

How To Place Epicurus In Relation To "Nominalism"?

Post by "Cassius" of June 12, 2021 at 3:51 PM

I was recently reading the [Wikipedia entry on "nominalism"](#) and found it fairly direct and understandable. Here is the opening:

Quote

In [metaphysics](#), **nominalism** is a [philosophical](#) view which denies the existence of [universals](#) and [abstract objects](#), but affirms the existence of general or abstract terms and [predicates](#).^[1] There are at least two main versions of nominalism. One version denies the existence of universals – things that can be instantiated or exemplified by many particular things (e.g., strength, humanity). The other version specifically denies the existence of abstract objects – objects that do not exist in space and time.^[2]

Most nominalists have held that only physical particulars in space and time are real, and that universals exist only *post res*, that is, subsequent to particular things.^[3] However, some versions of nominalism hold that some particulars are abstract entities (e.g., numbers), while others are concrete entities – entities that do exist in space and time (e.g., pillars, snakes, bananas).

Nominalism is primarily a position on the [problem of universals](#), which dates back at least to [Plato](#), and is opposed to [realist](#) philosophies, such as [Platonic realism](#), which assert that universals do exist over and above particulars. However, the name "nominalism" emerged from debates in medieval philosophy with [Roscellinus](#). The term 'nominalism' stems from the [Latin](#) *nomen*, "name". [John Stuart Mill](#) summarised nominalism in the apothegm "there is nothing general except names".^[4]

This is a subject we've touched on in several earlier Lucretius Today podcasts, but not explored too deeply there or in the forum that I can recall. The article does not mention Epicurus or take a position on how Epicurean philosophy may relate to nominalism, and I think that would be worth exploring. We quite often see discussions of [The Problem of Universals](#) (link to the same article), and we can be sure that Epicurus rejected Plato's views of ideal forms, and probably Aristotle's views of "essences" as well. But does that mean that Epicurus held, in John Stuart Mill's terms, that "there is nothing general except names?"

I think there are several passages that would bear on this including the following from Lucretius Book One (Bailey translation). I should note that this is a passage where I think the translation of *eventum* as "accidents" would be much better as "events," but that's another argument. Here, the issue is the question of eternal properties vs. transient qualities, and how those can

be viewed through the analogy of the Trojan War:

Quote

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

[430] Besides these there is nothing which you could say is parted from all body and sundered from void, which could be discovered, as it were a third nature in the list. For whatever shall exist, must needs be something in itself; and if it suffer touch, however small and light, it will increase the count of body by a bulk great or maybe small, if it exists at all, and be added to its sum. But if it is not to be touched, inasmuch as it cannot on any side check anything from wandering through it and passing on its way, in truth it will be that which we call empty void. Or again, whatsoever exists by itself, will either do something or suffer itself while other things act upon it, or it will be such that things may exist and go on in it. But nothing can do or suffer without body, nor afford room again, unless it be void and empty space. And so besides void and bodies no third nature by itself can be left in the list of things, which might either at any time fall within the purview of our senses, or be grasped by any one through reasoning of the mind.

[449] For all things that have a name, you will find either properties linked to these two things or you will see them to be their accidents. That is a property which in no case can be sundered or separated without the fatal disunion of the thing, as is weight to rocks, heat to fire, moisture to water, touch to all bodies, intangibility to the void. On the other hand, slavery, poverty, riches, liberty, war, concord, and other things by whose coming and going the nature of things abides untouched, these we are used, as is natural, to call accidents. Even so time exists not by itself, but from actual things comes a feeling, what was brought to a close in time past, then what is present now, and further what is going to be hereafter. And it must be avowed that no man feels time by itself apart from the motion or quiet rest of things.

[464] Then again, when men say that 'the rape of Tyndarus's daughter', or 'the vanquishing of the Trojan tribes in war' are things, beware that they do not perchance constrain us to avow that these things exist in themselves, just because the past ages have carried off beyond recall those races of men, of whom, in truth, these were the

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

There is also the question of whether it is possible to "know" something, and what that would mean. We have several passages on that:

Quote

Diogenes Laertius 121: "...he will give definite teaching and not profess doubt...."

Quote

Diogenes of Oinoanda: Fragment 5 - Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

This post is going to end up being mostly to pose the question, because this is a very deep subject that I don't think has an easy answer. So for now I will post this and come back when I have time or others add to the thread.

