that, however, I think you are going to find probably the best material answering your question in that DeLacey commentary, for example. All of this is very technical and as usual we are relying on commentators, some of whom are more sympathetic to Epicurus than others. I can't vouch for DeLacey but I remember thinking when I finished reading this work several years ago that DeLacey's interpretations seemed sound to me. This following clip is part of the material I linked in the last post above:

a conventional language was a purely practical evolution, and was not guided by any metaphysical considerations. The Epicureans thus rejected the various attempts of the rationalists to find some inner connection between language and ultimate reality.<sup>10</sup> Yet the Epicureans maintained that on the empirical level language involves no distortion of reality. By a psychological and half-unconscious process based on accumulated experiences, objects have been divided into classes according to their similarities and differences; and by virtue of this process, which produces what Epicurus called "anticipation," or "apperception" (*προληψις*), the person who uses or hears a word knows the sort of object to which that word refers. This is not to say that there is any sort of mental entity to which words refer; it is rather an approach to the later nominalistic view that words refer directly to objects and that the role of the person who relates words to objects is a purely functional one. The validity of this function is assured by the fact that the "anticipation" is based on accumulated experience and thus represents a very broad induction.<sup>11</sup>

Epicurus believed that an empirical system need not be limited to objects immediately perceived, but may include also objects beyond present experience. Some objects are as they appear manifestly. Others we are prevented from knowing as they are in themselves because of their minuteness or magnitude, or distance from the perceiver.<sup>12</sup> These, then, are unperceived (*ἀόηλα*) as far as our experience is concerned. Knowledge of them involves an inference beyond immediate sense data. Additional criteria are necessary for this extension of knowledge in order to determine which conclusions about the unperceived are true and which are false. Perceptions, being our immediate sensations, are always true; but inferences concerning that which is not directly or completely experienced may be true or false.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Plato's *Cratylus*; cf. Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.24.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bailey, *Gk. Atom.*, 245-247, 557-558.

<sup>12</sup> Sextus *Adv. Math.* vii.207-216.

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## Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2020 at 5:06 PM

I think I have one more thing to say for now about this very murky subject. I have long believed and still maintain that Bailey's version of anticipations = "conceptual reasoning" which occurs after you see five cows, form a word-picture in your mind of a cow, and use the word cow -- My view is that that process is by no means a complete description of what pre-conceptions means. That process DOES exist, and it is VERY IMPORTANT, but that is "conceptual reasoning."

PRE-conceptions, on the other hand, would (following DeWitt) be something "intuitive" that serves as an input or a disposition toward conceptual reasoning, and does not constitute conceptual reasoning itself.

I repeat this just because I think there are TWO very important things to discuss here, which are closely related but not identical: (1) conceptual reasoning, and all that goes with that, and (2) preconceptions, which is a "faculty" equivalent to seeing or hearing or feeling. I think if we jam both of these two together as if we are talking about the same thing then we lose sight of what Epicurus was talking about as PRE-conceptions.

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### **Post by “Martin” of February 14, 2020 at 8:15 AM**

The quotes from Mortimer Adler seem to be consistent with Epicurus' philosophy. In particular, he makes clear that the universals are (although commonly found among humans) not absolute:

"To say that the objects of conceptual thought are always universals is not to assert that these universals exist as such in reality, independent of the human mind that apprehends them."

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2020 at 9:06 AM**

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

"To say that the objects of conceptual thought are always universals is not to assert that these universals exist as such in reality, independent of the human mind that apprehends them."

I agree with Martin and in the first draft of my post above I quoted that line myself as something I thought sounded good. But then when I read further I got less comfortable and didn't requote any of it.

Clearly conceptual thought about things that do not exist is not only possible but ordinary and useful. However if our subject is "universals" then I am not sure that observation really advances the discussion, and we really need to start back earlier to define what we are talking about with that word "universals."

## Post by “Godfrey” of February 15, 2020 at 1:57 AM

### Quote

I am continuing to ponder universal concepts and how human behavior can be understood by anticipations in a world made of atoms and void.

I haven't yet read the Adler chapter, but have a comment on this well formulated quote.

In a world of atoms and void, there are no universal concepts. Biology emerges from clusters of atoms, human behavior and intellect emerge from biology. Anticipations are biological as well. They can be thought of as a faculty as Cassius describes. Elayne has called them "pattern recognition." A while back I read some architectural criticism by Sarah Williams Goldhagen which explores "embodied cognition" in how we experience space. I think all of these are describing, in various ways, the same biological process.

