

# Episode 166 - The Lucretius Today Podcast Interviews Dr. David Glidden on "Epicurean Prolepsis"

Post by "Cassius" of March 18, 2023 at 7:35 AM

Welcome to episode 166 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 walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you too find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at [EpicureanFriends.com](http://EpicureanFriends.com), where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Today we are very pleased to bring you a very special interview with Dr. David Glidden, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at University of California, Riverside.

Dr. Glidden has written numerous articles of interest to fans of Epicurus, including "Epicurean Prolepsis," in the 1985 *Oxford Studies in Classical Philosophy*, "Epicurean Thinking," and many others related to Epicurus which we encourage our listeners to seek out.

Epicurean Prolepsis (or anticipations, or preconceptions, or whatever you prefer as the best word for the topic) is one of the three legs of the Epicurean canon and one of the most difficult subjects for many people to understand as they study Epicurus.

We think you are really going to enjoy hearing Dr. Glidden's unique and challenging take on the subject, and we think it is going to prompt many of us to take a new look at what the standard commentators, even Diogenes Laertius himself, have had to say about the subject in the past. Dr. Glidden's approach promises to lead to a much deeper and rewarding understanding of many aspects of Epicurus that are often overlooked today.

We can't thank Dr. Glidden enough for his time in talking to us about his work, and we hope to be able to talk to him again in the future, so if you have questions or comments please be sure to post them in the thread below.

Now, let's talk with Dr. Glidden:



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Post

**[RE: Dr. David Glidden's "Epicurean Prolepsis"](#)**

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...



Cassius

March 4, 2023 at 8:55 AM

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/53283355>

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**Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2023 at 10:32 AM**

Our Special Interview With Dr. David Glidden Is Now Available! Along with our interview of Dr. Emily Austin this interview is going to be one of our most important episodes ever, as Dr. Glidden helps us work through the topic of "Epicurean Prolepsis." Please listen and comment below!

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/53283355>

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

## Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2023 at 8:27 PM

Time to follow up on some of Dr. Glidden's references. If anyone can remember or knows of the Disneyland / "Wonderful World of Disney" cartoon or movie scene he referred to in the podcast, please post. I am aware of an older cartoon with a similar theme of small humans inside our head giving the orders (representing conceptual reason) but not the example of a man on a telephone processing inputs. This is a clip from Disney's "Reason and Emotion" which is applicable in itself, but if anyone can think of the actual reference please post.



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## Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2023 at 8:28 PM

Mark Twain's "What Is Man?" was mentioned several times:

[The Project Gutenberg eBook of What is Man? and Other Essays, by Mark Twain](#)

# WHAT IS MAN? AND OTHER ESSAYS

By Mark Twain

(Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910)

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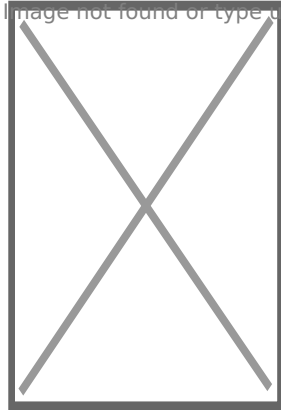
## **Post by “Godfrey” of March 21, 2023 at 11:47 PM**

The 2015 Disney movie Inside Out, about the emotions, also comes to mind.

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## **Post by “Don” of March 22, 2023 at 8:00 AM**

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[Word and Object - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

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## **Post by “Cassius” of March 22, 2023 at 10:11 PM**

A mostly-audio version of this interview is being posted on Youtube here:

<https://youtu.be/xz201PEnNQc>

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## **Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2023 at 7:58 AM**

One of the key things that Dr. Glidden states several times is that he considers Prolepsis to be "non-cognitive." We probably should not take for granted what that term (non-cognitive) means, and when we discussed it in a recent zoom session it became clear that this needs explanation.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

So if we consider Prolepsis to be non-cognitive, what does that mean and what is the implication?

Does it mean "without interpretation" in the same way the other legs of the canon provide data without opinion?

Once "words" start being involved, is that a bright line that we are no longer talking Prolepsis but a reasoning process? Dr. Glidden pointed out the difficulty in thinking about anything without using words. Does that mean that all "thought" is separate and apart from Prolepsis? I think he was cautioning us against presuming, for example as to justice, that a Prolepsis of justice has particular cognitive content. And same would probably go for Prolepsis of divinity.

Dr Glidden used a phrase to distinguish the consideration of an actual horse (he used three examples which I forget at the moment) from the \*concept\* of a horse. How can we explain that in more detail?

The implications of this are not just technical but very far-reaching in understanding how Epicurus was rejecting the arguments of Plato et al.

Not only do we need to see what the Stoics saw (how this threatens their conclusions) but we need to expand it to explain Epicurus' own conclusions.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2023 at 8:54 AM**

Here I think is a useful analogy:

Many people come to Epicurus because they have read in a scientific article that Epicurus was the precursor of modern quantum theory with atomic particles "swerving." In fact "The Swerve" is the title of one of the most popular books on Epicurus in recent years.

But I would submit that if Epicurus were here today and we told him that he was primarily known for having predicted atomic swerve, he would be very displeased and probably rebuke us as not understanding him at all.

That's because as David Sedley points out in his "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," it is likely that the swerve was not a central part of Epicurean physics development at all. Instead, Epicurus deduced the swerve from observation of "free will" in more intelligent animals. As Lucretius explains, Epicurus based his confidence in the existence of the swerve on the necessity of there being such a mechanism to free these higher animals from the billiard-ball chains of strict billiard-ball determinism. If I recall correctly, Sedley even says that the swerve likely played no necessary role in the formation of universes, so the idea of the swerve really

should not be considered mainly for its significance in physics.

Instead, the swerve is the mechanism by which we have confidence that we are not entirely slaves of our circumstances, and that we have the ability to effect those circumstances and our futures, which is a necessary part of controlling our lives so as to live happily.

Likewise, prolepsis should not be seen primarily as a matter of technical interest. It is certainly validating that modern science is moving in the same direction, but if we start and stop at that analysis we totally miss the point Epicurus was driving at.

Absent the mechanism of prolepsis there is no means of explaining why Plato was wrong to assert that all knowledge comes from remembering ideal forms from prior lives. There is no way to establish that knowledge is not something that supernatural gods implant within us, or to establish that knowledge itself is totally impossible or impractical as the skeptics would argue. There must be a mechanism that explains how intelligent animals develop and use knowledge itself.

I recall Dr. Glidden warning us that "canon" does not tell us the "content" of truth - the canon (even prolepsis) is not a set of conclusions about the universe or anything else. Certainly that is the point made by Norman DeWitt that we should never confuse the "tools of precision" with "the stones of the wall" when we are building a wall. The "canon" is the measuring tool given by Nature against which we compare our thoughts and speculations to decide if they are consistent with reality and with our feelings of pleasure and pain. It is not truth itself, but it is the way we decide whether our opinions comport with the outside world.

Much of the controversy between Stoics and Epicureans in the ancient world was about the proper use of "logic" and whether through logic alone we can reach some higher plane of supernatural insight. Epicurus said that there is no such higher plane, and he told us to look to the guidance of nature for all that is possible to us. The faculties contained in the canon are what Nature gave us by which to test all our thoughts and decision-making.

That's why the orthodox commentators rejected Dr. Glidden's articles so forcefully. The ancient Platonists, the Ancient Stoics --- and their modern successors -- know that if you have confidence in the guidance of Nature to live successfully, then you don't need their speculative logic and their manipulations to stand in their way. Epicurus' work on the canon, significantly including his work on prolepsis - is the key to breaking free of the Platonic idealistic and absolutist chains.

We can all profit by focusing on "how" to pursue pleasure and happiness prudently, but if we skip over the "why" then we are missing Epicurus' real contribution to philosophy.

So as we discuss where Dr. Glidden's insights lead us I think we should keep the analogy of this with the swerve firmly in mind.

## Post by “Godfrey” of March 23, 2023 at 11:53 AM

Dr. Glidden used, as I recall, two useful phrases to describe prolepsis: pattern recognition and prediction engine. Don brought up the example of the mind interpreting a stick in the forest as a snake, which illustrates the function well as I understand it. If the interpretation of a stick as a snake is a prolepsis, then it illustrates that 1) the mind's prediction is "non-cognitive," "pre-cognitive," "non-conscious," and 2) this prediction is then evaluated consciously. The conscious evaluation in the case of the stick involves gathering more data: after jumping back reflexively, looking again at the stick/snake to discover that it's a stick. This further illustrates Dr. Glidden's point that prolepseis, unlike sensations, aren't always "true" as well as his thesis that Epicurus anticipated modern neuroscience in thinking about prolepseis.

