

# References to Epicurus' Attitude Toward The "Place of the Sciences And Liberal Arts"

Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2020 at 9:37 AM

This is an effort to collect in a single place the references that are available to the Epicurean attitude toward the place of "the sciences and the liberal arts" (to borrow the phrase from Frances Wright).

Epicurus was criticized both in the ancient world and by today's commentators for this attitude, which on its face would conflict with Epicurus' focus on physics and observation as the foundation of his philosophy. There is an issue here which needs to be understood in order to understand Epicurus' perspective.

Here is an example of the issue from [Cicero's On Ends](#):

Quote

"You are pleased to think him uneducated. The reason is that he refused to consider any education worth the name that did not help to school us in happiness. Was he to spend his time, as you encourage Triarius and me to do, in perusing poets, who give us nothing solid and useful, but merely childish amusement? Was he to occupy himself like Plato with music and geometry, arithmetic and astronomy, which starting from false premises cannot be true, and which moreover if they were true would contribute nothing to make our lives pleasanter and therefore better? Was he, I say, to study arts like these, and neglect the master art, so difficult and correspondingly so fruitful, the art of living? No! Epicurus was not uneducated: the real philistines are those who ask us to go on studying till old age the subjects that we ought to be ashamed not to have learnt in boyhood."

Here is another, that while not mentioning Epicurus in this passage, is from Lucian, who can be argued to have held many Epicurean viewpoints:

Lucian's Dialog "[Icaromenippus, An Aerial Expedition:](#)"

Quote

**“Menippus. Ah, but keep your laughter till you have heard something of their pretentious mystifications. To begin with, their feet are on the ground; they are no taller than the rest of us ‘men that walk the earth’; they are no sharper-sighted than their neighbors, some of them purblind, indeed, with age or indolence. And yet they say they can distinguish the limits of the sky, they measure the sun’s circumference, take their walks in the supra-lunar regions, and specify the sizes and shapes of the stars as though they had fallen from them. Often one of them could not tell you correctly the number of miles from Megara to Athens, but has no hesitation about the distance in feet from the sun to the moon. How high the atmosphere is, how deep the sea, how far it is round the earth— they have the figures for all that. Moreover, they have only to draw some circles, arrange a few triangles and squares, add certain complicated spheres, and lo, they have the cubic contents of Heaven.**

**Then, how reasonable and modest of them, dealing with subjects so debatable, to issue their views without a hint of uncertainty; thus it must be and it shall be; *contra gentes* they will have it so. They will tell you on oath the sun is a molten mass, the moon inhabited, and the stars water-drinkers, moisture being drawn up by the sun’s rope and bucket and equitably distributed among them.”**

Although this does not qualify as an ancient text, Frances Wright comments at length on this issue in [A Few Days In Athens Chapter 9](#):

Quote

“This recalls to me,” said Theon, “that I have heard among the various reports concerning the gardens current in the mouths of the Athenians, very contradictory ones as to the place allowed in it to the sciences and liberal arts, and to music in particular.”

“I suppose,” said Metrodorus, “ that you heard our whole employment was eating, drinking, and rioting in all licentiousness. “

“True, I did hear so; and I fear I must confess, half believed it. But I also heard your licentiousness described in various ways: sometimes as grossly sensual, enlivened by no elegances of art; veiled, adorned, if I may use the expression, by no refinement. In short, that Epicurus laughed as well at the fine arts as the grave sciences. From others, again, I learnt that music, dancing, poetry, and painting, were pressed into the service

of his philosophy; that Leontium strung the lyre, Metrodorus the harp, Hedeia moved in the dance, Boidion raised the song to Venus; that his halls were covered with voluptuous pictures, the walks of his garden lined with indecent statues.”

“And you may now perceive the truth,” replied Metrodorus, “with your own eyes and ears.”

“But,” said Leontium, “the young Corinthian may be curious to know the sentiments of our master, and his advice regarding the pursuit of the sciences and the liberal arts. I can readily perceive,” addressing herself to Theon, “the origin of the two contradictory reports you have just mentioned. The first you would hear from the followers of Aristippus, who, though not acknowledging the name, follow the *tenets* of his philosophy, and have long been very numerous in our degenerate city. These, because Epicurus recommends but a moderate culture of those arts, which by them are too often made the elegant incentives to licentious pleasure, accuse him of neglecting them altogether. The cynics, and other austere sects, who condemn all that ministers to the luxury, ease, or recreation of man, exaggerate his moderate use of these arts into a vicious encouragement of voluptuousness and effeminacy. You will perceive, therefore, that between the two reports lies the truth. Every innocent recreation is permitted in the garden. It is not poetry, but licentious poetry, that Epicurus condemns; not music, but voluptuous music; not painting, but licentious pictures; not dancing, but loose gestures. Yet thus he displeases alike the profligate and the austere; for these he is too moderate, and for those too severe. “With regard to the sciences, if it be said, that they are neglected among us, I do not say that our master, though himself versed in them, as in all other branches of knowledge, greatly recommends them to our study but that they are not unknown, let Polyoenus be evidence.

“He, one of the most amiable men of our school, and one most highly favored by our master, you must have heard mentioned throughout Greece as a profound geometrician.”

“Yes,” replied Theon, “but I have also heard, that since entering the garden, he has ceased to respect his science.”

“I am not aware of that,” said Leontium, “though I believe he no longer devotes to it all his time, and all his faculties. Epicurus called him from his diagrams, to open to him the secrets of physics, and the beauties of ethics; to show him the springs of human action, and lead him to the study of the human mind. He taught him, that any single study, however useful and noble in itself, was yet unworthy the entire employ of a curious and powerful intellect; that the man who pursued one line of knowledge, to the exclusion of others, though he should follow it up to its very head, would never be either learned or wise; that he who pursues knowledge, should think no branch of it unworthy attention; least of all, should he confine it to those which are unconnected with the business, and

add nothing to the pleasures of life; that further not our acquaintance with ourselves, nor our fellows; that tend not to enlarge the sphere of our affections, to multiply our ideas and sensations, nor extend the scope of our inquiries. On this ground, he blamed the devotion of Polyoenus to a science that leads to other truths than those of virtue, to other study than that of man.”

Display More

There are other examples that discuss this issue, especially in regard to Polyoenus. If you know of others that should be added here, please post.

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### **Post by “Don” of May 15, 2020 at 12:05 PM**

I'm glad you started this, [Cassius](#) . This has been a hang-up for me with regards to Epicurus' teachings.

On the one hand, one would think Epicurus would want to get the most accurate view of the universe - το πᾶν - available through the senses with regard to the "sciences."

On the other, I get the impression from some readings that once you get a "good enough" explanation of, say, meteorological phenomena (ex., *DRN* VI:96-160, different possible causes of thunder), you accept one and move on. That part makes it sound like Epicurus or Lucretius were not advocates of any kind of deep "research" for lack of a better word right now.

I find it hard to reconcile these two so I'm looking forward to more in this thread.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 15, 2020 at 1:43 PM**

Thanks Eugenios. I think this is really the topic of Philodemus' "On Methods of Interference" and does not in any way contradict your statement "one would think Epicurus would want to get the most accurate view of the universe." I completely agree with you.

The issue as I see it is sort of a preliminary rule of evidence, like a judge ruling on what comes into court. As you probably know there are elaborate rules of evidence about things such as hearsay that have evolved over time so that certain kinds of out-of-court statements are allowed in fully, or allowed in for limited purposes, or are kept out entirely.

And there is also a court parallel in regard to expert testimony as a whole, with very elaborate rules about when and how experts are allowed to testify, so that the expert does not do things such as "invade the province of a jury."

Another consideration that these rules of court apply to is to prevent "speculation" by the jury, in order to ensure that all decisions of a jury are based on evidence, and not left to simple speculation without evidence on which to ground it.

As I see it, it will never be possible to develop exact rules of "what comes in" and "what doesn't come in" and so in court, judges have to examine the facts of each case and take testimony and hear both sides and then evaluate whether to let the jury hear the testimony at all, which serves as a sort of "gatekeeper" function.

That's where I think Epicurus was going. He was saying that we all need "rules of evidence" so as to decide what kind of evidence is open to any kind of consideration at all, and what kinds of "evidence" should be thrown out of court and not even considered. Issues of claims of divine revelation would probably fit the type to throw out entirely - unless there is some other proof of the communication being claimed, someone saying "God told me to" is not even going to be listened to as evidence, other than perhaps evidence of insanity.

It will take a long thread and discussion to go through all of the examples, but as I understand part of the crux of the problem was that unlike our mathematicians and geometers of today, those "scientists" of that period were using math and "science" to argue that the supposed "order" they were finding was proof that the world was governed by divine commandment. They were arguing that the alleged hugeness of the stars was evidence of their divinity, and that the earth's place in the center of the universe was proof that it was specially ordained by god.

As such, Epicurus might not have been concerned with their calculations as such, but he was concerned with OVERREACH of their calculations to support theories that were not in fact supported by their contentions. I think that excerpt from Lucian maybe illustrates this as much as anything other.

I realize so far that we've barely introduced the topic, much less made any headway in discussing it, but it's my understanding that this probably lies behind the ejection of "reason" from the canon, and many other attitudes by Epicurus. Again, the best text I have found so far to discuss this is ["On Methods of Inference" and the DeLacy commentary at the end of this edition.](#)

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**Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2020 at 2:25 PM**

In regard to expert testimony in court, here is a summary as to the current state of federal law, applying the well known "Daubert" case and criteria:

<https://www.expertinstitute.com/resources/insi...pert-witnesses/>

These are all "threshold" issues on which the judge has to pass before the expert is even allowed to testify at all to the jury, and I think there is a strong analogy here that applies to Epicurus' view of what kind of evidence should be considered. Then as a second step there are going to be issues about what happens if the evidence does meet this criteria, but seems to conflict with other evidence (presumably evidence of the senses), and how we then choose to weigh and balance which to believe. Because of course "admissible" does not mean that the jury has to believe and follow the testimony of the expert.

## Rule 702 - Testimony By Expert Witnesses

[Rule 702](#) is arguably the crux of Article VII, as it guides the court's analysis in determining the admissibility of expert testimony. It states that an expert's opinion is admissible if:

1. the expert's scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge will help the trier of fact to understand the evidence or to determine a fact in issue
2. the testimony is based on sufficient facts or data
3. **the testimony is the product of reliable principles and methods**
4. the expert has reliably applied the principles and methods to the facts of the case

The overarching aim of Rule 702 is to establish the relevance and reliability of the expert's opinion. Rule 702 was amended in response to the seminal Supreme Court decision, [Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc., 509 U.S. 579 \(1993\)](#), which outlines a non-exhaustive list of factors for the courts to consider when determining the expert testimony admissibility.

