

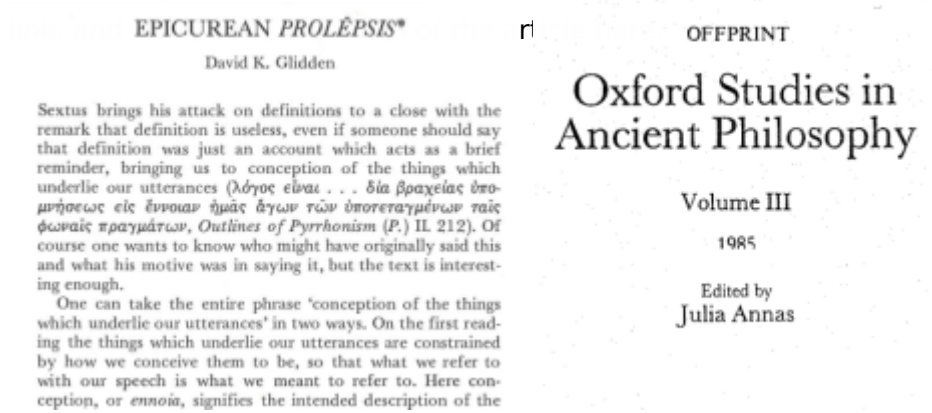
Dr. David Glidden's "Epicurean Prolepsis"

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2023 at 7:34 PM

Thanks to Don's hard work and to the generosity of Dr. Glidden himself, we have obtained a copy of Dr. Glidden's 1985 paper "Epicurean Prolepsis."

As many of you know we have been discussing Anticipations in our two most recent podcast episodes, and Dr. Glidden came to our attention through [a shorter work which we found very interesting](#). Dr. Glidden developed that shorter work into the longer article which was published in 1985 in the Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy.

While we decide the best place to host it, (it's 8MB and maybe not here at the forum) [here is a link where you can download it](#). Please let us know in the thread if you have an issues with the



Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2023 at 8:18 PM

A significant part of this article is devoted to drawing an analogy between anticipations and the ancient views of empirical medicine. This is an entirely new subject to me but I am very impressed that there are clear analogies, even though Dr Glidden says there are problems with the analogy too.

So before this thread is over we will likely have to deal with this issue of the ancient empirical view of medicine vs what I gather he is saying a more "conceptual" view of medicine.

This is really interesting stuff and the implications it has for why "logic" was not a part of the canon of truth are pretty clear too.

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2023 at 9:01 PM

As an incentive to read it, and not as a spoiler, I think I can suggest that the following is going to strike a lot of people as one of the more memorable passages of the article:

Quote from David Glidden, page 213

We can and do recognize a man on a horse leading a dog, without first having among ourselves agreed upon conceptions of what it is to be a man or a horse or a dog. And dogs and horses can do this too. We humans can also recognize war when we see one or poverty or justice, because we are familiar with such symptoms among ourselves. What we care to think about such human conditions, Epicurus suggests, is altogether a different matter. But can we so rigorously distinguish how things look from what we think about them? The empiric physicians, and the methodists too for that matter, thought we could, and they built their practice of medicine around the difference. Indeed, the 'general symptoms' recognized by the methodists are strikingly similar to Epicurean prolepsis, in that both concern persistent conditions varying widely from place to place, without always indicating the same hidden causes. The empirics even thought we could perceive symptoms and their antecedent causes without having to speculate about the hidden mechanism: we could just see that a puncture wound in the heart caused the death of the patient.

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2023 at 9:10 PM

And what is among the *most* memorable passages, the conclusion that should drive you to read the article to see if he can prove it to your satisfaction?

