

# **Episode 155 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 11 - The Canon, Reason, and Nature 02**

**Post by "Cassius" of January 2, 2023 at 4:51 PM**

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Fifty-Five of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

We're now in the process of a series of podcasts intended to provide a general overview of Epicurean philosophy based on the organizational structure employed by Norman DeWitt in his book "Epicurus and His Philosophy."

This week we continue in Chapter Seven - The Canon, Reason, and Nature

- The Dethronement of Reason
- Ridicule
- Nature as the Norm
- Priority of Nature over Reason

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/52398140>

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 2, 2023 at 5:48 PM**

In this episode - and likely for several weeks at least - we're going to be talking about some of the most important but least discussed aspects of the philosophy - canonic / epistemology.

We only scratched the surface this week but I hope everyone who is at least remotely interested in the topic will help is through this.

We have the PDs in the mid-twenties to go by, plus comments in the letter to Herodotus and in book four of Lucretius. The really ambitious might want to help us try to incorporate some of Philodemus' On Signs / On Methods of Inference.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2811-episode-155-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-11-the-canon-reason-and-nature-02/>

But at the very least when we are through I hope we can clearly draw lines between Epicurus and skepticism of all kinds - from the radical skepticism of Pyrrho to the idealistic skepticism of Plato and even to the views of Aristotle which Diogenes of Oinoanda criticized.

This is really basic and important and controversial stuff.

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## Post by "Joshua" of January 2, 2023 at 6:43 PM

### canon

#### noun (1)

can·on 'ka-nən

1 A: a regulation or dogma decreed by a church council B: a provision of canon law 2 [Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Late Latin, from Latin, model] : the most solemn and unvarying part of the Mass including the consecration of the bread and wine 3 [Middle English, from Late Latin, from Latin, standard] A: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture B: the authentic works of a writer; "the Chaucer *canon*" C: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works; "the *canon* of great literature" 4 A: an accepted principle or rule B: a criterion or standard of judgment; "the *canons* of good taste" C: a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms

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I'm rethinking the various usages of the word "canon" as compared with Epicurus' Canon of Epistemology, and I'm beginning to think that we haven't been very clear on this point in previous episodes. I think the word *test* gets at the heart of all of these disparate applications. For example:

- Canonized saint (Catholic Church); a person by whom a Catholic is to *test* their life.
- Western Canon; A collection of writings against which to *test* the aesthetic and literary value of new writings.
- The Epicurean Canon; the three sources of knowledge by which we *test* what is true or knowable.

I could probably go on, but it seems to me that what separates the Epicurean canon is **not** that it is a test or measuring stick, and the others are not: what distinguishes the Epicurean canon is that it is a test of epistemology--other uses of the word canon are also tests, but they test different things by different criteria.

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## Post by “Don” of January 2, 2023 at 7:18 PM

That's an excellent exposition above, [Joshua](#) . I like the idea of canon = test.

If I may, I'd like to expand on that even to say that, to me, the canon is a standard by which other things can be tested. The senses are part of the canon in that we can use them as a standard against which to test reality. Or am I stretching that metaphor too far?

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## Post by “Todd” of January 2, 2023 at 8:13 PM

I like that, [Don](#). Taking it a bit further...

Senses = the test of what is real; the primary tool of physics (natural sciences)

Feelings = the test of what is good; the primary tool of ethics

Anticipations = ???

Just to fit it into that scheme, I'm tempted to say anticipations are the test of what is logical, the primary tool of the formal sciences (logic, mathematics). But I don't think there is any support for that being Epicurus' meaning.

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## Post by “Don” of January 2, 2023 at 9:28 PM

### [Quote from Todd](#)

Senses = the test of what is real; the primary tool of physics (natural sciences)

Feelings = the test of what is good; the primary tool of ethics

Anticipations = ???

That's an interesting schema and one I don't remember seeing before. I'm not sure I'm totally onboard with "the primary tool of..." but it seems to be in the right direction.

But I do like "the test of..." as these \*are\* the canon. Yours seems a good way to get at that idea.

Anticipations have been described by others in this forum as a faculty of pattern recognition. I personally keep coming back to research on children's inborn capacities for fairness, etc, just like their capacity to seek pleasure and well-being and flee from pain and discomfort.