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### Post by "Don" of July 17, 2020 at 6:07 PM

I'm revisiting this thread for my own peace of mind...ataraxia if you will.

This idea (as I understand it) of having a "good enough" explanation of phenomena is \*almost\* enough to make me question my commitment to Epicurean Philosophy. I'm looking for all of you to "talk me down."

As I read the Letter to Herodotus (and other selections), I get the impression that an Epicurean only needs to have an explanation of phenomena that doesn't conflict with the senses and that doesn't cause them distress. If one's explanation of (for example) the size of the sun or why it

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1561-references-to-epicurus-attitude-toward-the-place-of-the-sciences-and-liberal-art/>

thunders is corroborated by the senses and makes you less anxious, but doesn't equate with how we (now) know thunder happens now, that's alright.

Now, I know we know why thunder happens now and how big the sun is, but what about things like the size and age of the universe, how quantum physics works, how the brain works, and other topics of science research. I find reading and wondering about these immensely pleasurable. The contortions of my mind amuse me and make me more curious. I don't understand the how's and why's, but that doesn't make me question the material non-supernatural nature of the universe.

My question is primarily: If I'm going to call myself an Epicurean, do I have to "pick an explanation" for these phenomena and move on? **Is curiosity an Epicurean trait?** Or do I need to choose and declare (dogmatize)?

Help.

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 17, 2020 at 6:16 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

My question is primarily: If I'm going to call myself an Epicurean, do I have to "pick an explanation" for these phenomena and move on? Is curiosity an Epicurean trait? Or do I need to choose and declare (dogmatize)?

Help.

Oh No no no! Absolutely I would argue curiosity is an Epicurean trait. But the big enemy of peace of mind is doubt and gnawing anxiety that some people have about gods or life after death, and the Epicurean theories give good reason to rest from constantly worrying that those are going to zap you. To me, what you're talking about is the kind of thing that i love to do, which is to explore the implications of the issues like infinity, life on other planets, etc. But it seems that not everyone thinks that way, and maybe as people get older or sick or just tired of the search some people seem to just want to "rest" and not to think that they have to constantly reexamine whether the gods love or hate them or whether they are going to hell.

I think THAT is the ultimate point that epicurus was making, not that scientific inquiry should ever stop or be limited -- ***so long as you personally see benefit or pleasure in it!***

When you get a chance to listen to the podcast released today you are going to see how directly related this post is to what was discussed. I don't think I did as good as job with the

conversation as I should have in keeping it tied to the high-level conclusions, but I am sure you will have a lot to think about from listening particularly to Elayne on this.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 17, 2020 at 6:19 PM**

This is a very important topic where we need to be absolutely clear so that the best people - the people who ARE curious and want to pursue science - are not turned off. It is so ironic that Epicurus, who spent so much of his time studying nature rather than dialectical logic, should be accused of a position of anything less than full scientific inquiry. But that's just one of the ways his arguments are twisted. Yes, in the end, he comes to the conclusion that pleasure is the final and ultimate goal, so therefore even scientific inquiry has to be judged by whether it brings pleasure or pain. But surely for most of us in so many ways it's absolutely clear that it DOES bring pleasure and reduce pain, in so many ways, and so within the scope of the observation that everything is contextual, surely scientific inquiry is probably right up there with "friends" and other high level "instruments" for the achievement of pleasure and reduction of pain.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 17, 2020 at 6:21 PM**

Don't it would be very good if you would hammer home questions and observations about this topic as much as you possibly can, for the reasons I mention above. This is something where there should be NO room for a "passivist" or "anesthesia" interpretation of Epicurus!

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### **Post by “Don” of July 17, 2020 at 7:51 PM**

I'm about 3/4 of the way through episode 27. I swear I didn't know this was the topic before I posted here 😊 Talk about serendipity! I'll listen to the rest then review Epicurus's writings and continue to post.

I agree this is an important topic!

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## **Post by "Cassius" of July 17, 2020 at 8:14 PM**

Yes please post your thoughts Don. When I was editing today I realized that I did a very poor job of digging in to this issue, and that is why in the notes for Episode 28 I am going to go back to the basics of the epistemology before we go further. This is a subject that needs to be very clear so that there is no hint that any advance in science would or could conflict with Epicurean theory - unless that "science" supposedly came up with something supernatural, and that would be unacceptable because it would violate the position that is set by the anticipations that true gods are totally self-sufficient and not involved in such mundane affairs

This is an example of the "tension" between the observational side and the logical side. I personally differ a little with those who think there is a tension, because I do not believe Epicurus saw it that way, because he would say that his logical positions were ALWAYS tied back to observation. And that is what I should have hit home in Episode 27 - ultimately the issue on the size of the atom being limited in size is tied to OBSERVATION - we have never seen a visible object that is undividable, rather than resting purely on logic.

But then there is the question of "well there are a lot of things we haven't seen" and how do we deal with those questions. Ultimately those are issues which need development through study of Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" and there is always going to be the "logical" question of whether it makes sense to entertain the idea that the conclusions we derive from observation should ever be suspended just on the "possibility" (which is without observed evidence) that something different "could" exist elsewhere. That is a very thorny question but I am solidly convinced that Epicurus would say that it is NOT logical to accept that observed rules "could" be violated just on pure speculation without a shred of evidence. That may get uncomfortably close to "faith" for some people (and therefore I think we see part of the reason DeWitt was willing to "go there") but ultimately I do think it rests on sound reasoning.

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## **Post by "Don" of July 18, 2020 at 12:48 AM**

My primary concern is with my interpretation of (especially) portions the Letter to Herodotus that sounds like "We don't need to investigate phenomena to find how they actually happen. All we need is an explanation that fits with our sense experience and doesn't make us wonder at our fear the phenomena anymore." I see this (admittedly maybe an incorrect interpretation) as unsatisfying personally. I'm curious as to the workings of the universe, the large and the small. So, I'm both airing my concerns and asking for other interpretations.

I also need to read Philodemus's treatise on methods of inference. But Let's start with the Letter to Herodotus. That's what brought me to this point most recently.

To make it easier to follow the argument, I'm going to replace "solstices, settings and risings, eclipses and the like" or "risings and settings and solstices and eclipses and all kindred subjects" with the simpler "them." **The letter text is bold.** *My notes are italic.*

Letter to Herodotus (excerpt)

**[79]"But when we come to subjects for special inquiry,there is nothing in the knowledge of them that contributes to our happiness (μακάριον); but those who are well-informed about such matters and yet are ignorant what the heavenly bodies really are, and what are the most important causes of phenomena, feel**

**quite as much fear as those who have no such special information--nay, perhaps even greater fear, when the curiosity excited by this additional knowledge cannot find a solution or understand the subordination of these phenomena to the highest causes.**

*The basic argument here as I see it is:*

- *We have people with special knowledge of phenomena.*
- *There is nothing in knowledge of the phenomena that contributes to our happiness (μακάριον)*
- *Those who are well informed are just as fearful as those without special knowledge.*
- *Those with special knowledge may even be more fearful due to their curiosity exciting/agitating them and their inability to find a solution.*

**"Hence, if we discover more than one cause that may account for them, as we did also in particular matters of detail, [80] we must not suppose that our treatment of these matters fails of accuracy, so far as it is needful to ensure our tranquillity and happiness (ἀτάραχον καὶ μακάριον ἡμῶν).**

*This seems to be saying "If we come up with more than one possible cause, that's fine." I don't know what he's saying in " we must not suppose that our treatment... Fails of accuracy." It seems to be we only have to consider it accurate if it ensures our tranquility and happiness. That's enough. It doesn't matter if it accurately reflects reality.*

**When, therefore, we investigate the causes of them, as of all that is unknown, we must take into account the variety of ways in which analogous occurrences happen within our experience ; while as for those who do not recognize the difference between what is or comes about from a single cause and that which may be the effect of any one of several causes, overlooking the fact that the objects are only seen at a distance, and are moreover ignorant of the conditions that render, or do not render, peace of mind impossible --all such persons we must treat with**

## **contempt.**

*Who do we treat with contempt? Those who don't recognize what comes from single or multiple causes and are ignorant of what provides for peace of mind. Is the research into the causes of phenomena itself contemptible? Or is it the ignorance of what brings peace of mind?*

**If then we think that an event could happen in one or other particular way out of several, we shall be as tranquil when we recognize that it actually comes about in more ways than one as if we knew that it happens in this particular way.**

*My hang up here is the "if we knew" phrase. If we \*think\* something happens a certain way (with no proof other than our "good enough" speculation), we can be done and don't need to investigate further. Or is this saying we can accept it could happen \*this\* way, we can be tranquil. Then later we find out it's another way, we're still tranquil. It doesn't affect us IF we're open to multiple explanations? But we don't go looking to solve which way is correct?*

...

**[82] But mental tranquillity means being released from all these troubles and cherishing a continual remembrance of the highest and most important truths.**

*So, we need to continually remember the "most important truths." Is this what [Cassius](#) was talking about when he mentioned we need to keep in mind no supernatural explanations, etc., in podcast episode 27?*

**"Hence we must attend to present feelings and sense perceptions, whether those of mankind in general or those peculiar to the individual, and also attend to all the clear evidence available, as given by each of the standards of truth. For by studying them we shall rightly trace to its cause and banish the source of disturbance and dread, accounting for celestial phenomena and for all other things which from time to time befall us and cause the utmost alarm to the rest of mankind.**

*Here Epicurus says explicitly that we "study" the feelings and sense perceptions and "clear evidence" to arrive at a "rightly-traced" cause of phenomena. Then we banish fear and dread. No supernatural causes. No superstition. But by study, can he mean research as we would understand it. I get the impression Epicurus didn't want his students studying astronomy and other subjects. Is the clear evidence just what we sense? I see the sun as that large, then it must be that large. Thunder could be produced by A, B, or C. A is good enough for me, I'm not going to investigate whether it's B or C. I shouldn't care which one as long as the one I choose makes me not fear something.*

*I'm still getting the impression that Epicurus was not advocating open-ended, empirical research into a topic. I'm reading this letter as his advocating:*

- *looking at a particular phenomena*
- *gaining information through your senses*
- *feeling pleasure/pain in your reaction to it*
- *thinking of analogous events/situations*
- *coming up with a satisfactory "good enough" explanation that assuages your fear of that phenomena*
- *and moving on.*

*If at a later date, someone says "it happens this way," you go "oh, okay" and accept that. But you don't go looking for explanations if more than one will suffice. Maybe this, maybe that. It doesn't matter as long as I accept a non-supernatural explanation but don't get hung up on the "right" answer. That doesn't appeal to me. I personally enjoy contemplating this kind of thing, reading about theories, having my brain twisted in a pretzel by quantum physics, string theory, black holes, etc. I don't fear these phenomena. So does that lack of fear matter here?*

*I also realize we're dealing with a 2,000 year old philosophy. Epicurus didn't envision string theory, etc. Am I putting a round Epicurean peg in a 21st century square hole?*

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## **Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2020 at 2:35 AM**

### Quote

*It doesn't matter as long as I accept a non-supernatural explanation but don't get hung up on the "right" answer. That doesn't appeal to me. I personally enjoy contemplating this kind of thing, reading about theories, having my brain twisted in a pretzel by quantum physics, string theory, black holes, etc. I don't fear these phenomena. So does that lack of fear matter here?*

Don, this is a really short reply to a question that deserves more, but I think this statement of yours (if I'm reading it right) is a good illustration of not getting hung up on the "right" answer. Is string theory absolutely correct? Are multiverses fact? These are ideas of *theoretical* physics and they may or may not be correct; they haven't yet been proven to be true or false. But are you going to study these until you can prove their correctness? If not, then you're not getting hung up on the right answer. If you enjoy the mental gymnastics involved in contemplating these ideas (I do, until I don't) there's nothing anti-Epicurean about that until it starts to drive you batty.