Post by "Don" of June 12, 2021 at 5:36 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I should note that this is a passage where I think the translation of eventum as "accidents" would be much better as "events," but that's another argument.

I realize you didn't want to get into this, but it looks like eventum is an *issue, consequence, result, effect*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l...nio&i=1#lexicon>

Post by “Cassius” of June 12, 2021 at 6:33 PM

Right and I think that is exactly what was intended, without the "luck" connotation that is present in English.

Ha if you get us further off track we'll just split this part out 😊

Post by “Don” of June 12, 2021 at 6:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Right and I think that is exactly what was intended, without the "luck" connotation that is present in English.

Ha if you get us further off track we'll just split this part out 😊

I'll behave myself 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 12, 2021 at 6:42 PM

But hold your place on that thought because I think it has important implications. It's probably not entirely irrelevant to the main topic also.

Speaking of the main topic, any thoughts on the extent to which it is proper to label Epicurus a nominalist? Just as with accidents vs events I think there are subtleties he would both agree

and disagree with.

I think the first hesitation anyone ought to have in thinking the answer is clear is that Epicurus usually finds a way to take a position that is foreign to us today to the point that we have to go looking for what it might be.

Part of what was on my mind about this is the saying in the letter to Menoeceus about all good and evil comes to us from sensation. The level of sensation I'd what really matters to us in life, and although it is not the same question, I do think Epicurus would oppose reductionism or any hint that "nothing matters to us because everything is just matter and void."

Like I say it's not the same question, but I think Epicurus would think it very important to have a theory that connects the senses and knowledge - including a theory of abstractions.

(Note: I was about to attribute the reference above to PD2, but in quoting it I see interestingly that that phrase is not there.)

Post by "Godfrey" of June 12, 2021 at 9:24 PM

Didn't he consider all sensations to be movements of atoms? And his descriptions of vision, dreams and knowledge of the gods are as images formed of groups of atoms. Both of these would seem to me to make him a nominalist.

As for knowledge, as I recall there was a discussion a while back debating what the Epicurean theory of memory was. Didn't memory, too, involve accessing images (composed of atoms) in some way?

So as far as I can tell he went to great lengths to explain everything in terms of atoms and void, which I interpret as nominalism. However I'm not familiar with the finer points of nominalism so I could easily be missing something!

Post by "Don" of June 12, 2021 at 9:57 PM

Might be helpful:

<https://philarchive.org/rec/BROEAS-9>

Epicureans and Stoics on Universals

[Ada Bronowski](#)

In Riccardo Chiaradonna Gabriele Galluzzo (ed.), *Universals in Ancient Philosophy*. Edizioni della Normale. pp. 255-297 (2013)

Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2021 at 6:46 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

he went to great lengths to explain everything in terms of atoms and void, which I interpret as nominalism.

Yes that is the question. But I don't think it necessarily follows from the observation that nothing is eternal except matter and void to the statement that "there is nothing general except names" without drilling down very precisely into what is meant by "general."

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicureans and Stoics on Universals

Yes that sounds like it's exactly on point - thank you! reading now!

From the opening:

Quote

But the Stoics discuss genera and species, claiming that they are concepts and Epicurus refers to **natural kinds, of which we have preconceptions**. Both schools elaborate their views in reaction to the Platonic claim about the existence of the Ideas: the Stoics say that the Ideas are concepts and the Epicurean view of the world as constituted by a constant flow of atoms shows that there is no place for such kinds of items. The criticism of the Ideas produces very different theories of what counts as a generic item for Stoics and Epicureans. However, one crucial point of contact between the two accounts is that, for both, universal or generic features of reality are nothing other than the result of a mental capacity to recognize them. Thus, generic features characterize certain workings of the mind, and are not themselves items in reality independent of the mind. It is the Stoics who push this capacity of recognition to a state

of having concepts in the mind which are utterly mind-dependent. Thus, it is the Stoics who set up a positive theory of universals as concepts, whilst the Epicureans contribute towards a conceptualist view of uni-versals through their systematic elimination of the Ideas from ontol-ogy and epistemology.

How much should we bet that this discussion will or won't take us back into the deeper issues of "preconceptions" and "instinct"? 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2021 at 7:02 AM

I have to inject here that i find this article very clearly and attractively written (at least so far). This is a good reminder that we need to go back and check "Against Colotes" and perhaps add this article to a basic reading list, as it very directly addresses Epicurus against Plato and other very basic issues. Thank you again Don!