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## Post by “Martin” of February 15, 2020 at 5:06 AM

If the same thought pattern shows up with only minor variation among the vast majority of members of a population, that should qualify as a universal.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2020 at 5:26 AM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

In a world of atoms and void, there are no universal concepts

### [Quote from Martin](#)

If the same thought pattern shows up with only minor variation among the vast majority of members of a population, that should qualify as a universal.

Here-again betraying my own lack of technical training, I want to repeat that I (and I bet I am far from the only one) find this topic very confusing and off-putting due to the common

meaning the word "universal" seemingly in conflict with the way philosophers use it. For example from the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#):

#### Quote

Universals are a class of mind-independent entities, usually contrasted with individuals (or so-called "particulars"), postulated to ground and explain relations of qualitative identity and resemblance among individuals. Individuals are said to be similar in virtue of sharing universals. An apple and a ruby are both red, for example, and their common redness results from sharing a universal. If they are both red at the same time, the universal, red, must be in two places at once. This makes universals quite different from individuals; and it makes them controversial.

MIND-INDEPENDENT ENTITIES ..POSTULATED TO GROUND AND EXPLAIN RELATIONS....?

And in the quote it is considered acceptable to compare an apple and a ruby and to say both are red and on the strength of two instances of something similar call that similarity a "**universal?**"

The reason I quote Godfrey is that that is how I tend to look at the question, although at present I would vary that and say:

"In a universe in which atoms are the only eternally unchanging entities, there is no possibility of there existing eternally unchanging human concepts (which is what is IMPLIED, to a normal person, by the word "universal").

On the other hand I agree that Martin is stating something obvious too:

"If the same thought pattern shows up with only minor variation among the vast majority of members of a population, that should qualify as a **universal.**"

I personally just find it very confusing and potentially very misleading for philosophers to try equate "same thought pattern"... among "members of a population" and call that a "universal" (which again to me implies that it is presumed to be found in ALL members of that population anywhere in the "universe" (meaning "cosmos").

I just wanted to restate this because I find it maddening that philosophers want to insist on using that term "universal." I find it impossible to shake the idea from my mind that this is intentional deception on the part of people (Plato et al) who want to postulate and convince untrained people of something that does not really exist. Of course I have no idea who originated the term "universal" and presume it is more modern in origin.

## Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2020 at 5:30 AM

[Wikipedia - Problem of Universals:](#)

In [metaphysics](#), the **problem of universals** refers to the question of whether [properties](#) exist, and if so, what they are.<sup>[1]</sup> Properties are qualities or relations that two or more entities have in common. The various kinds of properties, such as qualities and [relations](#), are referred to as [universals](#). For instance, one can imagine three cup holders on a table that have in common the quality of *being circular* or *exemplifying circularity*,<sup>[2]</sup> or two daughters that have in common *being the female offsprings of Frank*. There are many such properties, such as being human, red, male or female, liquid, big or small, taller than, father of, etc.<sup>[3]</sup> While philosophers agree that human beings talk and think about properties, they disagree on whether these universals exist in [reality](#) or merely in thought, speech and sight.

The problem of universals relates to a number of questions in close relation to not only metaphysics but, to [logic](#) and [epistemology](#), all in efforts to understand how the thought of universals has a connection to those of singular properties.<sup>[4]</sup>

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## Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2020 at 5:30 AM

Stated that way, we have very specific statements in Lucretius (and possibly Herodotus, I can't recall) on that topic. Well, I was going to quote specific sections, but really everything from line 420 to the end of book one is really on this topic. In fact, is not the entire structure of "atomism" not the rejection of the contention that "philosophic universals" exist?

[The following is Bailey, and he uses the word "accidents" rather than "events" which is used in the 1743 edition, and I think "events" is far preferable, especially since the Latin is "eventum" (if I recall). But is this not a statement that something like "circularity" (from the wikipedia entry) is only a name which humans give to "qualities" (their observations of temporary and changing combinations of atoms), rather than a reference to "properties" (attributes of eternally-existing atoms)?