Logic becomes involved when the prolepsis involves language and to evaluate conscious thinking, but is of no use in understanding reality without input from the sensations. Prolepseis act directly on input from the sensations and stimulate the feelings. Logic may act indirectly on input from the sensations or can ignore any input. It also attempts to ignore the feelings. The idealists consider this a strength, but in reality it's a fatal flaw. Without utilizing material input, and without listening to the "gut" reactions of the feelings, logic is divorced from reality. Isn't "divorced from reality" generally considered "useless"?

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## Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2023 at 12:32 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

This further illustrates Dr. Glidden's point that prolepseis, unlike sensations, aren't always "true" as well as his thesis that Epicurus anticipated modern neuroscience in thinking about prolepseis.

On this point I am still thinking further, because I have a strong tendency to think that "true" and "false" are descriptions that apply only to evaluations or interpretations, rather than to the raw functioning of a faculty providing input to the process.

We might also be talking here about a matter which explains why there was a divergence from later Epicureans going from 3 to 4 categories of canonic elements.

I doubt that Epicurus considered any aspect of "grasping" something to be part of the canonic faculty. Recognizing a pattern as significant and deserving of attention seems to me to be one thing, while interpreting it - in any way at all, as a snake or a danger or anything - seems to be

another thing, and the part where error can enter in.

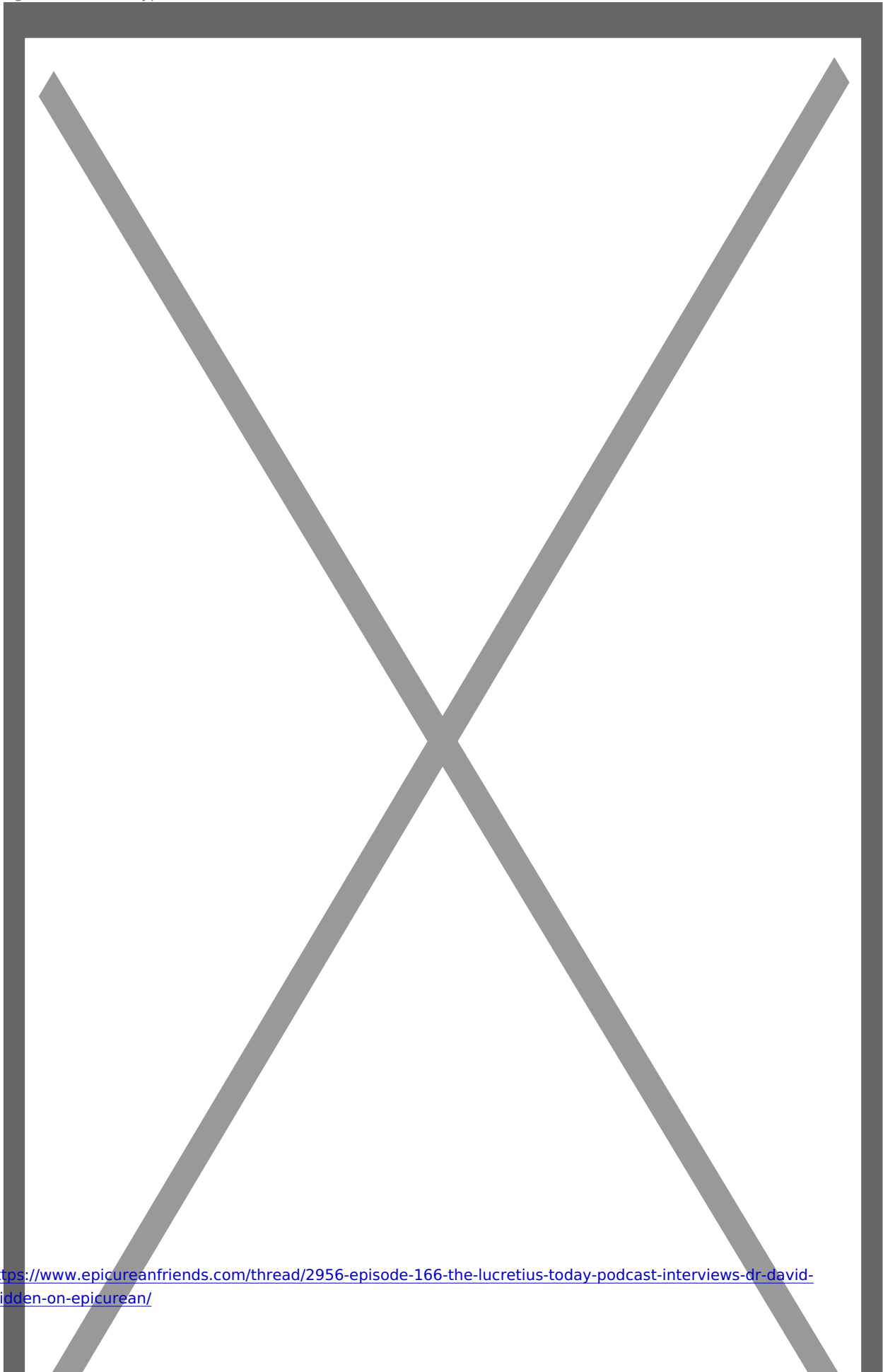
And it looks to me that it was important to Epicurus to keep separate the part where error can enter from the part that we accept without question - else we have a feedback loop and lose the ability to distinguish between our opinion vs what Nature is relaying to us directly and precognitively.

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**Post by “Don” of March 23, 2023 at 1:37 PM**

Maybe pertinent...

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

## [A Pattern Recognition Theory of Mind - Forte Labs](#)

In 2006, inventor Ray Kurzweil released the book *The Singularity Is Near* ([Amazon Affiliate Link](#)), with a bold prediction that by the year 2049 we'd enter  
[fortelabs.com](http://fortelabs.com)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 23, 2023 at 1:50 PM**

Don what do you consider the word "cognition" to mean?

"The book argues that the structure and functioning of the human brain is actually quite simple, a basic unit of cognition repeated millions of times."

I think we probably ought to be clear on this word since we are using it so often. Is it an exact synonym of "thinking" or of "consciousness" or what ? The definitions I am reading are somewhat circular and I suspect we will continue to go round in sort of circles unless we make this point more clear.

If we are considering the canonical faculties to be pre-cognitive, what exactly does that mean.

Are we moving toward seeing a major line between Epicurus and the others where the others are saying that we cannot be sure of anything unless it is reduced to words and definitions, while Epicurus is saying that certainty or confidence comes not from definitions and syllogisms but from constant reference back to canonical observations (observations that include not only the 5 senses and feeling of pain and pleasure but observations recognized as observations because they are organized - pattern-matched for repeatability - by the prolepsis mechanism)?

Because also if we are talking about pattern matching I would surely think that "memory" (of those patterns?) is also involved.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of March 23, 2023 at 6:51 PM**

These three paragraphs from the Forte Labs article seem to me to be the most pertinent to this discussion:

*"What the mind is doing when it “recognizes” an image is not matching it against a database of static images. There is no such database in the brain. Instead, it is reconstructing that image on the fly, drawing on many conceptual levels, mixing and matching thousands of patterns at*

many levels of abstraction to see which ones fit the electric signals coming in through the retina."

"Patterns triggered in the neocortex trigger other patterns. Partially complete patterns send signals down the conceptual hierarchy, fitting new lenses to the data. Completed patterns send signals up, fitting new data to the lenses. Some patterns refer to themselves recursively, giving us the ability to think about our thinking or to "go meta." An element of a pattern can be a decision point for another pattern, creating conditional relationships. Many patterns are highly redundant, with PRs dedicated to linguistic, visual, auditory, and tactile versions of the same object, which is what allows us to recognize apples in many different contexts."

"Paradoxically, a conceptual hierarchy made up of massively parallel pattern recognizers would explain a lot about our subjective experience. The feeling that something is "on the tip of the tongue" could be pattern recognizers firing below the level they become conscious. The certainty of "I know it when I see it" could be combinations of PRs firing without a corresponding, higher-order word label. Our intuition acquires new depths when it isn't limited to conscious patterns."