Quote

But the way Plutarch confronts the Epicureans serves, in effect, to bring to light all the better the view of ontology, in two basic steps, which characterizes Epicureanism in direct reaction against Platonic ontology. The Epicureans thus sustain (i) that the void exists (against Parmenides), and (ii) that it exists unqualifiedly, on a par with the existence of body (against Plato). In this way, the Epicurean whole, τὸ πᾶν, reaches saturation. It is therefore a rather different whole from the Parmenidean whole, which is one and immobile²¹. In acknowledging the existence of void, the Epicureans, like their Atomist forerunners, acknowledge the existence of what is in motion, given that the existence of void is inferred from the realization that there is motion²². Thus the Epicurean whole is continuously in motion, and it is in this way that it is eternal and infinite, in exact opposition to the Parmenidean whole.

Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2021 at 7:13 AM

I think this section ought to begin to point us to once and for all tune in on the role of memory as an important part of Epicurean theory;

Quote

As for memory, it plays a central role for what a person thinks, as it is repeatedly mentioned by Epicurus, whether in reference to remembering the main tenets of Epicurean doctrine⁴⁹, or remembering the προλήψεις or preconceptions a person naturally has in order to subsequently have the right beliefs and keep away from confusion and error⁵⁰. Thus, for Epicurus, sense-perception alone does not provide knowledge of reality but rather the fundamental information in order to reach knowledge. For, crucially, the form of reasoning Epicurus has in mind is based on sense-data (Her. 32), as is the notion of memory he is interested in. It is a deviation from sense-data which brings on error and false beliefs⁵¹

Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2021 at 7:17 AM

This is very close to what I was looking for and why I think Epicurus would object to a too-superficial labeling of being a "nominalist." What an on-point article!

Quote

This rapid overview is relevant to our present purposes in bringing forward one main point: namely that, in acknowledging certain ‘mental capacities’ (in the main, a form of reasoning and memory) in addition to sense-perception, the objects of knowledge do not shift to an intelligible realm⁵², but rather, on the contrary, are all the more tied down to what is observed⁵³. For it is possible, according to Epicurus, to recognize in the observable reality, with the help of memory and λογισμός, certain regularities which are the basis for knowledge – without these being immanent or separate universals. Thus, the distinction made by Aristotle in the first chapter of the *Metaphysics*, namely between experience on the one hand which yields knowledge of certain particulars (Met., A 1, 981a9), and art, or science, which is of universals and of which particular individuals are instances (Met., A 1, 981a10-12 and a16) – and which a person can have also without experience, given that an art can be taught (Met., A 1, 981b9) – is resolved, on the Epicurean account, into one unique path towards knowledge. For experience is the art or science which is able to yield knowledge of regular and generic features of reality, exhibited by the individual beings which compose it, without this knowledge being limited to a specific knowledge of this or that individual. It is possible to have knowledge on the basis of experience, without there being universals and thus without knowledge being of universals.

Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2021 at 7:23 AM

OMG THIS is a memorable paragraph, and what a line! **"A rose is a rose, that is, a whole, not a juxtaposition of properties."**

Quote

The formulae in Her. 69 all point towards considerations about body which go beyond the actual perceiving of distinct properties, the ἐπαισθήματα mentioned by Diogenes Laertius (D.L. X, 32)58: the distinct perceptions which cannot refute one another, and attest the truth, or trustworthiness of all perceptions. Rather, on the basis of the different ἐπαισθήματα (e.g. red colour perceived through sight, sweet perfume perceived through smell, velvety texture perceived through touch etc.), a perceiver has what Epicurus calls an ἔννοια, a conception, say, of a rose (Her. 69). **And indeed, a rose is a rose, i.e. a whole, not a juxtaposition of properties.** Thus Epicurus insists, with the repeated use of ὅλον and ἀθρόον especially in the discussion of the status of properties, that a body is really a whole or a whole is really a body, repeating twice in less than ten lines, that what is referred to as the ὅλον is «by us, called body» (Her. 70, 5 and 71, 4-5). Thus it is our mind, our way of thinking, which enables us to grasp the body as the whole it really is; for an ἔννοια, elsewhere referred to as an «ἐπίνοια» (Her. 45, also D.L. X, 32), corresponds to the further stage after sense-perception, in which reasoning and memory have a prominent role in forming a mental presentation of reality. The passage from perceptions, («irrational and without memory») to the conceptions a person has, is described in the following manner: as always proceeding from sense-data with the addition of the mind's arrangement of the data, through direct experience (περίπτωσις), or by analogy (ἀναλογία), by resemblance (ὁμοιότης), or by composition (σύνθεσις) and eventually also with some form of reasoning (τι καὶ τοῦ λογισμοῦ, in D.L. X, 32).

Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2021 at 8:50 AM

Here's the Conclusion paragraph, which I don't think does justice to the depth of the work. it's written as if the Stoics were an advance in a proper direction from the Epicurean viewpoint. As you would expect, I think that the reverse is true - the Stoics went on a rabbit hunt that totally threw away the trail that Epicurus had pointed out. I would say that the reason that Epicurus did not "propose a positive theory of universals as concepts" is that Epicurus would have held this to be error. the mind alone does not make a rose a rose.

I think the details of the article are excellent in pointing to what Epicurus actually proposed it is that makes a rose a rose. To repeat a comment from earlier in the thread, Epicurus' way of looking at things may be foreign to us but that doesn't make it wrong. And the current world may be so caught up in Platonism and rationalism that "concepts" and 'conceptualism" are the be-all end-all of all analysis, but that doesn't make it correct, and that doesn't make Epicurus wrong. Had Epicurus in fact "proposed a positive theory of universals as concepts" - if in fact he had been a "nominalist" in that sense - he would have been violating his own premises, and I think Epicurus would reject that direction out of hand. A rose is a rose whether we assign it that name or not. The tree that falls in the forest when no one is around does make a sound. And I am also firmly convinced that we do not determine whether the cat is dead or alive by looking at it. All of these seem to me to be related issues that deserve much clarification.

And they deserve clarification and discussion early in the process of studying Epicurus! This is something that needs to be hammered out in preparation for elementary school lessons - otherwise we spend a lifetime never really grasping where Epicurus was going.

Quote

.4. Conclusion

The comparison between the Stoic and the Epicurean criticism of Platonic ontology shows the difference between elimination and con-version of the Ideas into an ontological system which, on both accounts, denies the existence of supra-sensible items. The different forms their reactions take on, marks the difference between the Stoic view about bodies as existing and incorporeals as subsisting, and the Epicurean view that body and void alone exist. However, both accounts meet in rejecting the Ideas from reality, considering generic items to be de-pendent, to varying degrees, on the workings of the mind. With the theory of preconceptions, the Epicureans move towards a basic form of conceptualisation of reality, but it is the Stoics, with their concern with genera and species who propose a positive theory of universals as concepts.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 23, 2022 at 8:43 AM

Some reflections on the link between Epicurus and nominalism:

“When [Epicurus] says ‘unreasonably’ this is more than mere derision; it is a fundamental doctrine. Since the only real existences are atoms and void, it follows that no abstractions exist; ‘justice is nothing by itself’; form cannot exist apart from substance, quality apart from thing,

virtue apart from action. This results in a sort of nominalism; virtue becomes an empty name, corresponding to no reality" (De Witt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* 247)

"But against Plato, the Epicureans think that universal ideas or concepts refer to a class of similar objects or concrete particular things, but the universal ideas are neither independent of these concrete particular, nor are they in things. They are merely verbal marks to enable us to think about the class of particular things. Hence, Epicureans foreshadowed medieval nominalism and also modern empiricism." (Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* 127)

"We saw William Euvrie propose Epicurus as the ultimate founder of the nominalist movement—a connection he seems to have picked up from a contemporary arts master at Paris, Johannes de Nova Domo. Pedro Fonseca still sees a link between nominalism and Epicureanism in the later sixteenth century." (Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671*, 90)

"The reference to Epicurus as the spiritual father of nominalism was often repeated in the writings of late medieval realists. Besides Johannes de Nova Domo, the most important defender of this doxographical claim was Heymericus de Campo." (Friedman and Nielsen, *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory, 1400-1700*)

Post by "Cassius" of July 23, 2022 at 10:05 AM

THANKS Nate as always for great work! I had forgotten that DeWitt had made such a remark, and all the rest is new to me, including some good names to research.