***I will state too that my own person interest in the "problem of universals" arose because I used to think it was necessary to address the issue of "meaninglessness of life" and "nihilism" - the perspective which I "know/feel" must be "wrong" (that if only atoms really "exist" then life is "meaningless.")***

***I now think that the problem of nihilism has a much different answer than to theorize a (false) "theory of universals" such as Plato or Aristotle suggested. There***

**are better and more accurate ways to see that life is intensely valuable to us despite its impermanency and it arising from atoms and void.**

BOOK ONE:

[420] But now, to weave again at the web, which is the task of my discourse, all nature then, as it is of itself, is built of these two things: for there are bodies and the void, in which they are placed and where they move hither and thither. For that body exists is declared by the feeling which all share alike; and unless faith in this feeling be firmly grounded at once and prevail, there will be naught to which we can make appeal about things hidden, so as to prove aught by the reasoning of the mind. And next, were there not room and empty space, which we call void, nowhere could bodies be placed, nor could they wander at all hither and thither in any direction; and this I have above shown to you but a little while before.

[431] **Besides these there is nothing which you could say is parted from all body and sundered from void, which could be discovered, as it were a third nature in the list.** For whatever shall exist, must needs be something in itself; and if it suffer touch, however small and light, it will increase the count of body by a bulk great or maybe small, if it exists at all, and be added to its sum. But if it is not to be touched, inasmuch as it cannot on any side check anything from wandering through it and passing on its way, in truth it will be that which we call empty void.

[439] Or again, whatsoever exists by itself, will either do something or suffer itself while other things act upon it, or it will be such that things may exist and go on in it. **But nothing can do or suffer without body, nor afford room again, unless it be void and empty space. And so besides void and bodies no third nature by itself can be left in the list of things, which might either at any time fall within the purview of our senses, or be grasped by any one through reasoning of the mind. 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.

[460] 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.

[465] Then again, when men say that 'the rape of Tyndarus's daughter', or 'the vanquishing of the Trojan tribes in war' are things, beware that they do not perchance constrain us to avow

that these things exist in themselves, just because the past ages have carried off beyond recall those races of men, of whom, in truth, these were the accidents. For firstly, we might well say that whatsoever has happened is an accident in one case of the countries, in another even of the regions of space.

[472] Or again, if there had been no substance of things nor place and space, in which all things are carried on, never would the flame of love have been fired by the beauty of Tyndaris, nor swelling deep in the Phrygian heart of Alexander have kindled the burning battles of savage war, nor unknown of the Trojans would the timber horse have set Pergama aflame at dead of night, when the sons of the Greeks issued from its womb. So that you may see clearly that all events from first to last do not exist, and are not by themselves like body, nor can they be spoken of in the same way as the being of the void, but rather so that you might justly call them the accidents of body and place, in which they are carried on, one and all.

[484] Bodies, moreover, are in part the first-beginnings of things, in part those which are created by the union of first-beginnings. Now the true first-beginnings of things, no force can quench; for they by their solid body prevail in the end. Albeit it seems hard to believe that there can be found among things anything of solid body. For the thunderbolt of heaven passes through walled houses, as do shouts and cries; iron grows white hot in the flame, and stones seethe in fierce fire and leap asunder; then too the hardness of gold is relaxed and softened by heat, and the ice of brass yields beneath the flame and melts; warmth and piercing cold ooze through silver, since when we have held cups duly in our hands we have felt both alike, when the dewy moisture of water was poured in from above. So true is it that in things there is seen to be nothing solid. But yet because true reasoning and the nature of things constrain us, give heed, until in a few verses we set forth that there are things which exist with solid and everlasting body, which we show to be the seeds of things and their first-beginnings, out of which the whole sum of things now stands created.

[504] First, since we have found existing a twofold nature of things far differing, the nature of body and of space, in which all things take place, it must needs be that each exists alone by itself and unmixed. For wherever space lies empty, which we call the void, body is not there; moreover, wherever body has its station, there is by no means empty void. Therefore the first bodies are solid and free from void.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2020 at 5:59 AM**

Because I see this issue as tied to nihilism, I therefore prefer the 1743 decision preference for EVENTS over "accidents":

AGAIN, \* whatever Is must either act itself, or be by other Agents acted on; or must be somewhat in which other Bodies must have a Place and move; but Nothing without Body can act, or be acted on; and where can this be done, but in a Vacuum or empty Space? Therefore, beside what Body is or Space, no third Degree in Nature can be found, Nothing that ever can affect our Sense, or by the Power of Thought can be conceiv'd. 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; such is Weight to Stones, to Fire Heat, Moisture to the Sea, Touch to all Bodies, and not to be touch'd 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 when they go, the Thing remains entire; these, as 'tis fit we should, we call Events.