Proven and observable science is another matter entirely. But my take is that Epicurus was dealing with theorizing, as he didn't have the technology to verify many of his conclusions. So rather than spend his life trying to prove that, say, lightning is caused by x but not y or z, he was satisfied that any of x, y or z could be proven correct. Since he worked out all of these from logic based on observation, consistent with his overall theory (atoms and void), it wouldn't matter which might turn out to be correct. When it came to his "big picture" theories I wouldn't expect him to be so loosey-goosey.

For us, I think it comes down to the distinction between experimental and theoretical physics. Experimental physics is verifiable and doesn't typically allow for multiple explanations, while theoretical physics deals with currently unverifiable ideas. Theoretical physics is where you can play with multiple explanations but not get hung up on the "right" answer.

That turned out rather verbose for a "really short reply"!

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## **Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2020 at 6:00 AM**

Don's questions are great, and Godfrey's short reply is too. Mine is early in the morning and necessarily going to be short too, but here's a start, focusing on one part of Godfrey's answer:

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

But my take is that Epicurus was dealing with theorizing, as he didn't have the technology to verify many of his conclusions.

Epicurus didn't have the technology, and Epicurus (nor any single man) didn't have the time, to put in an unending 24/7 exploration of all of natural science.

And here's the big point:

**NOR DO WE! Nor does ANY individual person!**

And yet we must live, and yet we need a single overarching perspective which allows us to organize our lives, and not live in fear from moment to moment that we are totally wasting our time because we are not on our knees before god, and not facing eternal damnation in hell, and not hopelessly doomed by "fate," nor blindly needing to follow some ideal form that would condemn us to needing to acknowledge the concept of "a horse" without ever being confident that the large animal with hoofs and mane and tail in front of us is actually a horse.

Before I read these comments I was going to say that I was confident that Epicurus, if he had the opportunity, would strap himself into a spaceship and be among the first to blast himself off into space, because he clearly had that kind of drive to know more so that he could improve his understanding of nature.

But we need to realize that that might NOT in fact be what Epicurus would do, if he were alive today. He might look at the risks and benefits of space travel and decide that as for himself, particularly depending on his health and his age and his likelihood of return, that it was more satisfying for him personally to stay here on earth and, using whatever time and resources were open to him, to improve his philosophy and share it with his friends and gain enjoyment from that while acknowledging that his choice would forever deprive him of personally seeing (for example) the other side of the moon.

Does everyone have to devote themselves to being a physicist in order to make the best use of their lives? Certainly not. But how do we are they have confidence that we are "making the best use of our lives"? These are philosophical issues (questions of epistemology, and ethics, and the study of nature) where we cannot demand "perfect knowledge" before having confidence in our answers, because "perfect knowledge" is NEVER available to ANY of us, nor will it ever be so long as mankind continues to exist.

What we have instead are our canonical faculties - the senses, feelings/affections, and anticipations/preconceptions, and we judge our success at life by how well we use those, just as we judge a dog or a cat by how well they employ their own natures as dogs and cats. We can't / shouldn't hold ourselves as humans to a higher standard than we would hold any other living thing, but that is what is going on when we look for "perfection" and criticize anyone who has confidence in their decisions on how to live life simply because they are consumed with doubt because they don't have "perfect and complete knowledge of everything."

We don't have that, we never will, but we need a philosophy for living now in our current state of less than "perfect" knowledge. That, it appears to me, is the direction Epicurus is pointing.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2020 at 6:56 AM**

In case someone jumped over the quote in the first post in this thread, here is the clip of Frances Wright's argument on this topic:

sometimes as grossly sensual, enlivened by no elegancies of art; veiled, adorned, if I may use the expression, by no refinement. In short, that Epicurus laughed as well at the fine arts as the grave sciences. From others again, I learned that music, dancing, poetry, and painting were pressed into the service of his philosophy; that Leontium strung the lyre, Metrodorus the harp, Hedeia moved in the dance, Boidion raised the song to Venus; that his halls were covered with voluptuous pictures, the walks of his gardens lined with indecent statues."

"And you may now perceive the truth," replied Metrodorus, "with your own eyes and ears."

"But," said Leontium, "the young Corinthian may be curious to know the sentiments of our Master, and his advice regarding the pursuit of the sciences and the liberal arts. I can readily perceive," addressing herself to Theon, "the origin of the two contradictory reports you have just mentioned. The first you would hear from the followers of Aristippus, who, though not acknowledging the name, follow the *tenets* of his philosophy, and have long been very numerous in our degenerate city. These, because Epicurus recommends but a moderate culture of those arts, which by

them are too often made the elegant incentives to licentious pleasure, accuse him of neglecting them altogether. The Cynics, and other austere sects, who condemn all that ministers to the luxury, ease, or recreation of man, exaggerate his moderate use of these arts into a vicious encouragement of voluptuousness and effeminacy. You will perceive, therefore, that between the two reports lies the truth. Every innocent recreation is permitted in the Garden. It is not poetry, but licentious poetry, that Epicurus condemns; not music, but voluptuous music; not painting, but licentious pictures; not dancing, but loose gestures. Yet thus he displeases alike the profligate and the austere, for these he is too moderate, and for those too severe. With regard to the sciences, if it be said, that they are neglected among us, I do not say that our Master, though himself versed in them, as in all other branches of knowledge, greatly recommends them to our study. But that they are not unknown, let Polyænus be evidence. He, one of the most amiable men of our school, and one most highly favored by our Master, you must have heard mentioned throughout Greece as a profound geometrician."

"Yes," replied Theon; "but I have also

heard, that since entering the Garden, he has ceased to respect his science."

"I am not aware of that," said Leontium, "though I believe he no longer devotes to it all his time, and all his faculties. Epicurus called him from his diagrams, to open to him the secrets of physics, and the beauties of ethics; to show him the springs of human action, and lead him to the study of the human mind. He taught him that any single study, however useful and noble in itself, was yet unworthy the entire employ of a curious and powerful intellect: that the man who pursued one line of knowledge, to the exclusion of others, though he should follow it up to its very head, would never be either learned or wise: that he who pursues knowledge, should think no branch of it unworthy attention; least of all, should he confine it to those which are unconnected with the business, and add nothing to the pleasures of life: that further not our acquaintance with ourselves, nor our fellows; that tend not to enlarge the sphere of our affections, to multiply our ideas and sensations, nor extend the scope of our inquiries. On this ground, he blamed the devotion of Polyænus to a science that leads to other truths than those of virtue, to other study than that of man."

"I am obliged to you for the explanation," said Theon; "not because I could any longer have given credit to the absurd reports of your Master's enemies; but because whatever opens to me the character and opinions of such a man, interests and improves me."

"You will find this," said Metrodorus, "the more you consider them. The life of Epicurus is a lesson of wisdom. It is by example, even more than precept, that he guides his disciples. Without issuing commands, he rules despotically. His wishes are divined, and obeyed as laws; his opinions are repeated as oracles; his doctrines adopted as demonstrated truths. All is unanimity in the Garden. We are a family of brothers, of which Epicurus is the father. And I say not this in the praise of the scholars, but the Master. Many of us have had bad habits, many of us evil propensities, many of us violent passions. That our habits are corrected, our propensities changed, our passions restrained, lies all with Epicurus. What I myself owe him, none but myself know. The giddy follower of licentious pleasure, the headstrong victim of my passions, he has made me taste of the sweets of innocence, and brought me into the calm of philosophy. It is thus—thus, by rendering us happy, that he lays us at his feet,—thus that he gains, and holds the

<https://archive.org/stream/fewdays...ge/110/mode/2up>

## Post by "Don" of July 18, 2020 at 11:35 AM

I'm taking a look at the [Yonge translation](#) of the Letter to Herodotus and getting an interesting take on this subject (emphasis added):

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1561-references-to-epicurus-attitude-toward-the-place-of-the-sciences-and-liberal-art/>

“As to us, we find many explanations of the motions of the sun, of the rising and setting of the stars, of the eclipses and similar phænomena, just as well as of the more particular phænomena. And **one must not think that this method of explanation is not sufficient to procure happiness and tranquillity**. Let us content ourselves with examining how it is that similar phænomena are brought about under our own eyes, and let us apply these observations to the heavenly objects and to **everything which is not known but indirectly**.

Let us despise those people who are unable to distinguish facts susceptible of different explanations from others which can only exist and be explained in one single way.

Let us disdain those men who do not know, by means of the different images which result from distance, how to give an account of the different appearances of things; who, in a word, are ignorant what are the objects which can excite any trouble in us.

If, then, we know that such a phænomenon can be brought about in the same manner as another given phænomenon of the same character **which does not inspire us with any apprehension**; and if, on the other hand, **we know that it can take place in many different manners, we shall not be more troubled at the sight of it than if we knew the real cause of it**.

“We must also recollect that **that which principally contributes to trouble the spirit of men is the persuasion which they cherish that the stars are beings imperishable and perfectly happy, and that then one’s thoughts and actions are in contradiction to the will of these superior beings; they also, being deluded by these fables, apprehend an eternity of evils, they fear the insensibility of death, as that could affect them**.

What do I say? It is not even belief, but inconsiderateness and blindness which govern them in every thing, to such a degree that, not calculating these fears, they are just as much troubled as if they had really faith in these vain phantoms.

And the real freedom from this kind of trouble consists in being emancipated from all these things, and in preserving the recollection of all the principles which we have established, especially of the most essential of them.

