

# Was The Epicurean Theory of Images Meant By Epicurus To Take The Place of Conventional Views of "Memory" As A Storage Mechanism?

**Post by "Cassius" of April 21, 2021 at 5:35 AM**

In recent discussions largely arising from the Lucretius Today podcast, the suggestion has been made that the Epicurean theory of images explains, and takes the place of, what might be described as the conventional view of memory as a device for storing pictures or other information and retrieving them at will.

In other words, did Epicurus intend us to understand that the mind's ability to select from images "floating through space" is how we should understand the capacity to "remember things" to function?

I will say that as to my current thinking, I personally would answer this question "no," but I can certainly see why this suggestion might be made. It would therefore be helpful to see if we can gather examples from the Epicurean texts in which functions of "memory" are apparently being discussed, and examine them to see what they might show on this question.

Despite my inclination to the "no" answer, perhaps a very clear instance that supports "yes" would be the reference in the letter of Cicero to Cassius in which Cicero teases Cassius by questioning him as to whether Cicero's thoughts of Cassius had been spurred by "spectres" floating through the air. My interpretation of the answer given by Cassius is that Cassius refutes the notion, but his answer is possibly ambiguous, and the fact that Cicero even asks the question indicates that this line of thought was a possibility.

Let's use this thread to discuss the issue, including the suggestion that modern research has disproven the notion that memory works through the storage of pictures or other specific information in the mind. Is that the case? Even if it is the case, what would that development indicate as to Epicurus' position on these questions?

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**Post by "Don" of April 21, 2021 at 6:46 AM**

<https://classicalstudies.org/annual-meeting...and-imagination>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1972-was-the-epicurean-theory-of-images-meant-by-epicurus-to-take-the-place-of-conven/>

This paper appears to look at the exact question posed by [Cassius](#) . Unfortunately, only the abstract is at the link and it has not been uploaded to Academia. I'm putting the link here but if the paper turns up, I'll update.

It appears to have been presented at the 2016 conference.

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## Post by “Cassius” of April 21, 2021 at 6:54 AM

OMG you're right! We definitely want this full article. Here's a paste of the abstract. I am sorry to say that at least in the abstract he doesn't seem to refer to Cassius' reply, but I do see that reply as ambiguous. A really interesting topic to explore!

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# Cicero vs. Lucretius on Thought and Imagination

## Nathan Gilbert

The Epicureans, like other ancient philosophical schools, offered a detailed and comprehensive account of physics, including perception. This branch of philosophy was especially important for Epicureanism due to its crucial role in dispelling fears about the gods, death, and celestial phenomena—fears which Epicureans believed caused mental anxieties and threatened our acquisition of happiness (see e.g. Epicurus, *Ep. ad Hdt.* 79, *Ep. ad Pyth.* 85, *KD* 10-11; Lucretius, 4.33ff, 5.110ff). Therefore it was necessary for the school to advance a strictly materialist and atomistic explanation of perception and sensation, based, likely to a large extent, on the theories of the Presocratic philosopher Democritus (see Furley 1993).

Epicurus' insistence on materialistic explanations and his high standards for empirical verification of his claims yielded an account of perception which is in many ways remarkably close to modern theories. His theory, which argues that perception is caused by the impact of thin atomic films (called *eidola*) shed by external objects on our sense organs, and offers criteria for the verification (“witnessing”) of these mental impressions to account for and avoid optical illusions, has been justly praised for its ingenuity and continuing philosophical interest (Long and Sedley 1987: i.78; cf. Everson 1990: 183 and Asmis 2009: 100-104).

I propose to examine a more surprising and often neglected consequence of the Epicurean theory of perception: its materialistic account of imagination, thought, and dreams. Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* and especially Lucretius' account of *eidola* in *De Rerum Natura* IV reveal that the school explained these various mental phenomena by analogy with sense perception: our mind is impacted by special, particularly thin and fine *eidola*, which in turn form the basis of our thoughts and dreams. I propose to examine the epistemological motivations and coherency of this typically marginalized aspect of their physical system.

As a point of departure for my analysis I focus on an intriguing critique of this theory made by Cicero in his *De Natura Deorum* and in a private letter to C. Cassius Longinus written earlier that year (*DND* 1.107-9; *Ad Familiares* 15.16). Cicero's arguments, which have been alternatively ignored, written off as mere "jokes" (Castner 1988: 30; Lintott 2008: 324; Bailey 1947: iii.1269), or used in the service of *Quellenforschung* to reconstruct the positions of the Academic Carneades (Kleve 1978: 67, followed by Asmis 1984: 119 n.2), are in fact philosophically sharp and deserve to be considered in more detail. In these passages, Cicero accepts—for the sake of argument—that Epicurus' explanation of the five senses is correct and instead focuses his attack on the account of mental perception. He demands that his Epicurean interlocutors justify the extravagant conclusions of their theory, which would seem to necessitate an infinite availability of *eidola* of literally everything in every location (e.g. *Fam.* 15.16: "Is it the case that your [*eidolon*] is in my power, so that it meets up with me as soon as it pleases me to think of you? And not only of you, who cling to my very marrow, but if I start to think of the island of Britain, will its εἶδωλον fly into my heart?").