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### Post by "Godfrey" of March 23, 2023 at 6:53 PM

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

I doubt that Epicurus considered any aspect of "grasping" something to be part of the canonic faculty. Recognizing a pattern as significant and deserving of attention seems to me to be one thing, while interpreting it - in any way at all, as a snake or a danger or anything - seems to be another thing, and the part where error can enter in.

And it looks to me that it was important to Epicurus to keep separate the part where error can enter from the part that we accept without question - else we have a feedback loop and lose the ability to distinguish between our opinion vs what Nature is relaying to us directly and precognitively.

Well said!

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### Post by "Onenski" of March 23, 2023 at 10:06 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The "canon" is the measuring tool given by Nature against which we compare our thoughts and speculations to decide if they are consistent with reality and with our feelings of pleasure and pain

I found this sentence interesting and I don't know if problematic. I really hope I won't misinterpret you, Cassius.

Is there an assumption that Nature gave us tools to know the world?

I've read that from an evolutionary point of view (which I think is plainly consistent with epicurean philosophy) is problematic to think that some of our capacities *evolved* to have knowledge of the world. Specially because knowing the world (in a complete, maybe platonic way) is not something that we needed to survive.

From this perspective (I read it in a book called "The enigma of reason" by Sperber and Mercier), as primates, and before as mammals, we needed fast, or automatic, cognitions (we can include pattern recognition, for example) in order to survive. But as a social species, we developed different capacities that include language (verbal, visual, etc.) and a capacity to convince others (give reasons and make rationalizations). None of this capacities is *designed* (I mean, being the product of the mechanisms of natural selection) to know truths of the world.

I think my point is just to observe the assumption that Nature gave us tools to know the world, because precisely Epicurus tried to reject the existence of purposes in Nature (or maybe not and I'm misinterpreting Epicurus [1]). And also I thought this could be relevant, or at least interesting.

In response to this:

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I think we probably ought to be clear on this word since we are using it so often. Is it an exact synonym of "thinking" or of "consciousness" or what ?

In contemporary discussions there's a distinction between fast and slow cognitions (also called system 1 and 2, respectively) and is accepted in several disciplines (you can see more in "Thinking fast and slow" by Daniel Kahneman).

I hope this helps.

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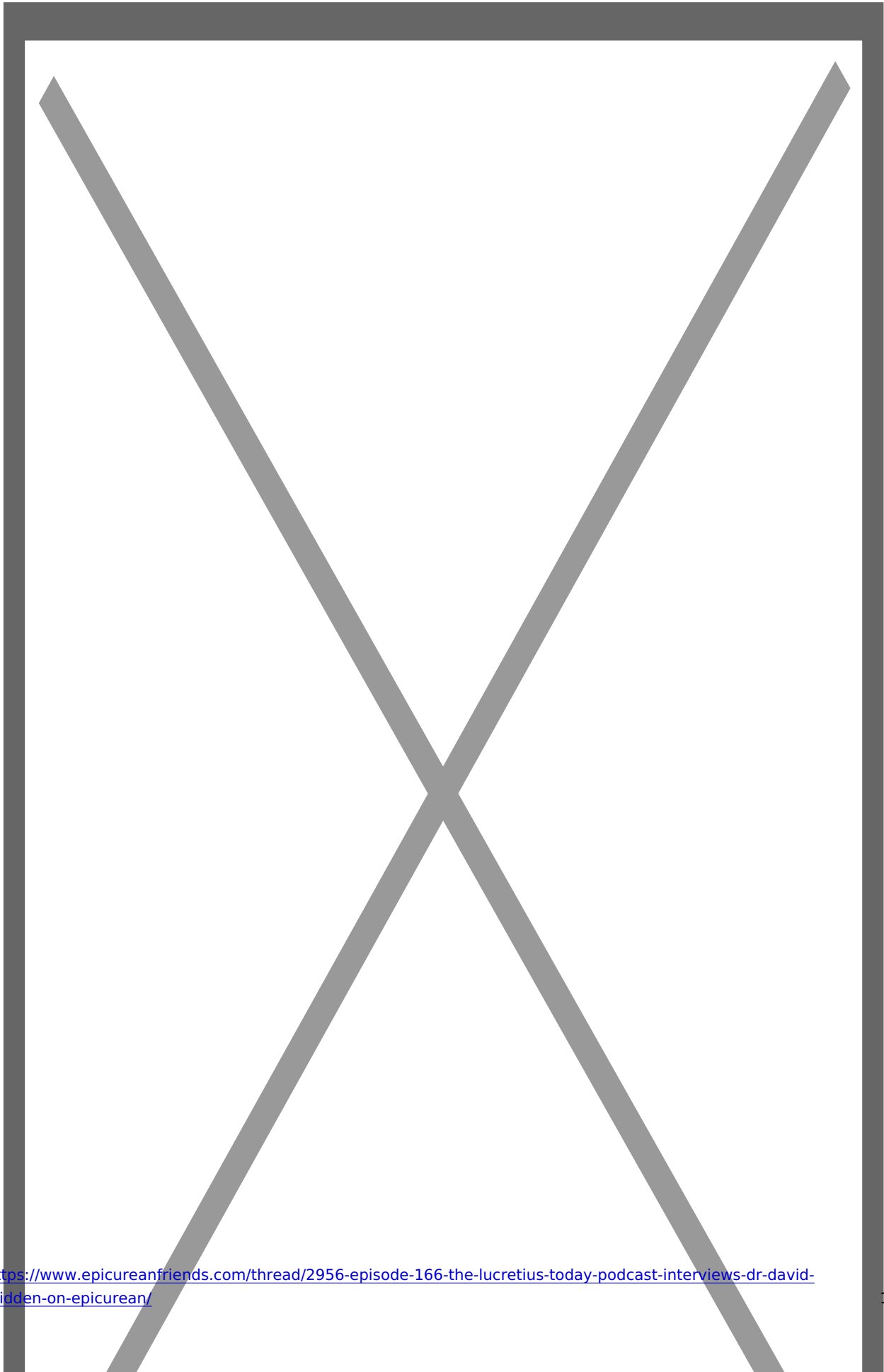
**Post by "Don" of March 24, 2023 at 12:29 AM**

I was going to go back and quote and respond directly, but this thread has grown. So, I'll just add my two drachmas worth. Those is my understanding after talking with Dr Glidden:

I really liked Dr. Glidden's "sensations are true\*to their cause\*." That is the best, succinct explanation of "[all sensations are true](#)" that I've heard. It makes perfect sense. Epicurus was "dogmatic" in the sense that we can make statements about the world, we can take a stand. Why? Because our senses are reacting to real things in the world. Our sensations are the result of our bodies being impacted by real things external to us. Those things impact our senses. Our sensations are true to their causes \*out there in the real world external to us.\*

But sensations are just raw data. Light hitting our retinas. Vibrations in the air. Molecules on the breeze. And so on. Prolepseis allow the recognition of patterns to be pulled out of the chaos. A prolepsis is a particular pattern, initially vague then reinforced over time. It's important to repeat that Forte Lab blog: "What the mind is doing when it "recognizes" an image is not matching it against a database of static images." Don't ask me to explain yet! Still trying to understand. But they important point is that prolepseis involve neither discursive thought nor conceptual thinking. It's quick, and gets quicker as we mature. But we recognize faces, for example, well before we "know" what a face is. And I think our pattern recognition faculty can be seen to work automatically when we see how it can be short circuited with the snake/stick example or the fact of Pareidolia:

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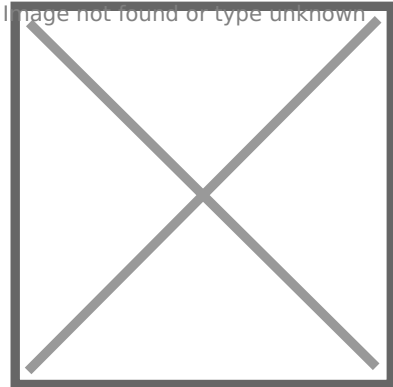
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[Pareidolia - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

We see faces everywhere!!! We can't help ourselves.

I'll leave it there for reactions.



[This is your brain detecting patterns: It is different from other kinds of learning, study shows](#)

Detecting patterns is an important part of how humans learn and make decisions. Now, researchers have seen what is happening in people's brains as they first...