I need to reread the thread to see where we left off last year, but my general impression is that this remains an important and underappreciated issue. I am convinced the Epicurean view does not lead to nihilism ("nothing is real but atoms and void") but to a full appreciation of the dividing line between what is truly real for us and what is really just abstract fantasy and imaginings.

I suspect most people have only a foggy understanding of what is involved, and as soon as the issue is raised they drop it like a hot potato because they are disconcerted by the whole discussion. But when you are comfortable with a world without supernatural control and with only this one life to live, a quick and ready understanding of what is real and what is not real is essential.

Instead of seeing "what is truth?" as an indictment of Pontius Pilate, those blinded by religion need to think about the depth of the question and realize that they need to answer it.

This is a really core point of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2022 at 10:06 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Johannes de Nova Domo

Great name. Am I right that that's "John of the New House"?

Post by “Pacatus” of July 24, 2022 at 1:56 AM

To me, the notion of (substantive) universals always conjures some Platonic notion of, say, “redness” as some essence/substance that imbues those things that we see as red – as opposed to some generalization about things that we just see as “red”. And as opposed to the fact that experiencing things as “being red” in color simply enables us to generalize to the idea of redness (really a certain wavelength range in the color spectrum, to which we apply the word “red”).

If, as Nate points out, “the only real existences are atoms and void [i.e., the universe is strictly physical in nature], it follows that no abstractions exist” – then, to the extent that they are (and I think they are) abstractions, universals such as “redness” are not themselves any kind of existent.

I wonder if this generalizing aptitude is related to Epicurean *prolepsis*? If I say I saw a red rose, you have (based on your own memoried experience) an immediate, general grasp of what I mean – without actually seeing the particular rose?

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2024 at 7:34 AM

I am not satisfied with where we left this discussion two years ago.

Twentier and Don in particular contributed some really good reference material, with Twentier pointing out that Dewitt said that Epicurus ended up at a “sort of nominalism.” And of course Godfrey and Pacatus' comments were very useful too.

But that's as close as we got to any kind of summary and I think there are significant issues that relate to Sedley's comments we discussed thereafter about Epicurus' rejection of radical reductionism that need to be incorporated.

We have some new people since two years ago and I would welcome new comments.

The article Don cited remains very much on point, and we need a clear summary?

Is Epicurus daily considered to be a nominalist, and if so or if not, with what kind of explanation?

I still tend to the view that Epicurus would reject "radical nominalism" just as Sedley describes him as rejecting radical reductionism. That would explain Dewitts "sort of" qualifier. But what is the nature of that qualification?

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2024 at 9:10 AM

This is the Sedley commentary I am wanting to relate to reductionism, commenting that Epicurus rejects "reductionist atomism," in favor of the common sense perspective: **"that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter, but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."**

To me, cats are given the name "cats" by the mind, and the "name" is totally arbitrary, but it is not the mind that makes a cat a four-legged furry creature that chases mice. It's the combinations of atoms and void playing into the genetics that makes a "cat" what we think of as a "cat," and that's different from saying that every cat is a totally unique specimen. There are "commonalities" and those commonalities are not just in our minds.

Now maybe "nominalism" as a term was never meant to imply that the mind creates reality in full, but that would be the trend of thought to which "radical nominalism" might lead, just as radical reductionism leads toward the view of saying that "nothing really exists except atoms and void" which would not be a correct statement of Epicurus' view (even though it might be a correct statement of Democritus' view).

But in the end I think that it ought to be made clear that even if you consider Epicurus a "sort of nominalist" that he would have rejected too radical an interpretation of that view.