Especially since "Eventa" seems to be the Latin:

*At facere & fungi sine CORPORE nullo potest res:  
Nec præbere locum porro, nisi Inane, Vacante 445  
Ergo præter INANE, & CORPORA, tertia per se  
Nulla potest rerum in numero natura relinqui;  
Nec, quæ sub sensus cadat ullo tempore nostras,  
Nec, ratione animi quam quisquam possit aspicere.  
Nam quæcumque cluent, aut his CONJUNCTA dua-  
bus 450  
Rebus ea invenies; aut horum EVENTA videbis.  
Conjunctum 'st id, quod nunquam sine perniciali  
Discidio potis est sejungere, seque gregari:  
Pondus uti saxi, Calor ignibus, Liquor aquæ,  
Tactus Corporibus cunctis, Intactus Inani. 455  
Servitium contra, Libertas, Divitiæque,  
Paupertas, Bellum, Concordia, cætera, quorum  
Adventu manci incolumis natura, abituque,  
Hæc soliti sumus, ut par est, EVENTA vocare.*

Here is the Munro Latin edition to confirm "eventa":

Nam quaecumque eluent, aut his coniuncta duabus  
rebus ea invenies aut horum eventa videbis. 450  
coniunctum est id quod nusquam sine perniciosa  
discidio potis est seiungi seque gregari,  
pondus uti saxist, calor ignis, liquor aqual.  
TACTUS CORPORUM CUNCTIS INTACTUS ISANI

servitium contra paupertas divitiaeque, 455  
libertas bellum concordia, cetera quorum  
adventu manet incolumis natura abituque,  
haec soliti sumus, ut par est, eventa vocare.

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### Post by “Elayne” of February 15, 2020 at 7:07 AM

There's clearly no innate specific word for cow-- but there is an innate recognition of the cow as distinct from the other matter in the field. The visual system, including the brain, has to perform work when presented with light reflections-- what is an object? Where are the boundaries of the object? Etc.

I don't know that anyone has specifically studied cows-- but humans do appear to have innate recognition of snakes and spiders as dangerous. The fear of snake-shaped objects appears whether a baby has been bitten by one or not. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/api.nati...nakes-video-spd>

This inborn pattern recognition doesn't include language and is not a symbolic concept-- it is an example of what I believe Epicurus meant by the prolepses. It's definitely what I would include in my own Canon-- it's like a species encoded memory of certain patterns.

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### Post by “Elayne” of February 15, 2020 at 7:57 AM

To elaborate on another aspect of what I said above-- infants don't appear to "figure out" that a shape like a cow moving against a background represents an object separate from the background. That is part of their innate rudimentary physics. They act surprised when objects don't behave according to gravity, etc.

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### Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2020 at 8:20 AM

Elayne is going back to the "pattern recognition" observation and I agree that that is where the answer to this lies. A faculty of pattern recognition does not imply that there are "concepts" floating in space in ideal platonic form, or in emanations from god, which define a perfect cow, of which all real cows are mere reflections. But that is the direction that many advocates of "universals" want to take the discussion.

I have two more passages that I personally consider important to my thoughts on this topic. The first is from "[A Few Days In Athens](#)" Chapter 15. Essentially all of Chapter 15 is devoted to unwinding this question of tracing effects back to causes and seeking to find some "ultimate cause," which we think is required to explain things to us, since we are told that we should not consider the properties of the elemental particles to be sufficient to explain the emergent qualities that arise from the combinations of those particles. I think these issues are closely related if not identical. I will quote here only the part that leads up to : "*The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum...*"

#### Quote

"How so? Does not even man possess a species of creating power? And do you not suppose, in your inert matter, that very property which others attribute, with more reason it appears to me, to some superior and unknown existence?"