[www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com)

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### Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2023 at 4:14 AM

[Onenski](#) thanks for the comment and I full agree that Nature is nonpurposive. I tend to use the "gave" in the sense of Epicurus's statement of being thankful to Nature in a more poetic than literal sense. The quote I refer to is

#### U469

**Johannes Stobaeus, *Anthology*, XVII.23:** "Thanks be to blessed Nature because she has made what is necessary easy to supply, and what is not easy unnecessary."

And I tend to agree with DeWitt's interpretation here:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

The duty of gratitude to Nature is on record in these words: "Gratitude is due to blessed Nature because she has made life's necessities easy of acquisition and those things that are difficult of acquisition unnecessary."<sup>117</sup> The true basis of the debt to Nature, however, is to be found in her function as a teacher. She is not to Epicurus, as she was to Aristotle, merely the creative force in the universe. She was also the aggregate of animate experience and especially of human experience.

It is Nature that reveals the Canon of truth and bestows upon man the means of contact between his soul and the material world, Sensations, Anticipations, Feelings. The true end of living as she reveals it is "the end of Nature." True justice is "the justice of Nature." The true attitude toward the desires consists in recognizing "the limits of Nature." The true attitude toward riches and poverty demands knowledge of "the wealth of Nature." She is the ethical teacher: "Nature teaches us to think the gifts of Fortune as of minor value and to know that when we are fortunate we are unfortunate."<sup>118</sup> In the language of Lucretius she is so eager for men to know the truth that she "barks" it aloud,<sup>119</sup> like a faithful dog that is keen to give warning. In a magnificent passage toward the end of the third book the poet steps aside and yields the pulpit to her so that in her own person she may lash self-pitying old men for their ingratitude.<sup>120</sup> If we take Nature in this Epicurean sense as a benevolent teacher, then gratitude is an imperative of Nature. It is owed to her by man and she in turn enjoins it upon man.

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## Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2023 at 4:40 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I really liked Dr. Glidden's "sensations are true\*to their cause\*."

### [Quote from Don](#)

But sensations are just raw data. Light hitting our retinas. Vibrations in the air. Molecules on the breeze. And so on. Prolepseis allow the recognition of patterns to be pulled out of the chaos. A prolepsis is a particular pattern, initially vague then reinforced over time.

I agree with both of those, and I think that it is possible to use the same perspective that prolepsis is also "true to its cause." The eyes are not "perfect" in the sense of always being in total focus and always true to colors, (astigmatism). We take what the eyes report as we get it

not because what the eyes report are perfect renderings, but because we have no other tool for vision.

I think the same can be said for non-cognitive prolepsis. The patterns being recognized are not being constructed cognitively, they actually do exist in nature in the sense of repeated similar constructions of atoms and void. On a larger scale it is not because we say "cat" that cats exist as a type. In the face example you cited, it is not because we say "face" that regularly in nature we find that animals have faces - nature does that in reality regardless of whether we recognize it.

I would think that the ability to pick up repeated examples of formations or configurations in reality is analogizable to what the eyes and ears are doing. Those repetitions exist regardless and prior to our thinking about them consciously and naming them, and that picking up or noticing of patterns happens prior to and without our interpretation of them.

Or at least I am thinking that that is what Dr. Glidden is saying about how they work and are pre-cognitive. That's why DeWitt cautions against confusion due to the multiple meanings of "true" and "False."

'true to their cause' implies to me much what DeWitt is saying - they are repeating how they are stimulated, without opinion or interpretation. But they are not "true" in the sense of \*interpreting\* how they are being stimulated. Using DeWitt's courtroom analogy, they are being reported "truly" in the sense of honestly repeating what they received, but they can easily be "false to the facts" if they are taken literally as explaining everything there is to know about the issue being witnessed. That's why we have to walk close to the tower and take multiple observations in order to see if it is square or round. And with prolepsis I would suggest the same - they might report to us a distorted (analogy to blurry or muffled) pattern at one moment while at another moment (presumably after some kind of closer examination) the pattern comes into sharper focus.

Again a possible analogy to optical character recognition - the computer is told the basic pattern of letters, but the document being input into the system at any one moment may be sharper or fuzzier depending on how good the "scan" is that the computer is trying to recognize. The pattern of the letters exists in nature (in the case of OCR because we tell it the pattern; in the case of the real world because in the nature of things there is regular behavior arising from properties of atoms and void) but the OCR engine sometimes fails to match the letter accurately because the document being scanned is blurry. The OCR engine is doing the best it can to recognize the letter, and it reports the closest match, but the pattern it reports can be "wrong" because the input is insufficiently focused. The OCR functioning is "true to its cause" but it is not "true to the fact" in that situation.

I see no problem with considering the pattern matching to be sometimes sharp, sometimes blurry, just like data from eyes and ears. The pattern-matching is also "true to its cause" all the way through - it is our interpretation of the pattern in our minds where we commit error or

confirm the pattern interpretation with accuracy.

Something like that would seem to me to be the logical way to express this, and would render it consistent with the other two legs of the "canon."

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### **Post by “Martin” of March 24, 2023 at 5:20 AM**

Taking the analogy between prolepsis and pattern recognition as very strong, prolepsis can be false.

We weaken the meaning of "true to their cause" for the senses too much if we apply the same to prolepses.

The sensations inherit the truth from the real world and the proper function of the respective sensing system. The prolepses are generated by blending sensations with prior structures of the brain, and those structures can introduce error.

As both sensations and prolepses are non-verbal, it is not straight-forward to determine whether they are true or false in a particular instance. Once the result is verbalized, we have already confounded it with cognition, and then it may appear to be rather arbitrary to assign what level introduced the error.

One way to go around is to look at quick reactions. Between the very fast reflexes and slow pre-meditated actions are automated actions controlled by the brain stem, which do not involve cognition. An inappropriate action could then be interpreted as being caused by a false prolepsis.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 24, 2023 at 5:23 AM**

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

Once the result is verbalized, we have already confounded it with cognition, and then it may appear to be rather arbitrary to assign what level introduced the error.

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

As both sensations and prolepses are non-verbal, it is not straight-forward to determine whether they are true or false in a particular instance. Once the result is verbalized, we have already confounded it with cognition, and then it may appear to be rather arbitrary to assign what level introduced the error.

I agree with that and think it is helpful to think of all legs of the canon as "non-verbal," and then to consider whether some (or all?) meanings of "true" and "false" only apply to the verbal level.

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### **Post by “Martin” of March 24, 2023 at 6:44 AM**

If all meanings of "true" and "false" only apply to the verbal level, then the canon is lost.

To keep the canon, we need somehow be able to establish the truth of its pillars in particular instances.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 24, 2023 at 6:59 AM**

Yes I agree and in order to do that we have to parse the multiple meanings of "true."

As Pontius Pilate asked, "what is truth?"

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 24, 2023 at 7:06 AM**

The chief ambiguities are also two in number. In the dictum of Epicurus that **“all sensations are true”** both terms are ambiguous. The English word *sensation*, like the Latin *sensus*, is employed to render various words and phrases in Greek, while the word *true*, like its Latin and Greek equivalents, may have any one of three meanings: first, absolutely true, as the statement that two and two make four is true, or second, relatively true, as the distant view of the tower is true, though false in detail, or third, real, in the sense that the sensation corresponds to a real object, such as an ox.

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While Epicurus was adamant in his determination to defend the validity of the sensations as being the means of direct contact between man and reality and as possessing precedence over reason, he exhibits no desire to defend the individual sensation. The fallacies of those who impute to him belief in the infallibility of sensation lie partly in their failure to observe the ambiguity of the word *true* and in their confusion of "truth" with "value."

It is not difficult to differentiate the various meanings of *true* and it is essential to right understanding. For example, when Epicurus declared that "the phantasms seen by the insane and in dreams are true," he meant that they were "real" and existed independently of the madman or the dreamer, because "they act as a stimulus and that which does not exist does not deliver a stimulus."<sup>13</sup> These phantasms, however, are not "true" in the sense that a sensation experienced by the waking observer is true. The dreamer may have a vision of a centaur but no centaurs exist in real life. If the waking man sees an ox, then the sensation is true because the stimulus is delivered by a living ox.

A still different meaning of *true* may be discerned when Epicurus denominates his system as "true philosophy." He means it is true in the sense that his Twelve Elementary Principles are true or in the sense that the modern scientist believes the accepted calculation of the speed of light to be true. This may be called absolute truth, if there is such a thing.