I argue that Cicero is pressing the Epicureans on a very soft spot, and I explore possible Epicurean motivations for this seemingly strange theory. Drawing upon Lucretius Book IV, I argue that the Epicurean explanation of mental perception connects with two critical assumptions in Epicurean physics and epistemology, both of which Cicero challenges: their claims about the infinity of atoms justify a corresponding infinity of *eidola* of every object in every location; and their standards of scientific explanation warrant the postulation of these unverifiable and especially fine mental *eidola* in a way that their more rigorous requirements for explaining sense perception do not. Cicero's critiques, then, go much deeper than an attack on a bizarre but minor consequence of Epicurean physics; they intersect with deep epistemological claims about explanation, evidence, and proof.

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## Post by "Cassius" of April 21, 2021 at 6:57 AM

Maybe I am too quick to recall this as ambiguous. We'd have to drill down into the Latin, but doesn't this appear to be a straight DENIAL of Cicero's characterization of the function of the images?

*Cassius had recently become a follower of the [Epicurean](#) school of philosophy.*

[15.16] **Cicero to Cassius**

[Rome, January, 45 B.C.]

L I expect you must be just a little ashamed of yourself now that this is the third letter that has caught you before you have sent me a single leaf or even a line. But I am not pressing you, for I shall look forward to, or rather insist upon, a longer letter. As for myself, if I always had somebody to trust with them, I should send you as many as three an hour. 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 [Catius](#) calls spectres (for let me remind you that Catius 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?

3 But of this later on. I am only sounding you now to see in what spirit you take it. For if you are angry and annoyed, I shall have more to say, and shall insist upon your being reinstated in that school of philosophy, out of which you have been ousted "by violence and an armed force."

[15.19] **Cassius to Cicero**

[Brundisium, latter half of January, 45 B.C.]

L I hope that you are well. I assure you that on this tour of mine there is nothing that gives me more pleasure to do than to write to you; for I seem to be talking and joking with you face to face. **And yet that does not come to pass because of those spectres;** and, by way of retaliation for that, in my next letter I shall let loose upon you such a rabble of [Stoic](#) boors that you will proclaim Catius a true-born Athenian.

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 21, 2021 at 7:07 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus' Letter to Herodotus and especially Lucretius' account of eidola in De Rerum Natura IV reveal that the school explained these various mental phenomena by analogy with sense perception: our mind is impacted by special, particularly thin and fine eidola, which in turn form the basis of our thoughts and dreams.

(that's a quote from the article) -- And so to be clear, my objection is not that images can't and don't spur thoughts, my objection is to jumping to the conclusion that images are the SOLE basis for thoughts and dreams. Just like I can see a tree in front of me and choose to contemplate it or think about something else, or hear a symphony and choose to think about something else, there seems to me to be no reason whatsoever to conclude that the mind's reception of an image would dictate that the mind occupy itself in contemplating that image to the exclusion of other thoughts.

I would also add "no reason whatsoever...." especially since we know that Epicurus considered agency to be an important attribute of human action - it would fly in the face of agency to presume that receipt of an image would compel the mind to pursue that image and nothing else -- any more than we should consider hearing or seeing something to compel our thoughts to comply with what we see or hear.

At least in my own case i think it is pretty easy to stare into space with eyes wide open, presumably seeing what is there to be seen, while my mind is off in a direction absolutely unrelated to what is in front of my eyes.

Maybe i should also consider the example that my wife frequently tells me that regardless of what i am hearing, I am sometimes / often oblivious to the words!

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## **Post by “Don” of April 21, 2021 at 7:11 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I would also add "no reason whatsoever...." especially since we know that Epicurus considered agency to be an important attribute of human action - it would fly in the face of agency to presume that receipt of an image would compel the mind to pursue that image and nothing else -- any more than we should consider hearing or seeing something to compel our thoughts to comply with what we see or hear.

It could be that the agency resides in one's ability to decide which images to focus on of all those streaming simultaneously to us.

The Cassius reply does seem to imply that Cicero got it wrong in some way, but that's not a lot to go on.