Quote from David Glidden

We are free to conceptualize and theorize about anything at all, about the movements of atoms, about the authority of experience. But our starting point and the measure of the truth of everything we have to say must remain the way things look, the present

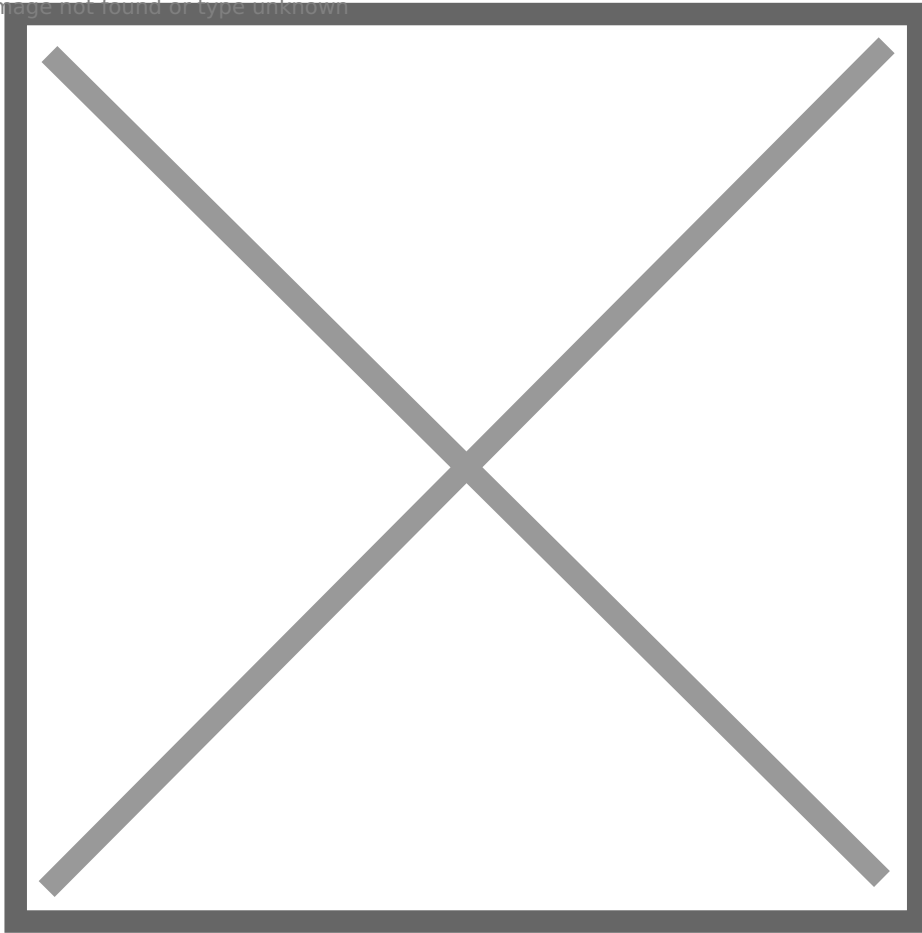
and persistent appearances of phaenomena and prolépsis. This guarantees that whatever we think about always attaches to some portion of reality. It is worth savouring the irony that this is a strategy which would appeal more to a Skeptic than a Stoic, for by completely isolating present and persistent appearances this way from the cognitive constructions of reason, the Epicurean perceiver has only the way things look to go by, the way things appear without representation, without interpretation. The Epicurean bravely vows to pull knowledge of reality up from this well of raw experience. The Skeptic from Aenesidemus to Hume goes this far in the company of the Epicureans. But when it comes to working at the well and coming up with something known, the Skeptic holds back and takes his rest.

At least for me, Dr. Glidden has made his point to my satisfaction. It seems to me that he reconciles Diogenes Laertius and Cicero's Velleius and Lucretius as well in a way that is guaranteed to offend everyone of the slightest Stoic disposition, and that may be one of the most reliable indicators of accuracy I can visualize.

Post by “Cassius” of March 3, 2023 at 9:17 PM

Before I forget to include this in the conversation, let me add this link here as a possible visual way to illustrate at least a part of what Dr. Glidden is talking about in terms of the mind assembling individual discrete observations into something more without use of words or concepts or definitions:

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[File:Flip Book - Messi Example.webm - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flip_Book_-_Messi_Example.webm)
en.wikipedia.org

There's lots of white space on each of those pages being flipped. Why did your mind pick out the line figures? Did you have to have conceptual definitions of men and soccer to do that?