It remains to speak of the relatively true. The views of a tower at

various distances may be cited as examples. Each is true relative to the distance; its value as evidence of the facts is another matter. This distinction was no novelty to the ancients; Sextus Empiricus sets it forth at some length in a discussion of Epicureanism.<sup>14</sup>

Also worthy of mention is the sensation which is optically true but false to the facts. An example much brandished by the skeptics was the bent image of the oar immersed in the water.<sup>15</sup> Epicurus made logical provision for this difficulty: "Of two sensations the one cannot refute the other,<sup>16</sup> because we give attention to all sensations." This statement alone would acquit him of belief in the infallibility of sensation, because it is distinctly implied that some sensations are employed to correct others.

The example of the tower will serve as a transition from the topic of ambiguity to that of confusion. When modern scholars seize upon the saying "all sensations are true," which appears nowhere in the extant writings of Epicurus, and stretch it to mean that all sensations are reliable or trustworthy or "that the senses cannot be deceived," they are confusing the concept of truth with the concept of value.<sup>17</sup> They overlook the fact that even a truthful witness may fall short of delivering the whole truth or may even give false evidence. The distant view of the square tower is quite true relative to the distance but it fails to reveal the whole truth about the tower.

To assume that Epicurus was unaware of these plain truths, as one must if belief in the infallibility of sensation is imputed to him, is absurd. It is because he was aware that the value of sensations, apart from their truth, varied all the way from totality to zero, that he exhorted beginners "under all circumstances to watch the sensations and espe-

Those clips are from the book. DeWitt's article on the subject - with very pithy summary paragraph - is here:

File

## [Norman DeWitt - "Epicurus - All Sensations Are True"](#)



DeWitt's interpretation of the "all sensations are true" controversy.



Cassius

December 29, 2022 at 12:23 PM

## II.—Epicurus : All Sensations Are True

NORMAN W. DEWITT

VICTORIA COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The aim of this article is to show reasons for believing that the statement in the heading is false as usually understood. It is absurd; the documentation is deficient, misleading, and from prejudiced sources; advocates of its validity go beyond their authorities. It is inconsistent with Epicurus' theory of perception, his terminology, his account of vision, his classifications, his treatment of the criteria in his Principal Doctrines, his account of heavenly phenomena in the letter to Pythocles, and his recommendations to students. Ancient proofs of it are polemical sophistries. Modern misinterpretations have arisen from the ambiguity of ἀληθής, which has three meanings in Epicureanism: 1. real or self-existent; 2. relatively true; 3. absolutely true. Sensations have been confused with judgments.

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### Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2023 at 12:35 PM

I think all this is important in how we understand the Democritus quote:

Quote from Democritus

By convention sweet is sweet, bitter is bitter, hot is hot, cold is cold, color is color; but in truth there are only atoms and the void. (trans. Durant 1939)[2].

"Convention" implies "agreement" to most of us, and yes that is true in regard to what word we use for "sweet" - what language we speak. But it is not by agreement with other people that sugar tastes sweet to us - we describe it that way in words, but "in truth" it is nature telling us individually and directly that sugar tastes a desirable way and gives pleasure. That feeling is just as true and real no matter what words we use to describe it, and it exists before we attempt to express anything about the sugar in words.

Democritus' statement as worded is easy to understand as nihilistic - as saying that nothing exists unless we agree it exists other than atoms and void.

Seems to me Epicurus is much more clear about all this (and in fairness to Democritus he might have been too if we had more of his texts).

The important take away is not that only atoms and void have a claim to be considered real, but that for us as humans what has a claim to be real is what nature allows us to perceive through the canonical faculties. That's the opposite of nihilism - it tells us (as against religion

that points to another world) that it is THIS world that we perceive through our faculties that is everything to us.

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### **Post by “Don” of March 24, 2023 at 2:02 PM**

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

Democritus' statement as worded is easy to understand as nihilistic - as saying that nothing exists unless we agree it exists other than atoms and void.

For me, it doesn't read that way. I've always taken it as a bare statement of fact. To try and imbue existence - let's get personal, your existence or mine - with some transcendent or ultimate meaning is, by definition, a meaningless endeavor. We're ALL, at the core, temporary patterns of atoms in the void. But not JUST atoms and void. We do have a real life and interact with real things in a real cosmos at the macro level of everyday existence. We don't experience ourselves as atoms and void, but we should keep that thought at the back of our minds, especially when we hear "God has a plan for me" or "The Universe is showing me a path." We give our lives meaning, and we can experience a pleasurable existence. But that doesn't mean we aren't, at our foundation, atoms moving in the void (or whatever modern paraphrase one wants to use).

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### **Post by “waterholic” of March 25, 2023 at 5:46 AM**

Just wanted to thank [Cassius](#) (and others) for the thought provoking interview. One thing is clear for me personally: I still have LOTS to read 😊

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### **Post by “Don” of March 25, 2023 at 10:42 AM**

#### [Quote from waterholic](#)

I still have LOTS to read

LOL! Welcome to the club 😄

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### Post by “Cassius” of March 25, 2023 at 11:10 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

One thing is clear for me personally: I still have LOTS to read 😊

I think that's a key insight for everyone including especially me. No matter how much we've read, it's the constant effort to organize it in our minds and then look for new ways to express it to others that is really motivational and keeps you moving forward.

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### Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2023 at 8:51 AM

Christos Tsigarides sends this at Facebook:

David Glidden must see this On the left of the picture is an old shrine in my village overlooking my city of VOLOS and PELION the place of CENTAURS I found this very important on 52,3 minutes of his lecture This is one of the two shrines on the two entrances to the village



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### Post by “Joshua” of July 20, 2023 at 7:36 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

In light of [this](#) recent thread I have decided to give another listen to this episode, and am slowly developing a better understanding of what is going on with the word 'cognition'. Dr. Glidden expressly contrasts the cognitive with the physiological. In humans it's difficult to demarcate these two faculties, in part because they are very intertwined.

But taking a lower order of life like the spider plant on my balcony, I can make several observations. Does it experience sensation? I suspect so. My balcony faces northeast, and that is the direction sunlight comes from. Not direct sunlight--my spider plant will never "see" the sun where it sits, but enough filters through by reflection and refraction for the plant to make do.

And here's the thing; when the spider plant sends forth a new shoot, it tends invariable toward the light. In a phenomenon called [Heliotropism](#), some plants will actually track the sun from east to west throughout the day. No brain, no thought or cognition, no language--and yet the plant senses light and heat and responds to stimuli with primitive cellular motor function. The process, from beginning to end, is physiological.

What about prolepsis? In the well-known and charismatic Venus Fly-Trap, it is an electrical impulse passed from the trigger hairs on each of the lobes that 'tells' the midrib of the plant to close the trap. The process again is physiological and noncognitive. Too physiological? Maybe. It could be argued that a merely physical process, like gently tapping the keys on a piano, is too noncognitive to really count as pattern recognition. After all, that last word is "re-cognition".

But if you look at plants on the cellular level, what you will observe is the faculty of these cells to recognize patterns associated with perceived threats and dangers--a faculty that allows the cells to respond to the threat and mitigate the damage.

The threat in this case is microbes, and it is an immune response that the pattern recognition triggers. To quote Wikipedia;

#### Quote

Pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) play a crucial role in the proper function of the innate immune system. PRRs are germline-encoded host sensors, which detect molecules typical for the pathogens. They are proteins expressed, mainly, by cells of the innate immune system, such as dendritic cells, macrophages, monocytes, neutrophils and epithelial cells, to identify two classes of molecules: pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), which are associated with microbial pathogens, and damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs), which are associated with components of host's cells that are released during cell damage or death.

If a molecule with the pattern of a threat bumps up against a PRR, the host organism's cells will initiate the immune response. But here's the thing; just as it's possible to mimic the pattern of a

fly by triggering the hairs of a venus fly-trap, it would be possible for a molecule to trip a PRR by having the pattern of a microbe without actually being one.

Do we consider this a primitive form of prolepsis? Let's review the components:

- Initial sensory contact. Like a human seeing a curvy stick on the forest floor, a venus fly-trap or Pattern Recognition Receptor in the cell registers a sensory impulse.
- The sensory impulse is "identified" (in purely physiological terms) as matching a "known" pattern--like a key sliding into a lock. The stick sends an impulse to our brain, and some twitching neuron somewhere fires--SNAKE!
- The organism responds both to the stimulus and to the pattern recognition. This part is essential--a fructose molecule could bump against a PRR all day long, providing the sensory impulse, but not register as a known pattern. It alone would not trigger the organism's response. The pattern recognition is essential. We jump back from the stick, only to discover cognitively that it's just a stick after all.