"By no means. No existence, that we know of, possesses creating power, in the sense you suppose. Neither the existence we call a man, nor any other of the existences comprised under the generic names of matter, physical world, nature, &c., possesses the power of calling into being its own constituent elements, nor the constituent elements of any other substance. It can change one substance into another substance, by altering the position of its particles, or intermingling them with others: but it cannot call into being, any more than it can annihilate, those particles themselves. The hand of man causes to approach particles of earth and of water, and, by their approximation produces clay; to which clay it gives a regular form, and, by the application of fire, produces the vessel we call a vase. You may say that the hand of man creates the vase, but it does not create the earth, or the water, or the fire; neither has the admixture of these substances added to, or subtracted from, the sum of their elementary atoms. Observe, therefore, there is no analogy between the power inherent in matter, of changing its appearance and qualities, by a simple change in the position of its particles, and that which you attribute to some unseen existence, who by a simple volition, should have called into being matter itself, with all its wonderful properties. An existence possessing such a power I have never seen; and though this says nothing against the possibility of such an existence, it says every thing against *my belief* in it. And farther, the power which you attribute to this existence — that of willing every thing out of nothing, — being, not only what I have never seen, but that of which I cannot with any distinctness conceive — it must appear to me the greatest of all

improbabilities.”

“Our young friend,” observed Metrodorus, “lately made use of an expression, the error involved in which, seems to be at the root of his difficulty. In speaking of matter,” he continued, turning to Theon, “you employed the epithet inert. What is your meaning? And what matter do you here designate?”

“All matter surely is, in itself, inert.”

“All matter surely is, in itself, as it is,” said Metrodorus with a smile; “and that, I should say, is living and active. Again, what is matter?”

“All that is evident to our senses,” replied Theon, “and which stands opposed to mind.”

“All matter then is inert which is devoid of mind. “What then do you understand by mind?”

“I conceive some error in my definition,” said Theon, smiling. “Should I say — *thought* — you would ask if every existence devoid of thought was inert, or if every existence, possessing life, possessed thought.”

“I should so have asked. Mind or thought I consider a quality of that matter constituting the existence we call a man, which quality we find in a varying degree in other existences; many, perhaps all animals, possessing it. Life is another quality, or combination of qualities, of matter, inherent in — we know not how many existences. We find it in vegetables; we might perceive it even in stones, could we watch their formation, growth, and decay. We may call that active principle, pervading the elements of all things, which approaches and separates the component particles of the ever-changing, and yet ever-enduring world — life. Until you discover some substance, which undergoes no change, you cannot speak of inert matter: it can only be so, at least, relatively, — that is, as compared with other substances.”

“The classing of thought and life among the qualities of matter is new to me.”

“What is in a substance cannot be separate from it. And is not all matter a compound of qualities? Hardness, extension, form, color, motion, rest — take away all these, and where is matter? To conceive of mind independent of matter, is as if we should conceive of color independent of a substance colored: What is form, if not a body of a particular shape? What is thought, if not something which thinks? Destroy the substance, and you destroy its properties; and so equally — destroy the properties, and you destroy the substance. To suppose the possibility of retaining the one, without the other, is an evident absurdity.”

“The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum,” returned the youth, “but I never considered the error as extending to mind and life, any

more than to vice and virtue.”

Display More

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### Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2020 at 8:22 AM

Here is the second passage that I relate to this topic, which I believe expresses Thomas Jefferson's application of Epicurean philosophy to this problem: **"On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need."**

Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820: [\(Full version at Founders.gov\)](#)

.... But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It's crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, **I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.' I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void*, or *nothing*, or *immaterial space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.** I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism* of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of *immaterial* existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.

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### Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2020 at 8:52 AM

This is what I perceive to be the sequence of reasoning on this topic in the letter to Herodotus (clips from Bailey):

54 Moreover, we must suppose that the atoms do not possess any of the qualities belonging to perceptible things, except shape, weight, and size, and all that necessarily goes with shape. For every quality changes, but the atoms do not change at all, since there must needs be something which remains solid and indissoluble at the dissolution of compounds, which can cause changes; not changes into the non-existent or from the non-existent, but changes effected by the shifting of position of some particles, and by the addition or departure of others. For this reason it is essential that the bodies which shift their position should be imperishable and should not possess the nature of what changes, but parts and configuration of their own. For thus much must needs remain constant

consider to be in  
have permanent

Next, even though the qualities of the combination of atoms (which includes all that we can experience directly in our universe) are not permanent and unchanging like the atoms themselves, we must not believe that they do NOT exist, OR that they have some kind of incorporeal existence. The things that we experience in our reality are real TO US (and this is the key to showing the insanity of nihilism):