I think there are probably other visualizations that people can cite as they read the article and think about what he is saying. Following the lead of the article as to what the Epicureans were suggesting, maybe the best way to grasp it might be to think of other visual ways, rather than dealing exclusively with words and definitions. Is this what Velleius was suggesting?

Quote from Velleius in *On The Nature of the Gods*

“These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but

handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal."

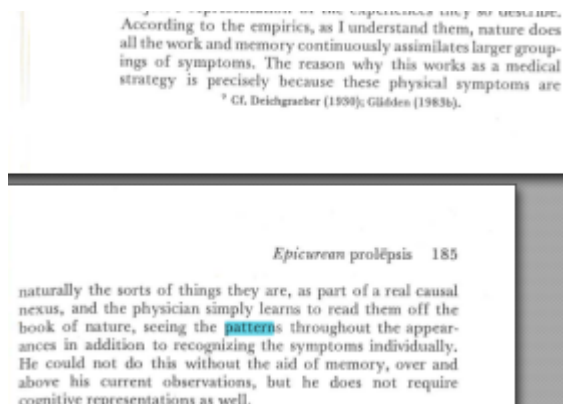
(Dr. Glidden says that he prefers the opinion that there is an error in the text and that indeed it was supposed to say that the images flow *to us from the gods* rather than in the opposite direction.)

So as we proceed I hope people will think of creative ways to grasp the possibilities he is suggesting as to how to interpret Epicurus.

Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2023 at 6:49 AM

Two more general thoughts:

1 - There is some discussion of "pattern recognition" in the article, but not really as much as I expected based on reading the shorter paper. It seems to me that this one is more focused on the material aspect of the phenomena, not on pursuing details on pattern recognition. But there are definitely some examples:



and they fail to do so because they lack the testimony of nature. The difference between *phainomena* and *prolēpseis* cannot then be the difference between perception and conception, since both are forms of experience against which one is to measure one's conceptions and opinions generally. Instead, *phainomena* would seem to be current perceptual apprehensions, what we might call present sensory impressions, the way things look right now (what Epicurus terms in the *Letter to Herodotus* τὰς παρούσας ἐπιβολὰς εἶνε διαβολὰς ἐπ' ὅτου δῆποτε τῶν κριτηρίων (38), what the empirics call *πειρά*). And *prolēpseis* turn out to be **patterned** recognitions, what Diogenes calls the memory of frequent appearances, what the empirics label *empeiria*, what we have found from Cicero to be engrained habits of perception.

At the same time it is easy to understand how Prol.....

2. As to the question: "Patterns ***in what*** are being recognized?" Is Dr. Glidden saying that the patterns under discussion are in the images received directly by the mind (the "sixth sense" to which he refers) or are the patterns under discussion being recognized in each of the distinct sensations (sights, sounds, etc) and feelings (pleasure and pain) that we also experience? I gather he means "patterns in all or any of these" but I can see someone thinking that he is talking only or primarily about images received directly by the mind.

Having now read both papers, Dr. Glidden's "[Abstract](#)," written after both papers, becomes much easier to understand:

Quote

Abstract

The paper I presented at the SAGP session was NOT the same as my much longer paper that was subsequently published in *Oxford Studies*, where I had by then established a fuller philosophical accounting of Epicurean prolepsis as akin to non-conceptual pattern recognition, a purely perceptual facility used by humans and other animals alike. (In this way, my dog recognizes other dogs and distinguishes them from other animals, just as we recognize kinds of things in nature and kinds of situations in our socializing, before we conceptualize and define what we are already habituated to recognizing.) So, the paper I gave to SAGP was more of a prolegomenon to that full accounting in *Oxford Studies*.