Accordingly, it is well to pay a scrupulous attention to existing phænomena and to the sensations, to the general sensations for general things, and to the particular sensations for particular things.

In a word, we must take note of this, the immediate evidence with which each of these judicial faculties furnishes us; for, if we attend to these points, namely, whence confusion and fear arise, we shall divine the causes correctly, and we shall deliver

ourselves from those feelings, tracing back the heavenly phænomena to their causes, and also **all the others which present themselves at every step**, and inspire the common people with extreme terror.

Display More

Here is where my rudimentary Greek is a handicap. I \*so\* wish I was more fluent to be able to read the original text better. I'm working on that. In the meantime, Yonge provides another perspective.

In this section, Epicurus is specifically discussing with Herodotus celestial phenomena (*many explanations of the motions of the sun, of the rising and setting of the stars, of the eclipses and similar phænomena*) HOWEVER he does also mention **everything which is not known but indirectly**. That last part is still a hang-up for me. But isn't the Epicurean atomic theory something that is "not known but indirectly"? I really need to read Philodemus on this. What is only know "indirectly" must be only ascertained through analogy with what is sensed directly, right? And once we come up with a satisfactory explanation that dispels terror, we can stop our investigation. Or do I have that wrong?

Epicurus says that what **principally contributes to trouble the spirit of men** is that men think the sun, planets, moon, stars, etc., are gods out to punish humans for actions **in contradiction to the will of these superior beings**.

So, Epicurus states that "**if we attend to these points** (i.e., material causes of these phenomena), **namely, whence confusion and fear arise** (i.e., when we attribute divine properties to the planets, etc.), **we shall divine the causes correctly** (i.e., they are only material objects composed of atoms and void)."

SO, am I reading too much into the Bailey translation? It definitely appears from my reading here that Epicurus is not necessarily talking in the general sense about researching the causes of all phenomena although he does bring up the "everything which is not known but indirectly." And is talking about "all [other phenomena] which present themselves at every step" which may "inspire the common people with extreme terror." It appears to me that Epicurus is talking about confronting all phenomena, both the directly sensed and indirectly known, with a commitment to the fundamental teaching that The Universe Is Atoms and Void. Which, for us "moderns" - shall we say - is not a huge stretch for our minds. I'm getting stuck on the multiple explanations for phenomena within that "All is atoms and void" mindset. Do we go after the "real" cause or surmise a "good enough" cause and wait for someone else to say it's not A it's B. And as long as B is a material and not a supernatural cause, we incorporate that into our knowledge and move along. But we OURSELVES as Epicureans shouldn't go looking for THE cause if we have a "good enough" explanation?

If a scientist is troubled by their search for the "real" cause of a disease or the "real" cause of the birth of the universe or the "real" cause of the mass of a particle in the Higgs Field (I'm out of my depth here!), can they be an Epicurean if that search troubles their mind? They don't feel

fear or terror from a vengeful deity, but is that anxiety/trouble incompatible with an Epicurean art to living?

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2020 at 2:19 PM

My sense from reading this is that you are eventually going to come out in the right place in all this once you satisfy yourself by rereading the texts and then go back to the basic fundamentals, which include that the observations that there no "absolute truths" in the universe that apply to everyone everywhere, and you focus on the practical aspects of using the canonical faculties to do the best that you can with any given situation, and especially on what the conclusion is about the "ultimate end" - which is the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain within the context of what is possible to each entity.

I think DeWitt rightly stresses how much Epicurus was devoted to practicality, and how also he was developing a general philosophy that applies to everyone regardless of their capabilities and circumstances, and that as a result he is giving broad guidelines about the nature of things rather than specific advice to specific people (since that differs so much according to circumstance).

Formulations like this would bother me greatly too if I thought they accurately reflected Epicurus:

### [Quote from Don](#)

Do we go after the "real" cause or surmise a "good enough" cause and wait for someone else to say

But I reject the idea that this is what Epicurus was saying, for the same reason I reject the "absence of pain" interpretation of Epicurus: the goal of life is PLEASURE, which means as much pleasure as possible and is reasonable to us under our circumstances -- we should NEVER simply go for "anesthesia" and waste our lives avoiding pain as the ultimate goal. The reason that science would advance more under an Epicurean regime than any other, in my view, is that science is the lever by which we use our minds to achieve pleasures and avoid pains in ways that would never be possible without that lever.

So in other words, I think your motivation to see Epicurus as a champion of science and opponent of ignorance is the same reason I see Epicurus as a champion of pleasure and a crusader against pain, without there being any real tension between the two sets of goals.

### [Quote from Don](#)

And once we come up with a satisfactory explanation that dispels terror, we can stop our investigation. Or do I have that wrong?

That's why an Epicurean would never be satisfied with anesthesia, or accepting a "least common denominator" approximation of an explanation in scientific matters when a better one is possible. The reason - to restate it - is that the goal of life is the pursuit of pleasure, and we will never achieve the pleasure that is possible to us if we accept a "good enough to avoid pain" strategy toward living.

To wheel back and cover a specific point, my interpretation of the difference between astronomical issues and issues about atoms appeared to Epicurus to be another issue in practicality: with the stars, we simply have no way to get "up close and personal" to really get our hands on what is going on.

With atoms, on the other hand, we CAN get up close and personal with the bodies that are formed from the atoms, and even though we can't see or touch the atoms themselves, we can (to use an example from the Lucretius covered in Episode 17) see enough around us to conclude that EVERYTHING we can see and touch is divisible, thus we are justified in concluding that atoms never grow large enough for us to touch ourselves, and thus we conclude that there is a limit to their size.

The standard question that seems to me that follows after that is always going to be "Well what about atoms on the other side of the moon, or other places you can't see? How do you know that there aren't super-huge atoms there?" And there I think we have to turn to the arguments in "on Methods of inference" or other fragments that are left to us. I don't recall that the material there is particularly as clear as I would like it to be either, but in referring to the [DeLacy commentary](#) (which I recommend probably before even reading the text itself) I think the main issue becomes choosing between inferences based on human senses/anticipations/feelings vs inferences based on dialectical/logical/syllogisms. I gather Epicurus interpreted the conflict as posing a choice between (1) we do the best we can with our human faculties, and (2) we defer to an inhuman form of "logic" which is not tied to reality but which is ultimately mystical even in the way that Plato and Aristotle advocated it.

And I think the final answer therefore involves coming to terms with our limitations as human beings and our willingness to be like all other animals, and to work within the confines of our abilities without being cowed into the submission of priests and other manipulators who are willing to lie to us that they have access to a superior knowledge to which we, due to our lesser status, do not have access. That's a lie, and we avoid it by understanding that in the nature of things no one has such knowledge, nor is it proper for us to think that it can exist.

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**Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2020 at 6:04 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1561-references-to-epicurus-attitude-toward-the-place-of-the-sciences-and-liberal-art/>

Here is a related thought on this topic. Don please correct me if I am wrong, but speaking for myself, at least, and I bet this applies to you too:

What gives us our confidence or persuades us or attracts us to the viewpoint that the pursuit of science MUST be the correct answer? Or that the pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate goal has to be the right answer?

Even though we are talking about science and philosophy, to me the answer is that it's FEELING, and not "logic" or "rationalism," that ultimately motivates us toward the view that to be correct, Epicurus "had" to have take the position that we intuit can be the only "best" position on these issues.

There's NO WAY that Epicurus would ultimately have been satisfied with a life of bread and water if it were "reasonably" available to him (unless he was compelled to accept it) and NO WAY that Epicurus would turn away from the pursuit of more scientific knowledge if it were "reasonably" available to him either. But the meaning of "reasonably" in this context is not some question of abstract logic, but a question of "reasonable cost" in terms of pain and pleasure. We're not choosing science just for the sake of the abstraction, but because it leads to the most pleasurable life, just like with virtue. All Epicurus was doing was describing science just like he described virtue and everything else, within the global framework of judging it in terms of its instrumentality in the pleasure/pain question.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of July 19, 2020 at 8:53 AM**

[Don](#) -- I am going to summarize my opinion about this issue, so I have it in one place. I might change my mind with a strong argument against this, but right now I feel pretty definite about my position.

I find the strong assertion of "this is how it is", based on reason and analogy, in the section of Lucretius we just read as incompatible with Epicurean philosophy as I understand and practice it. The philosophy is just fine, in my opinion, but this particular approach of stating hypotheses about unobserved processes in a manner as if the hypotheses are factual is a mistake.

It is inconsistent with the Canon of knowledge, that we know what is true by observation, prolepsis, and feeling. The insistence on not using reason to determine truth (vs practical use of reason to decide on wise action, based on \_observed\_ truth) was one of the primary things that drew me to Epicurus.

I have for years said the atheists should not celebrate a Day of Reason. They should have a Day

of Evidence.

I don't have any trouble with Epicurus saying that the possibility of multiple explanations for a single phenomenon is not a problem-- I agree. What I have trouble with is the way Lucretius is saying, to paraphrase, "it's like this, and we know it by analogy and reason." No. We do not know, because that is not how we "know" things.

I feel like Epicurus' language about these things, in the full context of his work, is more adherent to the Canon than the way Lucretius is presenting it. But anywhere that he presents a hypothesis as if it were decided fact, I disagree strenuously.

And it wouldn't have mattered if I had lived back then and not known the physics we know now-- my fears would not be relieved if someone tried to reassure me using a method of determining truth that I already knew to be faulty. If the goal is to relieve my anxiety, it would not work to use that kind of extrapolation. I wouldn't trust it, and I would remain anxious about what was really going on. I would not trust someone who made assertions without evidence about the rest of what they were telling me.

And leaving things that are unknown as so far blank spots on our map is fine with me, as it also appeared to be for Epicurus. That is completely different from the Skeptic position of saying we can't know anything at all.

Hypotheses are fine-- sometimes they lead to experiments which can test them, and sometimes they are just interesting.

Most importantly, because everything comes down to pleasure, why do I want to avoid confusing hypotheses with facts?

1) Because I would know my ideas about reality were derived from reason, not observation, and I would remain anxious and doubtful about my conclusions

2) Because misinformation can lead to unwise choices, more pain than pleasure, whereas being aware of unknown areas is fine. One can still make pragmatic decisions while remaining aware of uncertainties.

The issue of how much inquiry and science learning relates to pleasure is an individual preference. Like people who enjoy opera or the Three Stooges or both. I definitely get a lot of pleasure from science.