On that note, I saw this today:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/6AjM4mtNCQM?feature=share>

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2023 at 12:47 AM**

Episode 155 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we continue in Chapter 7 - "The Canon, Reason, And Nature." Our goal is to challenge you to think more deeply about Epicurus, and this week I think we deliver much food for thought on the canon and on "[all sensations are true.](#)"

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/52398140>

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### **Post by "Don" of January 10, 2023 at 7:28 PM**

Your discussion of consciousness aware of itself brought to mind the capacity to be aware of watching your own thoughts. I can easily think "I need to stop thinking about lunch" and realize I need to stop thinking about lunch and redirect my thoughts to the task at hand. Noting one's thoughts as they come up in your mind is a common method of mindfulness meditation. So, knowing that we're thinking particular thoughts is a common occurrence.

I just want to make sure you're not talking about that when you talk about some "philosophical" idea of "consciousness only aware of itself."

I'm also curious of how you account for dreaming when the senses are not tuned to external stimuli. The sensations are not active. Only the faculty of the mind is active.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2023 at 7:48 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2811-episode-155-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-11-the-canon-reason-and-nature-02/>

In both cases I am attempting to carry out the texts to their conclusions.

As to consciousness conscious only of itself, I don't think that Epicurus would say that that is something that would not apply to us humans, because we are aware of who we are because our our past experiences through the senses, as per the Thomas Jefferson passage. I am not aware of the details or theory of mindfulness mediation, but we aren't the kind of consciousnesses who have arisen from hypotheticals that are conscious only of themselves.

As to dreaming, that is to my understanding attributed by the Epicureans to the influx of images while we are asleep, which would be related to their impact on us while we are awake as well, for example as given in the exchange between Cassius and Cicero about "spectres." I presume that in modern terms we would think that the mind is operating on stored memories, but I personally would not entirely rule out of court the possibility that we are in fact affected by things going on around us. We are affected by what we eat or drink or how cold or hot things are while we are sleeping, and I would not rule out undiscovered aspects of how our brains are impacted by our environments. But especially as to dreams and hallucinations the point is only that they are "real to us" not that they are really happening to us, or even the mechanism by which they occur.

That last part is what I see as the important point. It looks to me like Epicurus is saying that our reality derives from the actions of our senses, anticipations, and feelings, and our mind reasoning on the inputs from those things, and that we need to consider what is going on with those things to be real to us, and work with them, and not look to imaginary worlds of ideal forms or supernatural beings or any of that stuff which Platonists or religionists assert to exist without evidence. Dreams and hallucinations are what they are - things which have an impact on our thoughts - but that doesn't mean that they have any external reality beyond what is going on in our minds.

To me all this comes down to an attempt to explain that \*this\* world is all that we have, and we need to explain the things that present themselves to us in natural terms, and not look to supernatural or other-worldly (meaning Platonic idealism) sources for those things.

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## **Post by "Joshua" of January 10, 2023 at 7:54 PM**

### Quote

I'm also curious of how you account for dreaming when the senses are not tuned to external stimuli. The sensations are not active. Only the faculty of the mind is active.

This is a legitimately difficult issue, but one trope often used in film about dreaming is how the content of dreams becomes affected by external stimuli.

Here's one example;

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=qgtLqBoLHkM>

My own view of dreams is that they are the product of a mind distanced from external stimuli but not severed from it, and turning its attention from a stream of sensation to a memory bank of the residue of sensation, while also functioning with decreased emotional inhibition. Lucretius and Shakespeare both vividly describe dreams as consisting primarily of daily experience, though jumbled together in strange ways. But who knows. I don't hang my much by dreams.

Regarding "the mind aware of itself" I think DeWitt makes this explicit by highlighting the paradox that it requires reason to pass judgment on reason.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2023 at 7:59 PM**

For example, this from Book 4 of Lucretius. There are many similar references to images which are not of the "seeing" variety, but nevertheless impact our minds. I am not saying that I believe this, or that the same phenoma could not be equally explained by stored images in the mind that are agitated when we are dreaming or hallucinating. I don't think it's important that Epicurus explained them "correctly" in our view, but that he suggested natural explanations that take them out of the realm of the supernatural, Theories like this allow us to explain what has happened to us without fearing that they are supernatural:

[26] But since I have taught of what manner are the beginnings of all things, and how, differing in their diverse forms, of their own accord they fly on, spurred by everlasting motion; and in what way each several thing can be created from them; and since I have taught what was the nature of the mind, and whereof composed it grew in due order with the body, and in what way rent asunder it passed back into its first-beginnings: now I will begin to tell you what exceeding nearly concerns this theme, that there are what we call idols of things; which, like films stripped from the outermost body of things, fly forward and backward through the air; and they too when they meet us in waking hours affright our minds, yea, and in sleep too, when we often gaze on wondrous shapes, and the idols of those who have lost the light of day, which in awful wise have often roused us, as we lay languid, from our sleep; lest by chance we should think that souls escape from Acheron, or that shades fly abroad among the living, or that something of us can be left after death, when body alike and the nature of mind have perished and parted

asunder into their several first-beginnings. I say then that likenesses of things and their shapes are given off by things from the outermost body of things, which may be called, as it were, films or even rind, because the image bears an appearance and form like to that, whatever it be, from whose body it appears to be shed, ere it wanders abroad. That we may learn from this, however dull be our wits.

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## Post by “Todd” of January 10, 2023 at 8:28 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Your discussion of consciousness aware of itself brought to mind the capacity to be aware of watching your own thoughts. I can easily think "I need to stop thinking about lunch" and realize I need to stop thinking about lunch and redirect my thoughts to the task at hand. Noting one's thoughts as they come up in your mind is a common method of mindfulness meditation. So, knowing that we're thinking particular thoughts is a common occurrence.

This is something I've been thinking about, and not seeing how it would fit into Epicurean epistemology.

Not only can we observe our own thoughts, but doing so is essential to make sense of other people's actions. That is, to know that other people are not mechanically responding to stimuli; they have desires, and are aiming at ends, just like we do.

So that seems like a legitimate and important source of knowledge, but how does it fit into Epicurus' system?

- Is it knowledge of reality? I'd say it is, but then how would it fit into the canon?
- It's definitely not a feeling, and I don't think it is what Epicurus was describing as anticipations.
- Is it a sensation? I think that's the best fit. It is an observation, but it's an observation of internal reality rather than external. That seems acceptable to me - the human mind is part of nature too - but it might seem like a slippery slope. And it is very different from the traditional senses.
- Or would you say this is just something Epicurus overlooked?

To be clear, I'm referring strictly to the observing of one's own mental processes. The extrapolation to understanding other people's actions definitely involves additional reasoning.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2023 at 8:43 PM

### [Quote from Todd](#)

To be clear, I'm referring strictly to the observing of one's own mental processes. The extrapolation to understanding other people's actions definitely involves additional reasoning.

I don't see why the observation of thought processes is anything special or different from making mental note of anything else. For example, writing out one's thoughts and playing with the words - does that require a special aspect of the canon for some reason? I think that as Joshua observed repeatedly during the podcast, what we are really talking about here is contact with the outside world. I don't think Epicurus or anyone else is disputing that we can't in fact direct our mental attention inward for long periods of time. That would include for example recalling past pleasures as we regularly discuss. No one is saying that thinking about thinking can't or doesn't or shouldn't happen. Whatever we think is indeed what we think. I am thinking that this entire discussion is not devoted to introspection, but how we make judgments about things in the outside world. Introspection is certainly an important subject but I don't gather it is really what is in issue here in combating skepticism.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of January 10, 2023 at 8:47 PM

### [Quote from Todd](#)

Is it a sensation? I think that's the best fit. It is an observation, but it's an observation of internal reality rather than external. That seems acceptable to me - the human mind is part of nature too - but it might seem like a slippery slope. And it is very different from the traditional senses.

I'd vote for this one. In Zen the mind is sometimes referred to as a thought generating organ. With this in mind (pardon the pun), observing one's thoughts might be similar to observing one's breathing. Or observing any other bodily function.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2023 at 8:49 PM

I think Joshua and I crossposted and I just saw what he wrote.

I would say it is important not to look at this discussion as some kind of global description of every possible thought process involved in the brain.

It seems to me that this is really directed toward defeating the claims of skeptics that nothing is knowable, and describing a system by which we can understand how to determine what we think is true about important issues of life. It doesn't seem to me that we should try to force into this model every mental process possible to us.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2023 at 9:00 PM**

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

It doesn't seem to me that we should try to force into this model every mental process possible to us.