I think I would call this a kind of prolepsis.

One further consideration. Does prolepsis lie? Can it be wrong? It depends on what we mean by 'wrong'. I might define prolepsis--sensation->pattern->response--as an "anticipation made noncognitively in advance of more complete information". It's certainly true that the stimulus whose pattern we recognize will very often turn out to be caused by something else. A stick, not a snake. A feather, not a fly. A fructose molecule, not a dangerous microbe.

But was the pattern recognition ITSELF a lie? I think not. A curvy stick does have the same pattern as a snake to the sense of vision. My opinion is that prolepsis is true to the cause because the cause IS the pattern. The stick-ness or snake-ness of the stick or snake is something we grasp cognitively and express and understand using language. But the pattern is the pattern--evaluating whether it's been rightly identified in the light of future evidence or further knowledge is quite beside the point. That process is cognitive--this process is physiological.

So that's where I find myself right now.

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## **Post by “HsiehKW” of July 23, 2023 at 11:08 AM**

[Joshua](#) , pretty interesting. I'll give the Canonics in DeWitt a better read and come back with a reply. I think I may have some material on contemporary cognitive science that would resonate with what you said. I'll definitely listen to this episode. Thanks for bringing it up!

## Post by “HsiehKW” of July 24, 2023 at 11:49 PM

[Joshua](#), here's my contemporary take on prolepsis and cognitive "errors". I think we have similar lines of reasoning, specifically: (1) how we define 'wrong' matters a lot; and (2) your definition of prolepsis as inference. So, let me start with how I see prolepsis as Anticipations in two nested senses.

In DeWitt, prolepsis is the "anticipatory notion of the essential attributes of the subject of examination (p. 148)." They are Nature's way of preconditioning an animal, preparing it for "life in the prospective environment (DeWitt, p. 146)." And it is a materialist (naturalist) concept being a "philosophical antonym of Plato's anamnesis or recollection (DeWitt, p. 146)." So, to me, it looks like the ancient analog of [cognitive modules](#) or [psychological adaptations](#). Roughly, the reasoning behind these modern concepts is that just like physiology is selected by evolution, so are our cognitive faculties -- furnishing organisms with effective propensities for adaptive behavior.

But, in DeWitt, Anticipations too it looks like can be built through experience. He stated that for Epicurus:

### Quote

"The innate capacity to distinguish colors is an anticipation of experience no less than the innate capacity to distinguish between justice and injustice. The difference is that the color-sense is part of the individual's preconditioning for life in his physical environment and emerges in early childhood, while the sense of justice is part of the preconditioning for life in the social environment and emerges later, **developing in pace with experience, instruction, and reflection** [emphasis added](DeWitt, p. 142-143) ."

So, it seems that while a cognitive agent is furnished with Anticipations by its evolutionary history, these Anticipations also undergo development through an agent's ontogeny, throughout its lifespan. I, for now, read Anticipations this way: they are nested preconditions for future action generation (e.g., thinking, planning, mulling, etc.), selection, and control. At its very base, Anticipations are shaped by evolutionary selection but the agent (with agency) can have a hand in shaping them through experience. In this sense, they are evolving [priors](#) for decision-making. And they can be [updated](#) through experience analogous to Bayesian Inference. As such, I'd like to think that Anticipations are in two nested senses: (a) *evolutionary adaptations in physiology* and (b) *psychological adaptations continuously developed in ontogeny*. This is where I am at. And the question of whether "prolepsis can lie" can be (and should be) approached from these two angles, if my reading is correct. I think you share the same notion too considering your two examples (i.e., heliotropism and snake/stick

identification).

In prolepsis as (a) evolutionary adaptations, I think you hit the mark by bringing up that (1) how we might define 'wrong' has a lot to do with it. One particular example has come to mind: [von Uexküll's tick](#). Loosely, the female tick is basically sensitized to three things: light, butyric acid, and temperature. After getting pregnant, it is driven by its prolepsis to light so it climbs up to a higher spot in the woods. She stays clung until she "smells" or detects butyric acid emanating from a mammal. Butyric acid is its cue to let go and drop "in the hopes of" landing on a warm-blooded mammal to feed. If the animal is missed, she makes her way back up following the light, doing it all over again. If she succeeds, then its prolepsis for temperature drives her to find a warm bald spot to take her last meal, blood. All she has to do then is drop, lay eggs, and die. These Anticipations or (a) evolutionary adaptations allow her to reproduce, evolutionary-successful so to speak. But these Anticipations only work in selected niches. In the lab, the tick can be tricked to drink any fluid from perforated artificial membranes provided they are at the right temperature. So, is prolepsis wrong? I don't think so if we stick to DeWitt's interpretation, prolepsis as the "anticipatory notion of the essential attributes of the subject of examination (p. 148)." In the tick's case, the essential attributes of biological/evolutionary significance are light, butyric acid, and temperature. And she rightly identified and acted on those in her "life in the prospective environment (DeWitt, p. 146)." The prospective environment is key here in judging whether prolepsis, as (a) evolutionary adaptations, are effective or not. And looking at this "algorithmic" process, it works in the most likely contexts where a tick would find itself. If we think of it in a probabilistic way, the tick is perfectly equipped by Nature. However, I think that prolepsis can lead to mistakes when applied/manifested in the 'wrong' context. The tick in the lab and Platonists are prime examples.

Kidding aside, it seems that we can sidestep the concern for correctness conditions of (a) evolutionary adaptations by recognizing them as enablers or embodied adaptive faculties, demarcating them from perception and action (i.e., inferences). As they are embodied in cognitive agents like the network of veins in the embryo that prefigures the adult organism (see DeWitt, p. 147), they are real entities. And real entities like organs and trees cannot be true or false, right or wrong. This is much like Sensations, which to me are evolutionary adaptations. Sensations are not true or false as if they are logical propositions like "P(x) is true" or "P(x) is false". They are true in the way that they are real goings-on in an agent embedded in the world that produces subjective phenomenal experience with certain qualities, as brute experiential facts. How they are used, however, can lead to mistakes. The error lies not in Sensations themselves but in "the hasty action of the automatic mind. For example, the boat on which the observer is a passenger is standing still but it seems to be moving when a second boat is passing by. In such an instance the eyes are not playing the observer false; it is the hasty judgment of the automatic mind that is in error (DeWitt, p.137)." Cognitive errors occur in interpretations of Sensations, interpretations that can come in the form of logical propositions that may be true or false. So, to sidestep the question of whether prolepsis can be right or wrong, we must demarcate them from inferences.

I think it is best to keep in mind that evolutionary adaptations are, first and foremost, there to deal with matters of biological significance. So, this is what they are preconditioned to do, not solve differential equations. The acid test for how evolutionary adaptations are successful is not in higher-order inferences but in keeping oneself intact under precarious conditions. As such, they should be judged this way, as sort of like "tools" (not the best analogy, I suppose) with proper domains of use. The error lies in the results of using such "tools" in an actual domain that they are not "designed" for, as we see with von Uexküll's tick (see [Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004](#) for proper and actual domains of cognition modules).

While this "washing of our hands of something" or demarcation strategy may work for Anticipations as (a) evolutionary adaptations in physiology, I think it is not as strong when applied to the nested level of (b) psychological adaptations. This is because it involves perception and action in short-term action contexts that correctness conditions may apply, especially in the subjective experiential world of an agent (e.g., your snake/stick example). I think you have the right idea, however, in salvaging a sense of prolepsis as an effective epistemic enabler in the short-term scale of particular action contexts which again looks to sidestep the question of whether they are right or wrong. And that "trick" is to view prolepsis as an *ongoing inferential process*, not a static and discrete mental representation of a somewhat Platonic kind, and judge it on its merits in this regard -- primarily for its ability to effectively precondition cognitive "life in the prospective environment (DeWitt, p. 146)" or in a niche close to the [environment of evolutionary adaptedness](#) (EEA) that shaped or endowed us with Anticipations in the first place.