My argument against the supernatural gods going around interfering with humans has more to do with a complete lack of evidence, and this was also true in Epicurus' time. Observing nature helps a person notice that supernatural action does not show up, and a lot of this is from

the predictability of natural processes that Lucretius has already made note of, that we never see the bizarre things happen that would be frequent if reality were not material. That is a reasoning process, to be sure, but it is tightly tied to observations and is not the same as the leaps of analogy in the section we just read. One does not need to be a physicist or neuroscience to understand that line of argument.

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### **Post by “Martin” of July 19, 2020 at 8:54 AM**

Here is my take:

#### Quote

And once we come up with a satisfactory explanation that dispels terror, we can stop our investigation.

We can stop there but we do not have to. Stopping there is OK for those for who do not get much pleasure from studying science or who do not have the time or ability to investigate further.

For Don, me and any other science geek, Epicurus puts no limit on how far we go in our investigation. It is our own decision based on hedonic calculus, with our curiosity and even obsessions driving us beyond Aristotelian moderation.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 19, 2020 at 10:53 AM**

I "liked" Elayne's comments and I agree with her conclusions about proper procedure, but I think that I am also aware of my own limitations in studying the details of what Lucretius is presenting, so I don't think I would characterize Lucretius in the way stated there I think someone who was trying to advocate for Lucretius' particular presentation could probably argue that Lucretius \*does\* ultimately point to observable facts such that he is in the end reasoning in the way that Elayne is advocating.

Trying to resolve any particular point in dispute (as to whether Lucretius goes "too far" on a particular conclusion) would require us to get really specific about exactly what he said on that point, and compare it to what else he said in the remainder of the book, plus whatever other record we have from the Epicurean texts, and that would probably take a Martin Ferguson

Smith or some other true "expert" to marshal all the evidence for and against that particular point.

In general, from my personal point of view, the "higher level" conclusions about the nature of the universe, infinity and innumerably, etc, remain very convincing, and I personally take what I understand to be modern theories to be just that - theories - which are in some instances an improvement but probably no more the "final word" than many other theories that have come about in the past.

That's why I am much more comfortable saying in many cases that Lucretius' views "appear to conflict with current theories" before I would say "Lucretius was \*wrong\*" Of course there are some specific examples where I agree and would say "Lucretius was "wrong" about some specific phenomena, but the closer the issue comes to bigger-picture issues of infinite/boundless universe, life elsewhere in the universe, etc, the more comfortable I am that his views probably remain the most persuasive.

Having said all that I want to come back to the big picture that I think Elayne's stress on proper procedure is correct and that is the take-home point. Whether or not Lucretius's particular statement in a particular passage fits the definition of "wrong" is a much less important question to me.

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### Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2020 at 12:04 PM

virtue and happiness of others. All learning is useful, all the sciences are curious, all the arts are beautiful; but more useful, more curious, and more beautiful, is the perfect knowledge and perfect government of ourselves. Though a man should read the heavens, unravel their laws, and their revolutions; though he should dive into the mysteries of matter, and expound the phenomena of earth and air; though he should be conversant with all the writings, and the sayings, and the actions of the dead; though he should hold the pencil of Parrhasius, the chisel of Polycletes, or the lyre of Pindar; though he should do one or all of these things, yet know not the secret springs of his own mind, the foundation of his opinions, the motives of his actions; if he hold not the rein over his passions; if he have not cleared the mist of all prejudices from his understanding; if he have not rubbed off all intolerance from his judgments; if he know not to

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weigh his own actions, and the actions of others, in the balance of justice — that man hath not knowledge; nor, though he be a man of science, a man of learning, or an artist, he is not a sage. He must yet sit down, patient, at the feet of philosophy. With all his learning, he hath yet to learn, and perhaps a harder task, he hath to unlearn."

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### Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2020 at 12:11 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1561-references-to-epicurus-attitude-toward-the-place-of-the-sciences-and-liberal-art/>



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**Post by “Cassius” of July 19, 2020 at 6:14 PM**

I am going to get today's recording processed as soon as I can too.

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**Post by “Elayne” of July 19, 2020 at 9:47 PM**

I should have been more specific, [Cassius](#), about where I disagree with Lucretius' procedures. I was thinking about the section we covered last week, with the smooth, rough, or hooked atoms.

I am not so much concerned that his conclusions turned out to be incorrect as I am about how he arrived at them, through reason and analogy. Rather than this being a case of experimental error or a mistake in understanding an observation, it was a method problem. It's a great example of how reason is fraught with error.

I wouldn't have minded if he said it might be that way. But that's not how it was presented. And even in that time, I would have distrusted someone who used imagination to arrive at part of their case about the nature of things. It wouldn't have allayed my fears, because it wasn't arrived at with sound methodology, and you don't have to be a physicist to know the difference between observations and imagination/ reasoning by analogy.

I think it's important to confront problems like this, because it could make the philosophy less credible to someone who notices how Lucretius arrived at his assertions. And then to say this does no damage at all to the solid structure of the philosophy, because we can remove all the pieces arrived at by imagination/analogy and still reach the same conclusions.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2020 at 9:31 AM**

Ok Episode 28 is now posted, and we dig a little into the issues Don has raised, but not as far as I would like. Don, it would be particularly helpful, if you get a chance to listen, to let us know whether we have addressed your ultimate point at all, and as is likely, let us know if you have followup thoughts so we can discuss them in upcoming episodes.

## Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2020 at 1:16 PM

As for the issue of "truth" I have posted an article that contains quotes where Sextus Empiricus states what he understands Epicurus' view on "truth" to be. I have clipped several pages that contain quotes, which are the most useful, as I don't think we can safely defer either to the author of the article or to Sextus Empiricus for this very complex subject:

### [Epicurus On Truth And Falsehood: Statements by Sextus Empiricus / Article By Brown](#)

Τὸ δὲ Ἐπικουροῦς τὰ μὲν αἰσθητὰ μόνον εἶλεν ἀληθῆ καὶ ὄντα, τὰ δὲ φησὶ γὰρ ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὰ λεγόμενα ἢ ὁμολογούμενα καὶ ἀπαρρητοῦσιν ἄλλοις καὶ ψευδῆ ἕτερα φησὶν ἀληθῆ τὰ αὐτὰς ἔχειν ὡς λέγεται ἔχειν, καὶ ψευδῆ ἄλλα φησὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ὄντως ἔχειν ὡς λέγεται ἔχειν· τὴν τε αἰσθητὴν ἀντιληπτέαν εἶσαν τῶν ὁμοιωτέων αἰσθητῶν, καὶ μὴτε ἀπαρρητοῦσιν τι μὴτε ἀπαρρητοῦσιν μὴτε μεταφασίαν τῶν λεγόμενων εἶσαι, ἀλλὰ παντὶς τῆ ἀληθείας καὶ οὐτως τὸ ἐν λαμβάνειν ὡς εἶχε φησὶ αὐτὸ εἶναι. μόνον δὲ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἀληθῆν ὄντων, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα φησὶν ἀληθῆ καὶ τὰ μὲν αἰσθητὰ εἶναι ἀληθῆ τὰ δὲ ψευδῆ, καὶ τὸ ἀπαρρητοῦσιν εἶναι φησὶν.

And Epicurus spoke of all perceptibles as true and as beings. For it made no difference to say that something is true or that it exists. After that he also gave an outline of truth and falsehood: 'True,' he says, 'is that which is as it is said to be,' and 'False,' he says, 'is that which is not as it is said to be.' And [sc. he says that] perception, being able to apprehend the things which are subjected to it, and neither subtracting, nor adding, nor changing anything—because it is non-rational—both is in all cases truthful and grasps that which is just as that very thing is in its nature. But [sc. he says that] while all perceptibles are true, judgeables are different in that some of them are true and others false, as we showed earlier.

Sextus first reports the basic position: Epicurus thinks that all perceptibles are true and that they are beings. (The question whether perceptibles are beings is relevant because several philosophers are reported earlier in the survey to claim that perceptibles have an inferior ontological status and for this reason

I interpret this as largely stating what should be obvious - "perceptions" are true because they are non-rational, but "judgeables" (meaning opinion?) are either true or false because they are formed through reasoning and therefore are subject to error.

So I would think one way to summarize a key point here is that perceptions through the canonical faculties constitute the foundation of truth for us, while those things which cannot be revealed through the canonical faculties must be considered opinions and can be true or false.

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2020 at 4:44 PM

I think we may have included this excerpt already, but I don't think in this format, so here is Bailey's translation of a key section of the Letter to Herodotus:

understanding of the nature of the existences seen in these celestial phenomena, and of all else that is akin to the exact knowledge requisite for our happiness: in knowing too that what occurs in several ways or is capable of being otherwise has no place here, but that nothing which suggests doubt or alarm can be included at all in that which is naturally immortal and blessed. Now this we can ascertain by our mind is absolutely the case. But what falls within the investigation of risings and settings and turnings and eclipses, and all that is akin to this, is no longer of any value for the happiness which knowledge brings, but persons who have perceived all this, but yet do not know what are the natures of these things and what are the essential causes, are still in fear, just as if they did not know these things at all: indeed, their fear may be even greater, since the wonder which arises out of the observation of these things cannot discover any solution or realize the regulation of the essentials. And for this very reason, even if we discover several causes for turnings and settings and risings and eclipses and the like, as has been the case already in our investigation of detail, we must not suppose that our inquiry into these things has not reached sufficient accuracy to contribute to our peace of mind and happiness. So we must carefully consider in how many ways a similar phenomenon is produced on earth, when we reason about the causes of celestial phenomena and all that is imperceptible to the senses; and we must despise those persons who do not recognize either what exists or comes into being in one way only, or that which may occur in several ways in the case of things which can only be seen by us from a distance, and further are not aware under what conditions it is impossible to have peace of mind. If, therefore, we think that a phenomenon probably occurs in some such particular way, and that in circumstances under which it is equally possible for us to be at peace, when we realize that it may occur in several ways, we shall be just as little disturbed as if we know that it occurs in some such particular way.

essential for our happiness, but not the knowledge of the detailed causes of their working.

We must therefore be content even if we find several causes for the same phenomenon.

We must reason about celestial phenomena on the analogy of things on earth, and not be disturbed, if we find several causes at work

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Post by "Cassius" of July 26, 2020 at 7:39 AM

[Don](#) if you get a chance could you let us know if we've addressed your thoughts in the podcast? I am sure there is a lot more on this to discuss, and I am not even sure that we hit your exact question.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

There's a LOT to digest here and I greatly appreciate everyone's thoughts on this topic. I plan to respond in more detail, but I had to say that this line from Elayne 's post made me smile and nod my head in agreement! 😊

Well said!