And that is really what I intuit some are doing by pursuing a fourth leg argument. I mean - surely "conceptual reasoning" - pattern recognition and matching - generating pictures and definitions and testing what we see against them -- all those kind of things seem to me to be obviously part of the reasoning process, and very important for us to consider how to do them efficiently using rules of logic.

But the "canon" or "criteria" is that first part -- the "yardstick" part - the "input" part - and that is where it seems to me that the key attribute is that these faculties operate automatically and without injection of opinion. That is what makes them worthy of being considered primary starting points for the reasoning process that takes place based on them.

I'm thinking that it's important to keep clear a bright line between the data collection, which operates largely or wholly "automatically" - versus what we do with that data after it is gathered. It's only in that second part where conceptual reasoning takes place and we have to judge whether our opinions are true/accurate or false/inaccurate to the full data set that we have it in our power to collect.

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### **Post by “Todd” of January 10, 2023 at 9:54 PM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't see why the observation of thought processes is anything special or different from making mental note of anything else. For example, writing out one's thoughts and playing with the words - does that require a special aspect of the canon for some reason?

What I'm trying to describe is more than just a mental process. It seems to me that it is a direct source of knowledge about an aspect of reality - just not external reality.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I think that as Joshua observed repeatedly during the podcast, what we are really talking about here is contact with the outside world.

I think you're probably right that Epicurus intended the canon to be strictly about knowledge of the external world. Unfortunately then it's not a complete epistemology (in my view). It would be sufficient for physics. When it comes to ethics, I think more could have been said.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I am thinking that this entire discussion is not devoted to introspection, but how we make judgments about things in the outside world. Introspection is certainly an important subject but I don't gather it is really what is in issue here in combating skepticism.

The form of introspective knowledge I'm thinking about actually is important in making judgments about the outside world - specifically about the behavior of other people and the best ways of interacting with them. It's the basis for empathy.

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## **Post by “Don” of January 10, 2023 at 10:50 PM**

It's also important to remember we have more than "5" senses, including, at least:

1. Vision
2. Hearing
3. Smell
4. Taste

5. Touch
6. Balance (vestibular sense)
7. Temperature
8. Proprioception (body awareness)
9. Pain (nociception)

[How many senses do we have? | Hopkins Press](#)

See also

[How many senses do humans have?](#)

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 11, 2023 at 1:22 AM**

From the Hopkins Press article linked in [Don](#) 's post above: "*In De Anima (Of the Soul) he [Aristotle] argues that, for every sense, there is a sense organ.*" It would seem that Epicurus was referencing this, and thinking of the brain as a sense organ when he wrote about images, dreams and knowledge of the gods. Centaurs and such were also perceived in this way by images getting jumbled in transit, as it were.

Our conception of the brain is far removed from this idea, and this makes it more difficult to understand the Canon as Epicurus intended it. Dreams, images and gods do originate from outside input. The difference between Epicurus and us is that we see such things as subconscious mental processes, processing external input from myths, legends and religion, often occurring in infancy and early childhood. Epicurus (to my understanding) describes such things as sensations that the brain experiences directly, with no processing involved.

However there's a further point about which I'm quite unclear. What exactly are *epibolai*? And what is meant by "grasping" and "focusing the attention"? The latter two, at least, sound to me like mental processes. Then my question is whether or not any Epicureans are including these mental processes in the Canon and why? This may have already been answered and I missed it in my befuddlement: if so, I apologize.

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### **Post by “Don” of January 11, 2023 at 5:21 AM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2811-episode-155-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-11-the-canon-reason-and-nature-02/>

What exactly are epibolai? And what is meant by "grasping" and "focusing the attention"?

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ε , ἐπιβολή , ἐπιβολή](#)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, δίανοια](#)

so, the phrase is " 'epibole' of the 'dianoias' "

PS: btw I'm not answering the question or solving the problem... Just providing resources.

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## Post by “Don” of January 11, 2023 at 5:41 AM

And speaking of perception 😊 and be sure to check the links:

According to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be in the right place.

The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem.

This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole. Amazing huh?

[Can you read this?](#)

[People](#)

[Vocabulary automaticity is the goal](#)