I guess the key here is to view short-term prolepsis in action contexts in faster timescales as an enabling process for inferences. It's the engine, so to speak; not the helmsman. It enables inferences of different kinds and it comes in different species-specific kinds, cognitive structures embodied in physiology, as endowed by Nature. So, in this line of thinking, we might be able to sidestep the issue once again. We can also supplement this by considering short-term prolepsis as error minimization, something that your (2) definition of prolepsis implies. Doing so would give prolepsis a corrective trajectory toward effective knowing of the environment and one's place in it, building what enactivists may call skillful know-how. That said, the argument may become clearer and stronger when we parse and interpret your definition in light of a contemporary framework.

You wrote that:

Quote

"I might define prolepsis--sensation->pattern->response--as an "anticipation made noncognitively in advance of **more complete information** [emphasis added]". It's certainly true that the stimulus whose pattern we recognize will very often turn out to be caused by something else. A stick, not a snake. A feather, not a fly. A fructose molecule, not a dangerous microbe."

I can't help but connect this to [Free Energy Principle \(FEP\) or Active Inference \(ActInf\)](#), a contemporary framework that is quite en vogue in CogSci circles. You may have heard of it here and there. The main purport here is that cognition is an inferential process where actions and perceptions are dovetailed together, hence called active inference or action-perception loops. The framework is quite eclectic, drawing inspiration for the study of cognition from various disciplines, from physics to machine learning and from neuroscience to embodied approaches among others. There is much enthusiasm surrounding FEP with many thinking (and hoping) that it is the "one ring to rule them all" in reference to cognitive theories. In case you want to read more about it, I will add the quintessential book on it in this folder: [Cognitive Science & Canonics](#).

In a nutshell, ActInf or FEP is an abstract way of thinking about and formally (mathematically) modeling how cognitive agents learn through perceiving and acting continuously on continuous sensory input to learn about the world and their place in it. Roughly, at the very basic biological level, for an agent to stay alive or keep within the bounds of existence, it must infer the hidden external states that cause its sensations and act in a way to change the next influx of sensations to conform to their expectations; expectations that are, first and foremost, biologically significant (e.g., organisms strive to meet their expectations of staying alive) and can be read as Anticipations in the (a) evolutionary and (b) psychological senses. As such, the ActInf scheme can be thought of as error minimization between an internal model (expectations) and the hidden states it models. This is where errors can be minimized in two ways: change your mind or change the world. Failing to minimize such errors so can be a matter of life and death (e.g., determining whether what is nearby is a poisonous snake or simply a stick). Or it can be as trivial as fishing for your TV remote inside your couch (i.e., thinking that the remote is in this crevice or that while actively engaging the couch by touch to confirm until your expectation is met). But the scheme remains the same, something like: "sensation->pattern->response" as you said. Only this time, it is in a loop of course corrective behavior.

What this implies is that "errors" can occur as agents move from one state to another toward their goal states. In fact, they happen all the time. Cognitive agents, however, have built-in capabilities for course correction. We can see this in von Uexküll's tick actively sampling the world to fulfill its expectations on its way to lay her eggs. Recall that if she did not successfully land on the animal that emitted butyric acid, she acts in a way again to correct her "error" -- fulfilling her expectations, as she goes about her business. That said, in judging these capabilities or Anticipations, I think it's better to judge their effectiveness, not the number of errors that happen all the time on an agent's way toward effectively navigating itself in its environment, particularly in its prospective niche similar to its EEA. And as the planet is teeming with cognitive agents, I think Nature has done pretty well.

Each organism is endowed with Anticipations, the propensities for action policy generation, selection, and control that are flexible and plastic enough to allow successful cognition in a

wide array of contexts that can even stray from the EEA (see [spandrels](#) and [phenotypic plasticity](#)). And this is the minimum kind that can be further built further and elaborated in experience. But at the core, I believe, they conform to the Epicurean insight on Pleasure and Pain -- the drivers for effective behaviors, occupying the highest priority of attention. I find it unimaginable for a cognitive agent to be biologically successful without such faculties, however rudimentary or complex they are for "lower-order" and "higher-order" organisms, respectively. So, Nature has done a good job. It is up to cognitive agents to use their agency over such faculties for their own good. I think this thinking can fairly sidestep the question of whether prolepsis can lie. Is this close to what you had in mind?

P.S.

While I pretty much resonate with your thinking, I wouldn't go as far as to call plants cognitive agents (not sure if you do). They may have as you would call them primitive prolepsis or the Anticipations of the (a) evolutionary adaptive order, but as far as we know, they wouldn't experience sensations and feelings that can be used for agentic decision-making -- no Anticipations in the (b) psychological adaptive order. While I do accept that there's continuity between life and mind (i.e., mind is life-like and life is mind-like), the specificity of the cognitive, I believe, lies in a higher form of autonomy/agency at the level of a nervous system. As far as we know, plants do not have them. This opens a whole can of philosophical worms (i.e., the debate on the "life = mind" thesis) but in case you want some good reasons for this stance, you can refer to [Barandiaran \(2016/2017\)](#).

Cheers!

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## **Post by "Joshua" of July 25, 2023 at 12:41 AM**

Thank you, [HsiehKW](#), that is a very thorough response and I will have to read it again more carefully tomorrow!

In response to your last paragraph, I agree that plants are not cognitive; I cite them merely in a thought experiment, in order to outline the operation of prolepsis as non-cognitive. The inclusion of prolepsis in the Canon seemed to require a process linked to sensation and rooted in physiology, which I tried to take as nearly as I could to its hypothetical extreme.

Your division of prolepsis into two adaptive orders is particularly interesting to me. As I said, I will return for a more careful reading!

Thank you again!

## Post by “Cassius” of July 25, 2023 at 7:39 AM

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

Thank you, HsiehKW, that is a very thorough response and I will have to read it again more carefully tomorrow!

I fully agree - thank you for such high quality posting! It's going to take me time to even begin to grasp the implications of all the data contained there. And further, I suspect you take the implications of these ideas in interesting ways that would also be productive to pursue.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of December 21, 2023 at 6:08 PM

As I've probably noted before, I do not tend to absorb knowledge as well through listening as reading. Others are the opposite. And “concretizing” a verbal discussion into written text can have its own problems. With that said, it would be tragic had I missed this podcast (and a couple of others that I've listened to so far) because of my own limitations in that regard.

With that said: (1) I was reminded - especially by Dr. Glidden's remarks on the fact that our prolepses can be mistaken, coupled with their place in the canon - of the distinction by the Pyrrhonians between “criteria for truth” (which they found suspect - at least with regard to certain knowledge about “nonevident matters”) and “criteria for agency.” That latter may be uncertain, but can be the best evidence we have to make choices and act upon. It strikes me that, based on Dr. Glidden's analysis, the prolepses might fall into that second category.

And (2) the question of “cognitive” versus “noncognitive” is something that I've encountered in moral theory. Moral cognitivism is (at the base level I can comprehend) the idea that we can derive proper moral views via thinking and reason (as well as some sort of cognitive validation of articulated rule-based moral creeds). Moral noncognitivism is the idea that we first react emotively - for example visceral repugnance in the face of cruelty to a child. We may try to articulate cognitive reasons for that response (perhaps so that we might convince others), but it is that response itself that drives the very process.

I tend toward moral noncognitivism (again, at the base level I understand it), but it strikes me that prolepsis might explain why so many of those noncognitive (or precognitive) reactions seem to be observed across diverse cultures generally - and why people who have opposite reactions (e.g. enjoying such acts of cruelty) tend to get diagnosed as “pathological.”

Just, really, thinking “out loud” ...

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Note: I take “cognitive” here to mean generally what is given as the first definition in Merriam-Webster: “1: of, relating to, being, or involving conscious intellectual activity (such as thinking, reasoning, or remembering).”

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## Post by “Bryan” of December 23, 2023 at 12:04 AM

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

...the distinction by the Pyrrhonians between “criteria for truth” (which they found suspect – at least with regard to certain knowledge about “nonevident matters”) and “criteria for agency.” That latter may be uncertain, but can be the best evidence we have to make choices and act upon. It strikes me that, based on Dr. Glidden’s analysis, the prolepseis might fall into that second category.

Yes, it is interesting that Dr. Glidden is keeping the anticipations distinct from the visual focus of the mind (αἱ φανταστικαὶ Ἐπιβολαὶ τῆς διανοίας), and not accepting the anticipations as a criteria of truth. I have preferred to coalesce them.

He takes Diogenes as being sloppy here “[10.31] They reject dialectic as superfluous; holding that in their inquiries the physicists should be content to employ the ordinary terms for things. Now in The Canon Epicurus affirms that our **sensations** and **anticipations** and our **feelings** are the standards of truth ; the Epicureans generally make *the visual focus of the mind* to be also standards.”