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### **Post by “Don” of April 21, 2021 at 7:28 AM**

[Prolegomena 14 2 2015 Gavran Milos.pdf](#)

Another potentially interesting paper, search for "memory" in text.

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### **Post by “Don” of April 21, 2021 at 8:13 AM**

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

s. Just like I can see a tree in front of me and choose to contemplate it or think about something else, or hear a symphony and choose to think about something else, there seems to me to be no reason whatsoever to conclude that the mind's reception of an image would dictate that the mind occupy itself in contemplating that image to the exclusion of other thoughts.

Oh I don't think any of the texts say you can't perceive more than one thing at a time. You can touch something with your hand, see something else with your eyes, "think" of something with your mind. In fact, you have an almost infinite number of eidola streaming at you all the time. It's like a radio. ALL radio stations are streaming through the air. The dial decides which station to pay attention to.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 21, 2021 at 10:33 AM**

Agreed I don't think that the texts say that at all, which is why I would not think that our own modern discussions of these things go in the direction of images crowding out or superceding

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any of the other mental functions that surely exist.

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## Post by "Cassius" of April 21, 2021 at 10:42 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Another potentially interesting paper, search for "memory" in text.

Here's one instance, and yes this would be relevant. The texts seem to be pretty clear that the perceptions do not involve memory. I would see that as a back-hand way of saying that while the perceptions (such as the receipt of images?) don't involve memory, memory is a function that accompanies our reactions and thoughts about what we perceive.

Perceptions are *aloi* because they are, as Diogenes reports, not self-generated, they are always caused by something from the outside. Given this, we can say that perceptions are passive, since they originate only when stimulated by external causes. Furthermore, Diogenes says that perceptions do not accommodate memory, which in fact probably means that perceptions are not capable of storing their reports somewhere since they are just passive

<sup>2</sup> For the similar versions of the argument see Striker (1996: 86-87), Long and Sedley (LS) (1987: 83).

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responses to the external causes and therefore they do not involve **memory**, which would require some sort of judgment, comparison or other cognitive processing of the original reports. From this it follows that perceptions in general are not capable of exercising any higher order cognitive process about what is presented to us, or as Diogenes reports, perceptions are not capable of adding or subtracting anything to the given report.

OK I need to read more of this before forming final conclusions, but as I scan this is there anything here which is not said much more clearly and concisely by DeWitt? And THAT brings me to this observation: look at that list of references at the end, and search the paper for "DeWitt."

additional edit: Godfrey THANK you for finding this paper. My frustrations are of course aimed at the paper. The writer spends 25 pages of academic wandering and probably never states as clearly and concisely that the real issue appears to be the meaning of "truth" and that "[all sensations are true](#)" means "reported truly without opinion" as Dewitt states.

I am going to have to get a double refill on my blood pressure medication.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of April 21, 2021 at 10:54 AM**

I have to now make a comment that I am going to elevate somewhere else at some point. This applies to almost every discussion, from this one to the Barrett book to any of the other complex issues.

At the same time we are exploring all these trails, we have to keep in mind the saying that the ultimate test of the worthiness of what we are doing is whether it brings real benefit. Those of us who are into the details get enjoyment and satisfaction from exploring every twist and turn, but as Epicurus said what is needed every day is not the detail but the higher level outline.

So what I have been thinking about is the issue of how we eventually express what we find to other people in a way that is productive. For example, as we go through this issue, or through the Barrett book, we cannot conceivably relate every twist and turn and speculation that is involved. We constantly have to relate the discussion back to practical application and practical benefit.

It's almost as if we ought to always be thinking: "How would I express this if the Garden of Athens invited me to give a 60 minute presentation, with slides, on what the average Epicurean needs to take away from this subject."

There are all sorts of cliches about how to organize presentations, such as "tell them what you're going to say, tell them, and then finish by telling them what you said."

If we aren't constantly doing that then I think we spin our wheels in much less productive ways.

In many of these issues we're deep in the weeds, and we need to be there, but I hope everyone (like Godfrey and Don and everyone reading today) thinks about "How will I present this when Cassius calls on me to give my presentation at the Convention of American Epicureans at Monticello next year!"

You'll only have an hour at most, and the final sentence can't be anything like "And studying this material is why I decided to once again become a Stoic!"

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## **Post by “Don” of April 21, 2021 at 2:06 PM**

"Epicurus taught that all our perceptions, thoughts, sensations, concepts, etc. have their genesis in material, physical processes. There's nothing supernatural - nothing beyond our physical reality - that exists that could have an impact on us."

How's that for the elevator pitch?

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**Post by “Cassius” of April 21, 2021 at 2:19 PM**

Sounds like that elevator might go all the way to the top!