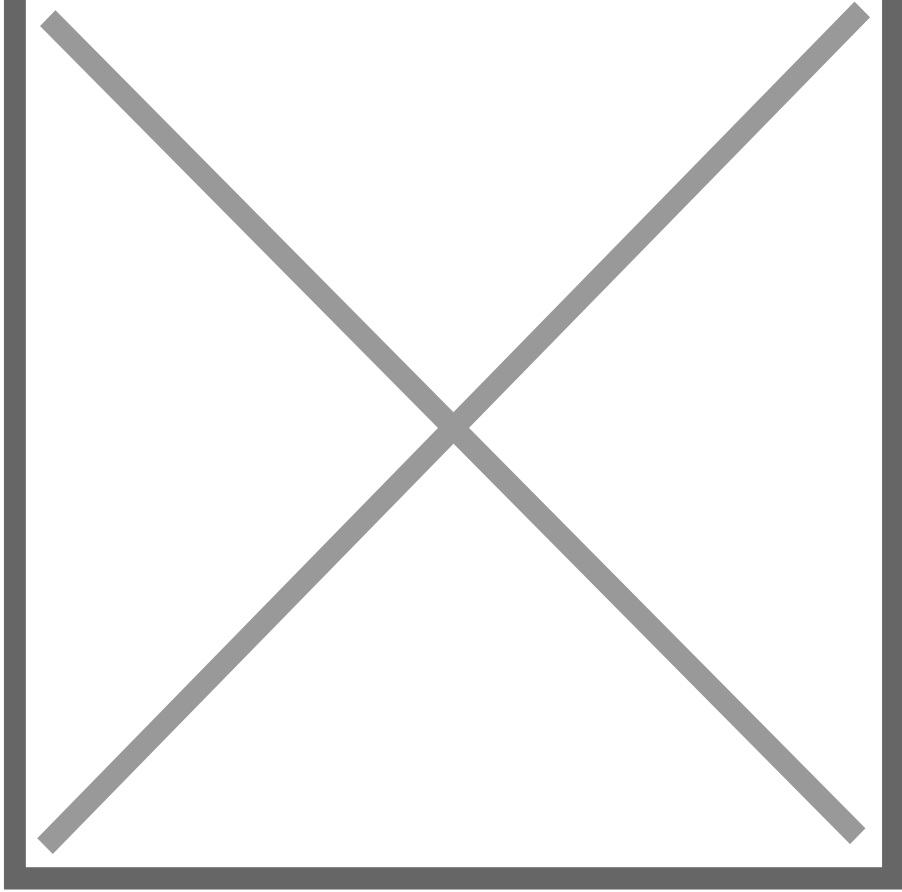
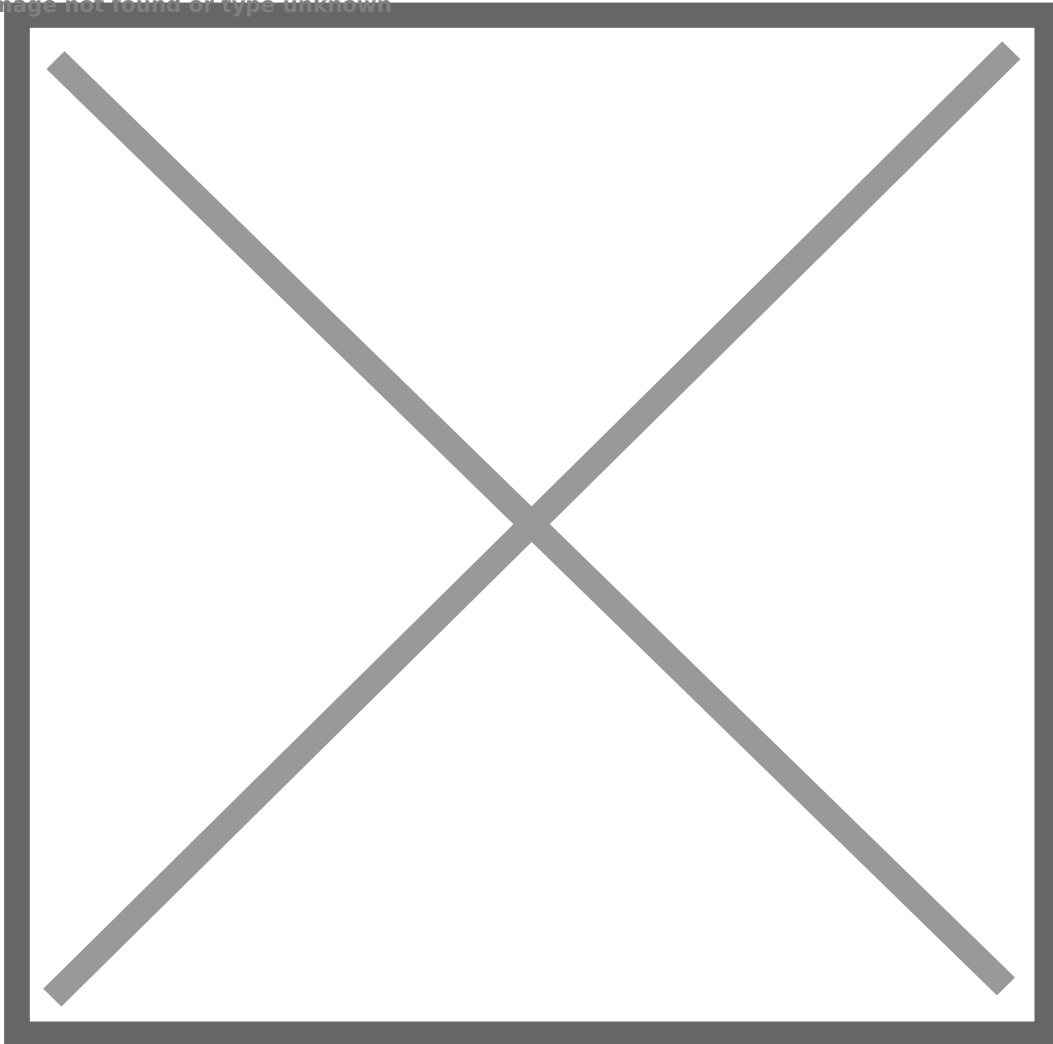