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### **Post by “Don” of July 26, 2020 at 8:55 AM**

Oh, dear. I did say I was going to respond. I'm going back and listening again to make sure I remember correctly. I'm about 1/2 way through again. Here are some initial thoughts:

I think I'm coming around to the idea that investigation... observation, if you will... of phenomena doesn't have to stop if you're Epicurean. I'm still not sure if I'm onboard with Epicurus and the classical Epicureans being advocates of "science" since science as a method or discipline didn't exist yet. I'm uneasy about imposing anachronistic definitions onto ancient terms, texts, and ideas. That said, Epicurus's φυσιολογία "physiologias" or the study of Nature/what is natural would imply he wanted an accurate or realistic understanding of natural processes and phenomena. My jury is still out on the implications of this.

I do want to address the conversation in the podcast on truth or Truth with a capital T. I have to disagree with [Elayne](#) and others that everyone knows what Truth is. In a quotidian sense, people can understand what true vs false is. "2+2=4" is true. I can count things. "The Earth is flat" is not true but some people will assert that it is true. For them, that statement is true and in some ways Truth. Other people "know" God is real and intercedes in their life and that's True. They would say others who don't believe God is Truth are mistaken (at least). All of humanity does not have a prolepsis of Truth. That would make life easier. Maybe in the most rudimentary sense of true vs false, but I don't think that rises to the level of prolepsis. People know what THEY know is Truth but those other people over there don't know Truth. Unless I've misconstrued the conversation, I think the concept of Truth is much more elusive than some on the panel tried to make it out to be.

PS It appeared to me that Truth was being described as more of a Platonic ideal than as an Epicurean prolepsis in the podcast.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2020 at 9:00 AM**

Thank you Don. As you think about it more, also please comment on what got you on this train of thought in the first place. I know in this instance I started the thread myself, but this comes up regularly so it would be interesting to know what passage or text or whatever led you to have a concern about the issue.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2020 at 10:37 AM**

Don -- Elayne got called away today and wasn't able to participate in this episode, so we'll bring up these comments next week and now you have a full week to consider whether there's any other aspect for us to cover 😊

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**Post by “Don” of July 26, 2020 at 11:02 AM**

I'll do my best 😊

I'm also reading Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" and the commentary that you recommended. This does seem to bear directly on the issue at hand, so thanks for that suggestion.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of July 26, 2020 at 4:31 PM**

From A Few Days in Athens:

Quote

"But what is a truth?" said Theon.

"It is pertinently asked. A truth I consider to be an ascertained fact; which truth would be changed into an error, the moment the fact, on which it rested, was disproved."

Wouldn't this be the prolepsis? In a universe of atoms and void there is no Truth, only truths.

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## Post by "Godfrey" of July 26, 2020 at 4:37 PM

Continuing the quotation above:

Quote

"I see, then, no fixed basis for truth." "

It surely has the most fixed of all — the nature of things. And it is only an imperfect insight into that nature, which occasions all our erroneous conclusions, whether in physics or morals."

"But where, if we discard the gods, and their will, as engraven on our hearts, are our guides in the search after truth ?" "

Our senses and our faculties as developed in and by the exercise of our senses, are the only guides with which I am acquainted. And I do not see why, even admitting a belief in the gods, and in a superintending providence, the senses should not be viewed as the guides, provided by them, for our direction and instruction. But here is the evil attendant on an ungrounded belief, whatever be its nature. The moment we take one thing for granted, we take other things for granted: we are started in a wrong road, and it is seldom that we can gain the right one, until we have trodden back our steps to the starting place. I know but of one thing that a philosopher should take for granted; and that only because he is forced to it by an irresistible impulse of his nature; and because, without doing so, neither truth nor falsehood could exist for him. He must take for granted the evidence of his senses; in other words, he must believe in the existence of things, as they exist to his senses. I know of no other existence, and can therefore believe in no other: although, reasoning from analogy, I may imagine other existences to be.

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## Post by "Don" of July 26, 2020 at 5:08 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Wouldn't this be the prolepsis? In a universe of atoms and void there is no Truth, only truths.

Thanks for that quote, [Godfrey](#) ! I would say no, that's not the prolepsis (or a prolepsis), but let me explain.

This was actually the point I was originally trying to make. "The Truth" with a capital T and scare quotes doesn't exist. That seems to me to be a Platonic ideal that has no relation to the real world. I would agree with your quote in that the only things we have are true facts as ascertained by observation and evidence. That way, we don't get into arguments about my Truth vs your Truth. What do the observations say are true facts. Otherwise, we're arguing about internal mental constructs that may or may not be connected to things able to be perceived. If someone believes the existence of God is Truth, can that be observed? Can that be factually ascertained? No? Then it's not a true fact but empty opinion.

I also don't think this recognition of a true fact rises to the level of a prolepsis. Either things correspond to observable phenomena as ascertained by our senses or extensions of our senses (e.g., telescopes, microscopes, instruments, etc.) or they don't. I know the prolepses are a hot topic and I won't go into my (current) understanding of them; but, in summary, I don't think we need to fall back on a prolepsis to determine if an observable fact is true or not. It either corresponds to our observations or it doesn't.

I hope that fleshes out my understanding a little, but I remain open to to reading others takes on this!

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### **Post by “Don” of July 26, 2020 at 6:11 PM**

I suppose I may be weaseling my way out of providing more of my current understanding of Epicurean prolepses. I'll try to be brief but also put my opinions out there.

First, I thought [this article was interesting in drawing distinctions between Stoic and Epicurean prolepsis](#).

Now, for me, prolepses are engaged at the instinctual level. Research has shown that animals and babies already have a sense of fairness and "justice" if you will. Check these links [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) to start. And we know Epicurus looked to animals and children for confirmation of the basic tenets.

So, my understanding is that prolepses could be thought of as instinctual or innate, inborn faculties that "grasp" more abstract phenomena like justice and our sensations grasp more concrete phenomena like sights, sounds, tactile sensations, etc.

That's why I don't think we need a prolepsis of Truth. Something either agrees with our sensations or it doesn't. I don't think that's the same as recognizing whether something is just or not and hence needing a prolepsis.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of July 26, 2020 at 7:19 PM**

Wow my compliments and thanks to both Godfrey and Don for these last posts. Godfrey that quote from Frances Wright is directly on point, and Don thanks for that link to the article on Prolepsis which I have not seen. I have not yet started to read it but the abstract sounds very promising to me. Sounds like most all of us are going to agree with his direction as the prolepsis being pre-rational and not at all the same thing as "concept formation" (which would involve reasoning/opinion).

If I understand the direction Don is going (and I think i do) he will not be surprised that I agree with him and the direction. At this point in the conversation I am prepared to commit that I believe that Epicurus held that prolepsis/anticipation/preconception is a faculty that provides a COMPONENT of "truth," just as do the five senses and the feelings of pain and pleasure, but I would not say that in general we can say that 'truth' IS a preconception.

I am pretty convinced along with Frances Wright and Don that truth is a purely contextual proposition. I think the word "objective" when evaluating the "truth" of a situation means something like "repeated observations from the same perspective under the same conditions will produce the same result" which I gather to be something like the "correspondence theory" of truth in that the opinion corresponds reliability with the situation about which the opinion is given. I think that in order to evaluate the "truth" of any proposition you have to have an opinion about the nature of the observer, and an opinion about the nature of what is being observed, and an opinion about the conditions under which the observation is being made. I think that that is why we're going to find Lucretius devoting so much attention to "images" in De Rerum Natura, in that he is stressing that our opinion as to truth (which he is convinced we can obtain in at least some instances) has to be tested by whether repeated observations produce the same result. That would constitute "our truth" but even then, as Frances Wright says, that truth ceases to exist when the facts change and the repeated observations stop yielding the same result. (And yes I am kind of mirroring the statements about "justice" in the PDs to the effect that justice changes when the facts change.

This is all hugely deep and I reserve the right to amend and change my comments, but the general direction that I am going is that I am agreeing with Don's observations. I think that Elayne is raising a valid point too, but I think that point is eventually going to resolve itself in the direction of clarifying that "we know truth instinctively by prolepsis" more to something like "'truth' is an important and valid human experience in which input from the faculty of preconception is an important point, but one of the most important things to recognize about truth is that what we consider to be true changes with contextual facts." I suspect that's the direction that Frances Wright was going in and her version is probably much more clear than mine.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2020 at 7:21 PM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I'm also reading Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" and the commentary that you recommended. This does seem to bear directly on the issue at hand, so thanks for that suggestion.

Don it's going to take you a while to get through that material so we are going to have to give your some time, but I do think you will continue to agree that it is extremely relevant material. It's possibly some of the most helpful material I've come across, especially in how it provides background in comparing Epicurus to Plato and especially Aristotle. Aristotle is often considered much appreciative of the senses than was Plato, and that's probably true, but DeLacey helps show I think that Epicurus went much further in rejecting rationalism and that is point that deserves tremendous emphasis (to the everlasting pain and embarrassment of the Randians/Objectivists!).

As we discuss that remember that i have the full book online so we can post links to this location: <https://archive.org/stream/philode...age/n5/mode/2up>

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of July 26, 2020 at 7:21 PM**

Now I understand better what you wrote previously, Don. Thanks for elaborating!

Regarding prolepsis and what was discussed in the podcast: if I understood her correctly, Elayne was comparing truth with, say, sweetness, as something that doesn't need definition. To me that's not correct, and I would consider it to be a prolepsis. Just as everyone can have a different idea as to what is just, so everyone can have a different idea as to what is true. But the prolepsis, at least as I understand it, is the germ of the idea. Little children have a general sense of what is fair and just, and they also have a general sense of truth. This is different from knowledge of specific concepts of truth and justice, which are only developed with time, experience and input from the senses and feelings. A child can see something and through their feelings, mediated by their prolepsis, have a sense as to whether that something is just, true or whatnot. This precedes conceptualizing about "what is truth" and the like.

At least that's how I currently understand it! 🤔

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2020 at 7:26 PM**

Yes Godfrey that is the direction I think probably Elayne will come down on when she has a chance to elaborate. In the sense you are talking evaluation of a "prolepsis of truth" would probably include recognition that human truth is contextual and that godlike omniscient certainty is an invalid standard.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2020 at 7:32 PM**

Also in getting the terminology correct I think it is important to keep in mind that "prolepsis" appears to refer to a FACULTY, while "truth" in the way we are talking about it here probably always refers to a PARTICULAR truth, in the same we that SIGHT is the faculty but we SEE a particular object.

So whether we have "prolepsis of truth" very possibly should always be stated to convey that we are talking about having a prolepsis of the truth of a particular situation.

Maybe there is a prolepsis of what truth is in the abstract, like there are prolepsises of the nature of the gods, but we have to remember I think that a prolepsis is like any other faculty (like sight) in that what the prolepsis reports will be reported truly, but may be "untrue to the facts" just like people can have incorrect preconceptions of the nature of the gods.