as though they were concomitant properties either of all things or of things visible or recognizable through the sensation of these qualities, we must not suppose that they are either independent existences (for it is impossible to imagine that), nor that they absolutely do not exist, nor that they are some other kind of incorporeal existence accompanying body, nor that they are material parts of body: rather we should suppose that the whole body in its totality owes its own permanent existence to all these, yet not in the sense that it is composed of properties brought together to form it (as when, for instance, a larger structure is put together out of the parts which compose it, whether the first units of size or other parts smaller than itself, whatever it is), but only, as I say, that it owes its own permanent existence to all of them. All these properties have their own peculiar means of being perceived and distinguished, provided always that the aggregate body goes along with them and is never wrested from them, but in virtue of its comprehension as an aggregate of qualities acquires the predicate of body.

70 Furthermore, there often happen to bodies and yet do not permanently accompany them (<sup>events</sup> accidents, of which we must suppose neither that they do not exist at all nor that they have the nature of a whole body), nor that they can be classed among unseen things nor as incorporeal. So

And this is how "events" as arising from the nature and movement of the atoms is the explanation to which Thomas Jefferson referred. And this understanding is hugely important -- none of this is an "**accident**" in the way that you fail to look both ways before crossing a street and get run over by a bus in an "accidental" way. The structure of our universe as a series of "events" arising from the movement of the atoms, and is largely "deterministic" and understandable and predictable, except for the limited instances of "free will" (including the life of higher animals) that arise from the swerve of atoms and which are able to break through under limited circumstances.

But I fully understand why Bailey and others of his attitude would choose to use the word  
as themselves, they  
forms and universals  
gatory connotations  
e preferred wording

## I. TO HERODOTUS

45

that when according to the most general usage we employ  
this name, we make it clear that accidents have neither  
the nature of the whole, which we comprehend in its  
aggregate and call body, nor that of the qualities which  
permanently accompany it, without which a given body  
cannot be conceived. But as the result of certain acts of  
apprehension, provided the aggregate body goes along  
71 with them, they might each be given this name, but only on  
occasions when each one of them is seen to occur, since  
accidents are not permanent accompaniments. And we  
must not banish this clear vision from the realm of exist-  
ence, because it does not possess the nature of the whole  
to which it is joined nor that of the permanent accompani-  
ments, nor must we suppose that such contingencies exist  
independently (for this is inconceivable both with regard  
to them and to the permanent properties), but, just as it  
appears in sensation, we must think of them all as accidents  
occurring to bodies, and that not as permanent accom-  
paniments, or again as having in themselves a place in the  
ranks of material existence; rather they are seen to be  
just what our actual sensation shows their proper  
character to be.

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Post by "Lee" of February 18, 2020 at 12:24 PM

The feedback to my question as been enlightening! Thanks to all who took the time to help clarify this difficult and fundamental question.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The reason I quote Godfrey is that that is how I tend to look at the question, although at present I would vary that and say:

"In a universe in which atoms are the only eternally unchanging entities, there is no possibility of there existing eternally unchanging human concepts (which is what is IMPLIED, to a normal person, by the word "universal").

On the other hand I agree that Martin is stating something obvious too:

"If the same thought pattern shows up with only minor variation among the vast majority of members of a population, that should qualify as a **universal**."

I personally just find it very confusing and potentially very misleading for philosophers to try equate "same thought pattern"... among "members of a population" and call that a "universal" (which again to me implies that it is presumed to be found in ALL members of that population anywhere in the "universe" (meaning "cosmos").

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

There's clearly no innate specific word for cow-- but there is an innate recognition of the cow as distinct from the other matter in the field. The visual system, including the brain, has to perform work when presented with light reflections-- what is an object? Where are the boundaries of the object? Etc.

I don't know that anyone has specifically studied cows-- but humans do appear to have innate recognition of snakes and spiders as dangerous. The fear of snake-shaped objects appears whether a baby has been bitten by one or not.  
<https://www.google.com/amp/s/api.nati...nakes-video-spd>

This inborn pattern recognition doesn't include language and is not a symbolic concept-- it is an example of what I believe Epicurus meant by the prolepses. It's definitely what I would include in my own Canon-- it's like a species encoded memory of certain patterns.

It seems possible to interpret everyone's comments as being in agreement and simply emphasizing different aspects of the answer.