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Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2024 at 9:19 AM

Also: I note that the wikipedia article spends considerable time with William of Occam. In this last podcast, which I edited down to make it fit a normal length, I edited out a brief discussion that we had of Occam's razor. That's a related topic to nominalism, it seems from the wikipedia article, and I'd like us to explore that as part of our current series on Cicero's "on the nature of the gods." But I think before we go too far in evaluating it we need to spend time with how it relates to William of Occam's views on nominalism, as there are things here that seem to be a cause for concern in regard to nominalism, and those issues probably relate to too broad an interpretation of "Occam's razor" too. That's something Joshua was mentioning as well, that Occam's razor shouldn't be interpreted as meaning that "the simplest explanation is always

correct." That would end up being a "rule" that I think goes further than Epicurus would go.

Comparing Occam to [PD24](#): "[PD24](#). If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations, as well, with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation, and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong."

It appears to me that we have Epicurus laying down a better rule, that all theories which comply with facts about which we are confident must be considered to be possible, and that we don't settle on one until we have the facts to eliminate other possibilities. Injecting a rule of "preferring the simplest" or even "preferring the one which makes the least assumptions" concerns me as sounding like a rule which is not included within the more basic [PD24](#). I wonder if Occam's viewpoint (or the way it is interpreted) is asserting a rule that Epicurus would say is not justifiable if we are to ground our opinions exclusively on the evidence of the sensations, anticipations, and feelings, rather than looking for logical rules that are allegedly superior to and more important than the actual evidence.

This topic won't be easy or quick to resolve but it's something we can discuss here for a while before staking out positions.

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2024 at 9:30 AM

As a reminder, here is the issue as Wikipedia states it:

In [metaphysics](#), **nominalism** is the view that [universals](#) and [abstract objects](#) do not actually exist other than being merely names or labels.^{[1][2]} There are at least two main versions of nominalism. One version denies the existence of universals – things that can be instantiated or exemplified by many particular things (e.g., strength, humanity). The other version specifically denies the existence of abstract objects – objects that do not exist in space and time.^[3]

[220px-William of Ockham.png](#)

[William of Ockham](#)

Most nominalists have held that only physical particulars in space and time are real, and that universals exist only *post res*, that is, subsequent to particular things.^[4] However, some versions of nominalism hold that some particulars are abstract entities (e.g., [numbers](#)), while

others are concrete entities – entities that do exist in space and time (e.g., pillars, snakes, and bananas).

Nominalism is primarily a position on the [problem of universals](#). It is opposed to [realist](#) philosophies, such as [Platonic realism](#), which assert that universals do exist over and above particulars, and to the [hylomorphic](#) substance theory of Aristotle, which asserts that universals are [immanently real](#) within them. However, the name "nominalism" emerged from debates in medieval philosophy with [Roscellinus](#).

Further:

The problem of universals

Nominalism arose in reaction to the [problem of universals](#), specifically accounting for the fact that some things are of the same type. For example, Fluffy and Kitzler are both cats, or, the fact that certain properties are repeatable, such as: the grass, the shirt, and Kermit the Frog are green. One wants to know by virtue of *what* are Fluffy and Kitzler both cats, and *what* makes the grass, the shirt, and Kermit green.