## Post by “Godfrey” of July 26, 2020 at 7:35 PM

Absolutely it's not an absolute!

To further compare truth and justice as prolepsis: in order to provide further understanding of the prolepsis of justice, Epicurus provides 10 [Principal Doctrines](#). In order to provide further understanding of (the prolepsis of?) truth, he provides the Canon.

That of course doesn't mean that truth is definitely a prolepsis, but it does seem to me to be an analogous situation.

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## Post by “Don” of July 26, 2020 at 7:52 PM

Speaking of sweetness and bitterness.. and revisiting Clear & Vivid with Alan Alda... Here is an [episode of that podcast that got me thinking of the prolepsis of sweet = good & bitter = bad](#). The guest talks about tiny worms that seek out sweet things and avoid bitter things. I think I can see the idea of the proto-prolepsis in the worm but I'm not sure if others would see the sensations or the reactions (pleasure/pain) or all three of the Canon working in concert. I believe this is in the first half of the episode if you get a chance to listen.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of July 26, 2020 at 7:53 PM

Quote

So whether we have "prolepsis of truth" very possibly should always be stated to convey that we are talking about having a prolepsis of the truth of a particular situation.

Yes, that's very important!

Again to compare truth with justice, I think that it's also the case that a prolepsis of justice applies to a particular situation. Thinking about it, a prolepsis, being part of the Canon is a faculty to evaluate a particular situation. Similarly for sensations and feelings.

We can apply well developed concepts to the evaluation of specific situations, but a prolepsis is a more fundamental, gut level, lizard brain tool for evaluating. A different faculty from the use of reason. Which accidentally asks the question "is reason a faculty?" Maybe there's a better word that's specific to "abilities" outside of the Canon.

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## Post by “Don” of July 26, 2020 at 9:53 PM

### [Epicurean Preconceptions.pdf](#)

I just found this article by Dr. Voula. It appears to have some good summaries of the current scholarship on the prolepses, and she gives her own take as well. I've only just begun reading, but a couple things jumped out so far including this list:

#### Quote

In the first place, an examination of early Epicurean texts intimates that the range of objects of which we have preconceptions includes: natural kinds, such as man, horse and cow; abstract entities, for instance justice, utility and truth; moral and psychological attitudes like responsibility and agency; and non-perceptible items, such as gods and atoms. Preconceptions of these objects always have an evidential basis. One acquires the preconception of cow through repeated clear impressions of cows, that of justice by perceiving many just acts, that of moral responsibility by being exposed to acts of praise and blame, and the prolepsis of atoms as constantly moving by observing corpuscula dancing in the light. However, the evidence makes it reasonably clear that only some of our concepts are preconceptions formed in the aforementioned way, while all other concepts are formed by internal mental processes in which the mind plays a role. 'All notions arise by means of confrontation, analogy, similarity and combination, with some contribution from reasoning as well' (DL 10.32).

The list is helpful, but I'm not sure I accept the conclusions. I find it interesting that she includes truth in the abstract concepts list! I'd like to know where that comes from in the texts to provide some context.

Prolepses are also described elsewhere as being innate, and, if they're innate, that seems to mean they are inborn. So, Tsouna's contention that they require multiple experiences doesn't seem to line up with that idea of innateness.

On the other hand, consider the acquiring of language by babies and toddlers (to look at the prolepses of language, e.g., cow, man, horse, etc.). My contention would be that as we are

acquiring the words of our individual language (man, άνθρωπος, l'homme, etc.) we are attaching these to prolepses of the general meaning of man, car, house, tower, etc. These are NOT Platonic Forms but mental images we will immediately access when we again hear or read or imagine those concepts.

But is this prolepses or simply memory? For me, the innateness and reflexive automatic pre-rational access of the prolepses would argue against this kind of formation of prolepses. I'm much more inclined to the instinctual, inborn faculties as being the prolepses.

I'll have to study the texts and the scholarship more, but this is where my head is at right now.

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### Post by “Martin” of July 27, 2020 at 4:11 AM

Just for clarification:

The truth about something is not a prolepsis (in most cases). During the referred to podcast discussion, my agreement with truth as prolepsis was about the meaning of the word truth, not truth about something, and I thought the other participants were referring to the meaning of the word truth, too.

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### Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2020 at 4:48 AM

if I recall the Voula Tsouna article correctly (and I think it is posted here) she discusses David Sedleys views as different from hers, and I recall agreeing more with Sedley than with her.

File

#### [Tsouna - Epicurean Preconceptions \(2016 Article\)](#)



Epicurean Preconceptions



Cassius

May 2, 2020 at 6:14 PM

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2020 at 7:10 AM

### [Quote from Martin](#)

Just for clarification:

The truth about something is not a prolepsis (in most cases). During the referred to podcast discussion, my agreement with truth as prolepsis was about the meaning of the word truth, not truth about something, and I thought the other participants were referring to the meaning of the word truth, too.

Don, I wonder if you have the same concern about this as your earlier concern?

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## Post by “Don” of July 27, 2020 at 1:16 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Don, I wonder if you have the same concern about this as your earlier concern?

Sort of. (Oh, that's helpful, right?) 😊

The more I read the current scholarship (and there seems to be a WIDE spectrum of thoughts) on prolepses, there definitely seems to be a language component. So, a "prolepsis of truth" seems to me to maybe simply be the faculty to recognize a true vs false statement in some way.

My problem, consternation, uneasiness comes in when we have statements like:

1. That is a round tower.
2. God saved me from the accident.

Those are not equivalent statements when it comes to determining their being true vs. false.

(1) can be resolved from observation and doesn't really need a prolepsis of "truth" because our senses will resolve whether it's true.

(2) cannot be resolved by observation. That statement is connected to somebody's internal/personal Truth (capital T) and, so, again I don't think it falls under a prolepsis because

it would be innate. That seems more like a case of holding an empty or incorrect opinion.

There also seems to be some scholarship that tries to make the prolepsis of the divine (That they are blessed, immortal, etc.) a special case, but I don't think - personally - that Epicurus would create a category - prolepsis - to cover only one case. And if the prolepsis about the gods is innate, I would \*think\* that all prolepses are innate and pre-rational, especially if they're part of the Canon and used in determining a correct version of reality.

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2020 at 1:38 PM

Don I expected that you would not yet be satisfied. Have you yet gotten to the chapter in DeWitt where he talks about his view of anticipations?

We do probably have two very separate issues here:

- (1) The practical meaning/definition/view of "truth"
- (2) The nature and use of "anticipations."

My current thought is that I go very much along the lines of Godfrey's quote from "A Few Days In Athens" as to "truth," and as to anticipations, I am pretty much with DeWitt but with a focus on anticipations being a "faculty" (like sight) which makes it critical to distinguish the faculty from any single "perception" that arises from the faculty.

I think it is very very easy to equate an anticipation with a particular conclusion, and I think that is exactly what Bailey and probably Tsouna are doing, and I think they are wrong about that. I think that anticipations are distinct perceptions (just like from 5 senses and feelings) from which we draw opinions, but blurring the line between the perception and our opinion or conclusion is a major error.

Even DeWitt seems to me to be too close to equating an anticipation with a particular opinion, but if you read him closely enough I don't think he really goes over the line. For example when we talk about having an anticipation of justice, I don't think that means that our particular anticipation equates to a conclusion that a particular situation is just or unjust. My view is that it's a faculty that allows us to recognize that what is being observed is something that our minds are disposed to file under a category that "justice," but that all the conclusions about whether the particular situation is just or unjust are in the realm of opinion rather than in the realm of the anticipation faculty. Where I think DeWitt is most correct in ridiculing the idea that anticipations allow us to identify cows or horses. I think that process, which is featured in Diogenes Laertius, is something else (probably "conceptual reasoning"), not a description of the

faculty of anticipations.

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### **Post by “Don” of July 27, 2020 at 2:23 PM**

I just read DeWitt's section of Anticipations and find myself largely in agreement with him. I also see that he did NOT accept the idea of having a prolepsis of an ox, etc., for individual words.

Just finishing lunch break so back to work... But more later!

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of July 27, 2020 at 2:46 PM**

What if we zoom out a bit, then zoom back in. This is an off the cuff expression of my current understanding so I'm kind of going to ramble a bit... The Canon is a three legged tool with which to measure the veracity of observations and/or arguments. One leg, the sensations, provides input. One leg, the feelings, responds to input (sensations, thoughts, etc) and also provides guidance for action. As to the leg of prolepses... it seems that this can be a bridge between the two other legs. Is it also an internal source of input, or, like feelings, is it strictly another response mechanism? As a response mechanism it would be an innate faculty, but subject to "training" over time.

I need to give this a lot more thought, but where I'm going is asking what the function of each leg is, how or if they work together, and whether or not this can help to define a prolepsis. Part of the difficulty in answering this is that there seems to be a wide variety of ways that the Canon can function.

Also, there are five or more sensations which interact with each other. The feelings have an inverse relationship as described by the Full Cup model. Is there something analogous in the workings of the prolepses? I often think of them as a bridge between the other two legs but I'm not sure that that's entirely accurate.

I'm not sure if this is useful or not but I figured I'd put it out there....

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2020 at 3:48 PM**

Godfrey you are asking the question that leads me to my own conclusion: How are all three legs of the canon supposed to work and what makes them canonical?

I've always come to the conclusion that in order for the legs of the canon to serve as criteria of truth, they had to function "automatically" without the input of reason/opinion. Therefore I have always rejected the view that anticipations could be "concepts," because in my view that creates a feedback loop. If the opinion we form after experience becomes part of our standard of truth, then that just doesn't work if the main feature of the canon is that it is pre-rational.

Now in my mind there is a possibility that the anticipation faculty is some kind of "organizational" capacity that can be made sharper over time, just as perhaps our ear for music or our ability to pick out detail in sight might improve with experience. But that would just be improvement in the working of a non-rational faculty, and if you consider concepts like "ox" to be subjects of anticipations, then in my mind that's a non-starter. "Ox" is a human-developed category of living things summarized in a particular word "ox," and it's going to be a matter of opinion where the dividing line between an ox and a cow and a horse and sheep really lies.

So I think DeWitt is correct in ruling out the possibility of there being an "anticipation" of a concrete particular like an ox or Plato.

The process of deciding whether the thing headed toward us is an ox, or Plato, clearly does involve some kind of process in which the mind works to narrow down the possibilities and fit the data to a pattern we have developed over time, but at the point we're saying "that's an ox because it matches our definition of an ox," and at that point we are pretty far from what Epicurus was considering to be a faculty analogous to seeing and hearing.