He prefers to stick to Epicurus “[KD24] If you reject even one sensation and you will not separate (1) a theory about what is still pending, versus (2) what is actually present according to the **senses, feelings, and the visual focus of the mind**: then you will disturb the remaining senses with empty thought – as you will be rejecting the whole basis of judgment.”

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## Post by “Godfrey” of December 23, 2023 at 1:01 AM

[Bryan](#) I'm interested in hearing more of your thinking on visual focus of the mind. This seems to be a topic of some controversy, and one of which my understanding is pretty limited. What do

you mean by coalescing them with the anticipations? Would they then be a type of anticipation? And what exactly is the visual focus of the mind? Conscious, unconscious, dreams...? Is the Greek *epibolai* equivalent to these? How does the Greek word relate to the Greek phrase that you posted above?

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## Post by “Godfrey” of December 23, 2023 at 1:06 AM

Here's a post after a webinar with Voula Tsouna that tries to point out some of the issues:

Post

[RE: Voula Tsouna Zoom Presentation This Thursday, May 27, at 12 Noon EDT](#)

Pardon my tardiness in posting: I attended the presentation but am only now able to weigh in.

I got the impression that this was not a finished paper but a work in progress. She seemed to be working with *athroa epibole* versus *kata meros epibole* in order to draw some conclusions. Basically, is there a difference between a "big picture" *epibole* and an *epibole* of a detail or details? Is memory involved in one but not the other? Is memory involved at all in an *epibole*? Is attention?

Also she was...



Godfrey

May 27, 2021 at 8:04 PM

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## Post by “Bryan” of December 23, 2023 at 2:41 AM

*Epibolai* really just means “focus.” We understand the eyes can focus on a specific range within the sea of information around us, whereas the ears can focus on a different range within this sea of information, and so for the rest of the senses.

As we know, there is a lot more data out there. From radio waves to radiation, there are many perpetuated disturbances (waves/*eidola*) all around us that carry information that our external

senses do not pick up.

Epicurus understood the internal sense of the mind also focuses on a range of this information, which produces mental images (prolepseis). If we have a thought that is not based on images – it is just "a label on an empty box" (hypolepsis). So, we are talking about a “mental picture.”

Just as when we increase our views of the formerly distant tower, we come to see it's true nature – as we increase our views of these mental pictures, while guided by the laws of nature, we are more acutely able to focus on and more accurately able see what exists within the universe.

The anticipations are these mental pictures, and mental focus (ἡ ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας) is our attention to them.

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### **Post by “Don” of December 23, 2023 at 8:20 AM**

For reference:

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

[Bryan](#) 's description of "focus" seems a good way to think of it. The basic definition in LSJ of "throwing or laying on" gets at that same idea.

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### **Post by “Bryan” of December 23, 2023 at 11:55 AM**

Yes (expanding on what I said in KD24) instead of using the modern analogy of ‘focusing’ the mind (as though the mind were something like a camera), Epicureans used the analogy of ‘throwing’ or ‘casting’ the mind (as though the mind were something like a net). The paraphrases animī iniectus ("throwing the mind") and ἡ ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας ("casting the mind upon") therefore are equivalent to our modern use of ‘attention’ or ‘focus’ in the broad sense. Everything from trying to hear a particular sound out of many to focusing on our automatic mental images/stereotypes.

As Lucretius says, often things in the room with us are totally out of our thoughts, so much so they may as well be miles away—until we focus on them. He says the same of our mental images. Many people are very busy and ignore all but the most pressing impressions that cannot be ignored for life to continue (stereotypes of dangerous things, for example).

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2956-episode-166-the-lucretius-today-podcast-interviews-dr-david-glidden-on-epicurean/>

There is also the idea (cynically promoted by those who prefer that they -- not you -- are in control of your thoughts) that if a stereotype is wrong even once it is invalid. But abandoning this natural mechanism would make us defenseless in body and enfeebled in the mind. In reality nobody can actually live for very long without using them.

If some people tell you to stop relying on your senses as the basis of your thinking, you must stop trusting those people.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of December 23, 2023 at 8:35 PM**

The above is some very helpful explanation and great analogies. Particularly comparing the technology of casting a net to focusing a camera lens: that's a great way to illustrate the 2300 year time difference.

One thing that I'm still confused about: is this focusing conscious? To my understanding prolepseis are pre-conscious in a way that might be analogous to a feeling being pre-conscious. Then we use conscious thinking to examine the data provided by the senses, prolepseis and feelings.

My understanding, again, is that the mind does tons of focusing and processing without our conscious awareness. I've been interpreting this as the activity that generates prolepseis. However I can also see that the focusing I'm doing now, consciously, could be considered an activity that generates a prolepsis. But now I'm getting confused, because my line of thought is leading to a prolepsis being both a process and a result. And also "learning".

I need to go back and review from the beginning of this thread. Meanwhile, any further explanations would be much appreciated!

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### **Post by “Bryan” of December 24, 2023 at 3:24 AM**

Thank you for the conversation!

It seems to me that the data contained in sight is pre-rational and automatic whether (1) we are purposefully focusing our eyes on something, (2) we just happen to see that thing, or (3) that thing grabs our attention.

If **we choose to look at a dog**, the data we see about the dog will still be pre-rational upon reception. We will then immediately (but nevertheless subsequently) start thinking about this data.

Similarly our anticipations are honest witnesses that report directly the data contained in the perpetuated disturbances that strike and stimulate the mind. Just like sight, anticipations/stereotypes are pre-rational and automatic whether (1) we focus on them, (2) we observe them as they come and go, or (3) they grab our attention.

Examples:

(1) **We choose to think of a dog**, the general stereotype (our anticipation) of a dog automatically strikes our mind -- and from this pre-rational basis -- we can then immediately begin to manipulate the idea/image of a dog.

(2) We let the images come and go without thought or analysis -- most often when we are very relaxed or sleeping.

(3) We see a dog-like thing, the general stereotype (our anticipation) of a dog automatically strikes our mind -- we can then immediately (but nevertheless subsequently) begin to think "this is a dog," "this is a dog-like animal," or "this is actually just a statue of a dog."

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## **Post by "Godfrey" of December 24, 2023 at 4:38 PM**

Thanks [Bryan](#) ! I think we're on the same page.

This morning I listened to the Dr. Glidden interview again. He explicitly states that prolepsis are not infallible, which makes sense to me. But in this way he repeatedly separates them from sensations and feelings while leaving them in the Canon. He may have gone as far as to say that they're not true, but I'm interpreting that as not infallible. Riffing on this I get the notion that the three elements of the Canon all vary in degrees of infallibility:

- Sensations are true, but not infallible (as in the bent stick in the water, or the rounded or square tower)
- Anticipations can be true or false, so not infallible (as in the snake or stick illustration)
- Feelings are true and infallible. But they need to be carefully attended to in order to properly hear them (particularly wrt to those who incorrectly think that there is a "neutral zone".)

(I'm using infallible here to mean "a reliable source of information".)

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 24, 2023 at 5:20 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

(I'm using infallible here to mean "a reliable source of information".)

Yes that's the key - my fingers were prepared for a comment til you clarified that - I was going to say that yes they all share the same level of infallibility - zero! (In the sense of their being correct \*opinion\*). 😊

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2023 at 6:37 PM

Just to clarify after my last post:

When I say that the three canonical faculties share the same level of fallibility / infallibility - and I say that the level is zero --- that is a reference to the fact that "Fallibility" and "infallibility" are terms that refer to conclusions: to ideas that are reached after a process of thinking and coming to an opinion. Fallibility and infallibility are terms generally used to refer to whether a set of opinions is correct or incorrect when compared with the "Truth" (which is another abstract conclusion or concept).

I think most of us are agreed that the three canonical faculties do not provide "opinions" or 'concepts" or "conclusions" at all: therefore it is not proper to consider them to be either fallible or infallible. The faculties don't represent to you that they are handing you completed idea. Instead, they are handing you raw data (sounds, sights, feelings of touch, pleasure, pain, etc.) that are neither "right" nor "wrong." They simply are what they are, and from them we have to take what they give us and reach any opinions or conclusions that we want to reach.

I think probably I am preaching to choir in writing this but I wanted to clarify in case any "newer" readers happened on my statement and were wondering how to interpret it.