The SAGP paper was more narrowly conceived as a cautious analysis of textual evidence, where I sought to separate the Stoic use of prolepsis as a conceptualized sortal device from the original Epicurean invention of prolepsis as an extended form of aisthesis that recognized patterns presented to our senses over time, much like Aristotle's commonly sensed perceptual recognitions. I argued that Stoicized sources had been read back into Epicurus by later critics, thereby infecting Epicurean views with the Stoic conceptualized understanding of prolepsis, an understanding that would have proven fatal to the sort of mechanical, physiological empiricism Epicurus so clearly espoused. I argued that Epicurean prolepsis was a synthesizing, somewhat mechanical effort by *dianoia* to detect natural kinds and common situational characteristics and respond to them, after the fashion of other animals and prior to the invention of language and conceptualizing or definitions. So, prolepseis, aistheseis, and

the path of pleasure and pain provided the non-conceptual evidentiary basis for Epicurean empiricism, prior to the interpretation of such data —very un-Kantian.

Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2023 at 7:14 AM

For those always looking to ask "What is the practical effect of this?" I would nominate this sentence below as crucial. Epicurus emphasized the importance of waiting when evidence is conflicting and it doesn't line up well enough to be sure about it, but I think Dr. Glidden was right to say that where decision-making is critical to our happiness, we do the best we can -- *damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead*:

Quote from Dr. Glidden

"The Epicurean bravely vows to pull knowledge of reality up from [the] well of raw experience."

When you are convinced that you only have one life to live, what other attitude could you possibly take? When you are serious about finding out the best life possible and pursuing it, how could you possibly be satisfied with the attitude of the radical skeptic and say that nothing is knowable? How could you listen to your teachers tell you that everything emerged magically from chaos and just "hold back and take your rest?" You couldn't.

Quote from Dr. Glidden

"But when it comes to working at the well and coming up with something known, the Skeptic holds back and takes his rest."

Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2023 at 7:39 AM

As to extending Dr. Glidden's thoughts into future discussions of their effect, I can easily imagine that after reading his material it would be very interesting to revisit Frances Wright's Chapter 15. The whole chapter bears on this general topic but here is one part:

Quote from Frances Wright A Few Days In Athens Chapter 15

You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible.

The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us: finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others.

You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling.”

“This explanation is new to me,” observed Theon, “and I will confess, startling to my imagination. It is pure materialism!”

“You may so call it,” rejoined Leontiurn, “But when you have so called it — what then? The question remains: is it true? or is it false?”

Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2023 at 8:55 AM

Here's another point of terminology: If some people are concerned that the word "recognition" in "pattern recognition" is too strongly evocative of Plato suggesting we remember true forms from before we were born, or that gods are writing in our minds, or that there are "essences" in the world that are their equivalent, those people might get the same result from calling this "pattern appreciation."

As I understand English, "appreciation" carries most of the same meaning in terms of being able to identify what is being observed, but "appreciation" doesn't get caught up in implying an answer to the question of where the appreciation came from.

Pattern appreciation would just be a way to say that however it operates, the baby does "appreciate" that the mother's face is of significance to it shortly after birth than the blank white of the ceiling. No doubt we observe and learn to appreciate new and more intricate patterns the older we get, but also (I would say no doubt) we are born with some faculty within us that makes us better at this, and carry it further, than dogs and cats and the link.

We appreciate lots of details that other animals don't, but it is overbroad and confusing to say that we appreciate those patterns because we "recognize" them in full blown form from some kind of past experience. As I think Dr. Glidden says, what we are calling patterns are things that exist in the natural world that we are observing, and our minds are simply appreciating that these patterns (horses have long necks and tails) exist in nature.

Post by “Don” of March 4, 2023 at 9:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

we are born with some faculty within us that makes us better at this, and carry it further, than dogs and cats and the like

But remember, some animals are born with more ability for pattern "appreciation" than us in some senses, like dogs and the patterns in smells, for example. Read *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* by Ed Yong.