Now being a lawyer I think I can take the other side of that argument. I can argue that, "Yes, since human experience isn't absolute and so much is relative to our perspective, then we should consider our previously-formed concepts and opinions to be a part of our canon of "truth." In saying that we would have to emphasize that "truth" is not absolute, so it's ok to incorporate our own reasoning conclusions as part of what we think is true.

And it seems that the "later" or "the Epicureans generally" did take that course, thereby creating a fourth leg of the standard of truth.

However DeWitt concludes that that was a big mistake, and I agree with DeWitt. Once you admit that the product of conceptual reasoning itself is a part of your measure of "truth," to me you are on the slippery slope to Platonic rationalism, because your holding the opinions of your own mind as equal in authority to the promptings of nature.

[Edit: I made some pretty significant revisions to clean up my poor typing and phrasing hopefully without changing the meaning.]

## Post by "Godfrey" of July 27, 2020 at 8:42 PM

A further question that I periodically ponder is whether or not the three legs as conceived by Epicurus function together as a process, interact randomly, or both.

I keep leaning toward the notion that they function together as a process, but I may be bringing that to it from my personal bias. The way that I envision the process working is that the prolepses work on a "gut" level to route a received sensation to either a pleasure or pain receptor. If neither feeling is involved, then there's no prolepsis. So we determine a concept of justice not necessarily from a single use of the Canon but through multiple exposures to situations that involve justice and stimulate resultant feelings of pleasure or pain. The concept of justice is a mental construct (not Canonical). The prolepsis of justice is the "intuition" that gives us pleasure or pain from the situation involving justice or injustice.

Now there are situations that lead to feelings with, seemingly, no prolepsis involved: seeing a beautiful sunset, burning your hand on the stove. And there are situations that don't stimulate feelings (recognizing an ox as an ox) and so, by this line of reasoning, don't involve a prolepsis. But in thinking of it in terms of a process, the prolepses or feelings aren't activated without a stimulus. Which maybe after all is just a long winded way of saying that a prolepsis is not a concept, although more specifically I'm trying to ascertain if the Canon is considered to be an integrated process.

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 27, 2020 at 9:06 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

I keep leaning toward the notion that they function together as a process, but I may be bringing that to it from my personal bias.

... Or else you are mind-melding with Norman DeWitt, because I think that's his position too 😊  
Godfrey you've read DeWitt's chapter on anticipations? He has a very involved discussion of this functioning that I can't say I agree with 100% but makes a lot of sense and definitely ought to be part of your reading as you think about this

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

But in thinking of it in terms of a process, the prolepses or feelings aren't activated without a stimulus.

I think that is probably correct too. That steps us closer toward the subject that none of us (to my knowledge) have ever really dived into -- the "images" which are distinct and not received through the sight - which seem to be a MUCH more important part of all these processes than most people talk about much nowadays. Don't let me get us off too far on that tangent, but in the context of when stimuli are involved, remember this passage from Cicero to Cassius:

Quote

For it somehow happens, that whenever I write anything to you, you seem to be at my very elbow; and that, not by way of visions of images, as your new friends term them, who believe that even mental visions are conjured up by what [Caius](#) calls spectres (for let me remind you that Caius the [Insubrian](#), an [Epicurean](#), who died lately, gives the name of spectres to what the famous [Gargettian](#) [Epicurus], and long before that [Democritus](#), called images).

2 But, even supposing that the eye can be struck by these spectres because they run up against it quite of their own accord, how the mind can be so struck is more than I can see. It will be your duty to explain to me, when you arrive here safe and sound, whether the spectre of you is at my command to come up as soon as the whim has taken me to think about you - and not only about you, who always occupy my inmost heart, but suppose I begin thinking about the Isle of [Britain](#), will the image of that wing its way to my consciousness?

<http://www.attalus.org/translate/cassius.html>

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## Post by "Don" of July 27, 2020 at 11:29 PM

Some great points to consider, [Godfrey](#) and [Cassius](#) . Jumping off from your points, here is what I'm beginning to formulate about the prolepses:

- The Canon has three parts and those need to be pre-rational and they react to incoming stimuli. As [Godfrey](#) said "**the prolepses or feelings aren't activated without a stimulus.**" I would add, by definition, the Sensations as well.
- It seems to me that it would make sense if the Sensations registered physical stimuli: light, sound, touch, taste, odors; the Prolepses "registered" abstract stimuli: justice (how

do we sense fairness?), divinity (how do we sense awe?), language (how do we sense meaning?), etc. Okay, I need to flesh that out but later. But these are inborn faculties that need only honing in humans and are present in rudimentary form in animals. Then both these faculties feed into the Feelings to register pleasure or pain. Only afterward our memory and reasoning kick in to give us information about those concepts and sensations.

- One question I'm rolling in my mind came with [Godfrey](#) saying: "**seeing a beautiful sunset, burning your hand on the stove.**" I think these are two different circumstances. The latter is just the nociceptors directly registering pain. The Sensations register heat > Feeling of Pain > later reason kicks in (How bad did I burn myself? Will it scar? Do I need to go to the doctor?) The sunset seems to be registering something else. I think it can't be a simple registering of sight. I think it may be a Prolepsis but of what? Consider too the similar feeling when you're taking in a vast Vista (my go to is my first view across Yosemite Valley. Breath-taking awe is my only description). It's more than just registering the light coming into your eyes. I would contend there's a prolepsis of awe or something at work before the Feeling of pleasure kicks in.
- [Godfrey](#) also mentioned "**So we determine a concept of justice not necessarily from a single use of the Canon but through multiple exposures to situations that involve justice and stimulate resultant feelings of pleasure or pain.**" I would say that we recognize fair and just actions from a \*very\* young age (from research I've seen) and even animals have a rudimentary prolepsis of justice. The prolepsis stimulates pleasurable feelings and so we are attracted to people and situations which are just. The multiple exposures simply reinforce our intuition and begin to acculturate us to our specific culture's laws and justice. When that culture's laws conflict with our prolepsis and they don't keep people from harming or being harmed, we see them as injustice. That intuition is the prolepsis, I believe.

I need to think and read more but that gets thinking out there in summary for review.

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## Post by "Godfrey" of July 28, 2020 at 1:25 AM

I guess I've absorbed more of DeWitt than I was aware of! It's been a while but I've read the sections on the Canon a couple of times though I don't consciously remember them. 😏 That's one reason why I'm not a lawyer! 😄

Regarding the "images," to me there are two topics involved. Don rightly mentioned above that all three faculties aren't activated without a stimulus. To clarify my original point that he was responding to, my thinking is that the prolepses and feelings aren't activated without an

*internal* stimulus. The sensations, it would seem, are reacting to *external* stimuli. They then transmit an internal stimulus to the prolepses or feelings.

The images are described as external particles stimulating the faculties. I'm not sure that I buy that and that is one topic of discussion. The other topic is our modern understanding of thoughts and dreams. On the subject of the Canon, I would describe these as *internal* stimuli that can then tickle the prolepses and feelings.

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of July 28, 2020 at 1:45 AM**

Don makes a great analysis of sunsets and burns. Sunsets, vistas, contemplating the universe; so many things do seem to stimulate a prolepsis of awe/wonder/mystery/connectedness. I'll even go out on a limb and say that this could be what some people (not me!) have referred to as "the god shaped hole" in their hearts. Which maybe leads back to "images."

[Don](#) I think we're saying the same thing about justice. I was attempting to differentiate between the concept and the prolepsis, but you've described it more clearly. 👍

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### **Post by "Cassius" of July 28, 2020 at 8:08 AM**

You know "it strikes me" (a good Epicurean expression, right?) as a good idea to reemphasize not only the operation of the canon but also some of its most important implications.

Would it be fair to say that those include?

1 - This is an Epicurean response to total skepticism. It's the theory that tells us that when used properly and under the right conditions there are some opinions that can be considered to be ""true" as opposed to "false."

2 - This is an Epicurean response to the suggestion that nothing in life is "real." A premise of the canon is that these faculties are providing to us what is "real to us" in life.

3 - This may be just another way of saying item one, but this approach allows us to affirm that knowledge is possible because we define knowledge as that which is established by the use of the canonical faculties, which is the proper way of defining knowledge, rather than requiring supernatural omniscience.

4 - it's an explanation of a valid human approach to consciousness which shows that it all can occur in a reliable way without divine inspiration.

5 - it's an explanation that allows us to reject Platonic rationalism by insisting that whatever is the subject of our reasoning be validated by one of more of the canonical faculties.

There is probably a lot more to say on this but I wanted to interject these first thoughts into the discussion so we can keep oriented not only to some of the procedural issues (how the canon is non-rational or pre-rational, how the three legs are separate but work together) but also the significance of why the entire topic is important.

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### Post by “Don” of July 28, 2020 at 8:35 AM

“strikes me” 😊 Well done!

1. Agreed.
2. Partially agree. "Real to us" seems too subjective for everything. There are some things that are "real" or true for the individual but there is also an objective reality we all need to agree on. (We won't get into the ultimate nature of reality here! I'm just talking about the everyday real world in which we move around in here.)
3. Agreed.
4. Agreed. No God needed.
5. Agreed. No need for Platonic Forms.

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### Post by “Cassius” of July 28, 2020 at 9:05 AM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

There are some things that are "real" or true for the individual but there is also an objective reality we all need to agree on.

Yes I agree with that. A significant part of coming to an agreement would be to define the terms as clearly as possible so we see if we can't come to a common understanding of how we are

using those words "real" and "true." And I think that issue is what started some of the recent conversation as you were pointing out that it probably isn't sufficient to say that "we all just know" what "real" and "true" mean. ("We all just know" not being a good description of anyone here's position, but just a stand-in for the question of how we go about coming to agreement.)

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### **Post by “Don” of July 28, 2020 at 9:41 AM**

I think it comes back to [Elayne](#) 's comment about evidence. It's not enough to use reason, we need evidence as "seen" by our senses (and the extension of our senses through instruments etc.).

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 28, 2020 at 10:18 AM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

It's not enough to use reason, we need evidence as "seen" by our senses (and the extension of our senses through instruments etc.).

I agree. We need to be able to articulate WHY that is so. The issue is so obscured in common discussion that many people seem to have become convinced that there is something called "reason" which makes evidence unnecessary, so it no longer appears to go without saying that "reason" requires evidence, and then explaining what kind of evidence we're talking about, and why it is in fact legitimate to rely on the evidence of the canonical faculties even though we are the first to admit that the information they provide may not in every instance be true to what we regard as the ultimate facts. it's the circular issue that Epicurus and Lucretius address directly: Ultimately there is NOTHING that can be used to justify an opinion (or reason itself) other than the evidence we obtain through the canonical faculties.