The [Platonist](#) answer is that all the green things are green in virtue of the [existence](#) of a universal: a single [abstract](#) thing that, in this case, is a [part](#) of all the green things. With respect to the color of the grass, the shirt and Kermit, one of their parts is identical. In this respect, the three parts are literally one. Greenness is repeatable because there is one thing that [manifests](#) itself wherever there are green things.

Nominalism denies the existence of universals. The motivation for this flows from several concerns, the first one being where they might exist. [Plato](#) famously held, on one interpretation, that there is a realm of abstract forms or universals apart from the physical world (see [theory of the forms](#)). Particular physical objects merely exemplify or instantiate the universal. But this raises the question: Where is this universal realm? One possibility is that it is outside space and time. A view sympathetic with this possibility holds that, precisely because some form is immanent in several physical objects, it must also transcend each of those physical objects; in this way, the forms are "transcendent" only insofar as they are "immanent" in many physical objects. In other words, immanence implies transcendence; they are not opposed to one another. (Nor, in this view, would there be a separate "world" or "realm" of forms that is distinct from the physical world, thus shirking much of the worry about where to locate a "universal realm".) However, [naturalists](#) assert that nothing is outside of space and time. Some [Neoplatonists](#), such as the pagan philosopher [Plotinus](#) and the Christian philosopher [Augustine](#), imply (anticipating [conceptualism](#)) that universals are contained within the *mind* of God. To complicate things, what is the nature of the [instantiation](#) or [exemplification relation](#)?

Post by “Bryan” of May 3, 2024 at 2:18 PM

Plato seems to say (in his poetic way) that the wavelength of blue exists inherently outside of the objects that create the wavelength you see as blue. The problem from a physical perspective is that $2 + 2 = 4$ only exists when there are four things to be added (even if only in our physical minds) — there is nothing transcendent about the mathematical equation itself that makes it exist on its own — just like blue wavelengths can be described mathematically but there must be a specific physical basis for wavelengths to actually exist at any point.

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2024 at 2:40 PM

Yes to me the consideration of mathematical symbolism helps make the issues involved in debating nominalism and reductionism clear.

Two things plus two things equals four things, because we define it that way. But what is a "thing"? In the end the usefulness of such symbolic equations becomes a matter of identifying what "thing" means. You can reduce everything over and over into a series of definitions as you try to assign meaning to your symbols, but in the end you have to remember that definition games can be circular and be a fool's errand, and the only way to prevent that is to tie things ultimately to observations of the facts observed by senses, anticipations, and feelings.

Surely there are practical "rules" or "conventions" about how to define things, based on experience, that will generally work to make the process more accurate. But in the end the definition game had better tie back to observations from the senses (or anticipations or feelings) or else the entire game collapses into circular abstractions.

It appears to me that Epicurus was waving major red flags about definition games, and he would have done the same with implying that all knowledge is a matter of definitions in the mind that are infinitely malleable. I would see the same issue with "rules of construction" such as we apply in the law, or as we deal with in deciding what is good logic vs what is a logical fallacy. Ultimately justice is not a matter of robotically following rules, nor is identifying truth a matter of definitions.

You have to eventually come to conclusions in order to survive, and it's fair to work as hard as you can to describe the best process of reasoning so that you can reproduce that process over and over.

But the cardinal and overriding rule seems likely to be that in the end rules cannot be considered to override the facts of the sensations ,anticipations, and feelings in ultimately

analyzing any situation.

And the temptation to try to develop "rules" to be considered universal and infallible seems to be at least as great a hazard as the temptation to deny the usefulness of any and all rules. Epicurus certainly had his own rules of thought, such as [PD23](#) and [PD24](#), but they were always couched in terms of the ultimate rule being that the sensations, anticipations, and feelings are the ultimate abiter. In any situation of conflict between pure rules vs pure evidence (from the sensations, anticipations, and feelings, *not including* "rules of symbolic logic,") the ultimate arbiter of what we should acknowledge to be true is not the result of *rules*, but the result of facts established by the sensations, anticipations, and feelings.

Post by "Joshua" of May 3, 2024 at 4:57 PM

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=3MWpHQQ-wQg>

Regarding Plato's forms, Fry and Laurie have an amusing take on it near the end of this video.

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2024 at 5:11 PM

Wow! I have never seen them before - but it does touch on the issue! 😊

Post by "Joshua" of May 3, 2024 at 5:33 PM

I can also recommend Mitchell and Webb for sketch comedy!