Cassius has a good point that the terms “universal” and “accident” have a lot of historical meaning that is tied to immaterialism, essence and forms. Using the term “Events” does seem to shed some of the baggage that hangs with the other terms. He and Godfrey have emphasized the doctrine that all of reality resolves to the principles of matter and void. Cassius provided ample evidence for this with the helpful textual reference from the letter to Herodotus, Lucretius, Jefferson, Wright, etc. Thanks for sharing such a trove of useful material!



On the other hand, Martin seems correct in his point that it is possible to understand “universal” as a description for a cognitive activity we all utilize as a natural part of life. This can be true while still resolving to principles of matter and void.

Elayne’s references to child behavior and description of prolepses as, “a species encoded memory of certain patterns” seems to round out the explanation based on the experience of scientific research.

In my opinion, Adler is generally correct in his opinion that nominalism is wrong and that these “universals” or “events” exist in the intellect. However, we must understand “intellect” as a mechanism ultimately made up of atoms that has the function of recognizing patterns found in other material configurations.

It seems similar to how DNA mechanically encodes the same configurations in separate individuals of the same species. Intellect is how the brain decodes and records the information in each of us.

Adler may agree with this but his final paragraph of the chapter hints that he believes there is more to the issue where he says the brain is a necessary but NOT sufficient cause of the intellect. He still believes there is an immaterial component.

I, however, think the arguments raised here point out that the material brain could be sufficient to explain our experience. As the Occam's razor principle states, "Entities should not be multiplied without necessity." We do not need immaterial causes to explain similar (universal) events.

I am very glad to have found this group of Epicurean Friends and am immensely appreciative that all of you take such pains to share your opinions.

Best Regards,

Lee

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 18, 2020 at 1:15 PM

### [Quote from Lee](#)

In my opinion, Adler is general correct in his opinion that nominalistic is wrong and that these “universals” or “events” exist in the intellect.

My understanding of what the term "nominalistic" means is not sufficient for me to understand whether "nominalism" is accurate or inaccurate, or what that says about Adler and his opinion. I probably should not have added this note here but wanted to clarify for the record that i'm not able to contribute much to answer that question.

### [Quote from Lee](#)

I, however, think the arguments raised here point out that the material brain could be sufficient to explain our experience

Yes I do think that that is the essential point - that the mechanisms of the brain do not contain any element or connection to anything "supernatural" that would give rise to ideal forms, divine communication/revelation, or the ability to spot "essences" such as the other Greeks were theorizing.

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## Post by “Lee” of February 18, 2020 at 2:15 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

My understanding of what the term "nominalistic" means is not sufficient for me to understand whether "nominalism" is accurate or inaccurate, or what that says about Adler and his opinion.

Your comment made me realize that I had assumed “nominalism” to mean the position that there are no universals, rather, there are only words that categorize particular things. I did a bit more reading and realized that “nominalism” has a more subtle definition and can mean at least a couple of things. I included a quote below from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy with a link. My position appears to be a denial of abstract objects but an acknowledgement that our words describing general things point to some real material combination of matter.

In other words, “redness” and “circularity” are real concepts as manifested by a particular combination of atoms in each of our brains.

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[Nominalism in Metaphysics- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

*“Thus one kind of Nominalism asserts that there are particular objects and that everything is particular, and the other asserts that there are concrete objects and that everything is concrete.*

*As noted above, the two forms of nominalism are independent. The possibility of being a nominalist in one sense but not in the other has been exemplified in the history of philosophy. For instance, David Armstrong (1978; 1997) is a believer in universals, and so he is not a nominalist in the sense of rejecting universals, but he believes that everything that exists is spatiotemporal, and so he is a nominalist in the sense of rejecting abstract objects. And there are those who, like Quine at a certain point of his philosophical development (1964; 1981), accept sets or classes and so are not nominalists in the sense of rejecting abstract objects and yet reject universals and so are nominalists in the sense of rejecting universals.*

*Thus Nominalism, in both senses, is a kind of anti-realism. For one kind of Nominalism denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of universals and the other denies the existence, and therefore the reality, of abstract objects. But what does Nominalism claim with respect to the entities alleged by some to be universals or abstract objects, e.g. properties, numbers, propositions, possible worlds? Here there are two general options: (a) to deny the existence of the alleged entities in question, and (b) to accept the existence of these entities but to argue that they are particular or concrete.”*