

# Mako's Epicurean Outline

Post by “Mako” of January 20, 2018 at 1:25 PM

Hello all. I'd like to thank Cassius and the community for supporting the outline concept. I think this will be a very useful tool as I continue my early studies in Epicureanism. I anticipate that my personal outline will initially focus more on Knowledge, Truth and How to live, though I may be grossly neglecting other areas of study that would benefit and support the position of happy wisdom I am trying to reach. Right now, I am still trying to *understand* the foundations of the philosophy and discover how to keep it fresh in my mind in every day life, living by the doctrines that have brought me happiness when I study them.

I am very busy, as we all are, and sadly tend to fall behind on my studies during periods of stress. This has been what's kept me from keeping the philosophy several times in the past. I am trying to remain encouraged and organized in my attempts now, and having the support and knowledge of an Epicurean community is likely what has kept me successful this go around. **If I had one goal initial goal for my outline, it would be to construct it so that I can keep the early, basic foundations of Nature, Truth and Ethics fresh in my mind every single day regardless of how busy life may be at the time, and live in accordance with the key principles** even when the time I would prefer to spend deepening my studies is consumed. Any input, suggestions and advice (even if not related to the outline) are wholly welcome and appreciated as I continue not only to continue my studies, but retain what I've learned.

I will initially only start with what I believe I can recall from texts from memory. If I am greatly misinterpreting any principles (beyond the realm of personal interpretation), guidance that will bring my outline closer to the truth is entirely welcome.

**Please, do not let any blank spaces or areas "under construction" keep you from offering your input.**

1. Nature / Physics (\*)
  1. All matter is composed of bodies, which travel within the void.
  2. The senses receive matter and allow the body to perceive it.
  3. Nothing can be created from nothing, and similarly, nothing may be rendered to nothing.
  4. The gods are immortal beings that are imperceptible to us. (\*\*)
2. Knowledge /Truth
  1. Nature derives truth from the senses. What the senses tell us is pleasurable and painful is true, as Nature confirms this in life that is unable to reason beyond sensations of pleasure and pain. Therefore, Nature defines the goal of life as living

- a pleasurable life.
2. Reasoning should be in line with the ultimate goal of life, and should use the senses and observations as its criteria for determining what is painful and pleasurable, and therefore what is true.
  3. Choice and avoidance, as well as reasoning on things which may not be observed by the senses, should be based on the reasoning mentioned above. Experience and evidence must be applied to those things of which one is unsure.
  4. There are limits imposed by Nature, such as mortality and the limits of pleasure. We must not attempt to overcome these limits.
  5. It is the nature of life that we experience inherent pain by need, such as need of food and water.
3. Ethics / How to live
1. The highest state of pleasure is when all pain, be it need or desire, is removed. After this, we experience no greater pleasure. (\*\*\*)
  2. All choice and avoidance should be made to achieve and maintain a pleasurable life, free of pain. We should act to avoid pain and fear firstly. (\*\*\*)
  3. To obtain the highest state of mental pleasure, you must reflect on pleasure, pain, your choices and observations in regards to the ultimate goal of life, the limits of life, and what can be confirmed as true.
  4. You must enjoy your present blessings while recalling happiness past, without worrying for the future, which is uncertain. However, you must actively choose to make your future happier than your present.
  5. Pleasure should always be chosen for pleasure's sake, but simplicity should only be chosen if it begets pleasure. In the same way, we must accustom ourselves to simplicity so that we are happy when we have little, and enjoy luxury all the more.
  6. The wise man will live pleasantly, well and justly only if each of these virtues are present simultaneously.
  7. Friendship will secure lasting happiness, but the wise man may protect himself from men and the prison of ignorance by living quietly and withdrawn from the public.
  8. Good, evil and justice are subjective constructs. Nature truly defines what is good and evil as what is pleasurable and painful, respectively. Justice is a contract not to cause pain to one another.

(\*) It appears I need to study my Elementals more closely.

(\*\*) My confusion shows here. Epicurus denied the existence of a God, but I thought I recall him also saying they exist, but are not as man believes them to be. They immortal and happy, the model that we seek to follow by living a pleasurable life. Was Epicurus using the word "God" to demonstrate this, but not actually claiming there were heavenly figures above us?

(\*\*\*) After the initial draft, I can say that my understanding of removing pain to obtain the highest pleasure may be lacking. This is where I am careful not to approach the Stoic mindset again by seeking first to remove all pain and desire by simple means. The Full Cup model has

helped with this, but I seem to still be a little unsure as to how to *think* of it.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 20, 2018 at 1:47 PM

Mako that is an OUTSTANDING first draft. on the issue of the absence of pain, did you get a chance to read the [Nikolsky article yet](#)? Every time I read it I realize that I picked up its argument and just say it in a different way. Also, I realize that I have internalized some material from Gosling & Taylor too. Now THAT is a book that is not so easy to find, and better access to it would help a lot. Although I say it this way all the time, I am not sure that this phrase is really all that helpful "The highest state of pleasure" --- I think that implies (to me, when I say it) that there is some single type of pleasure which is mysterious and needs to be found. I think rather the truth is exactly as stated in PD3 - the LIMIT OF QUANTITY OF PLEASURE..... meaning that the pleasure contained in the vessel can be a mixture of any type just so long as the vessel is full and pain has been crowded out.

Which is not to say that that is easy or even possible to do (effort from breathing?) but that seems to be the way the goal is defined. [Nikolsky](#) describes this response to the Academics in a somewhat different way than I do, but I think the result is the same. And the bottom line is that we have a philosophically defensible position in which we rely on nature for our goal and have no need to resort to gods or to false standards for something higher.

A lot of what we are doing here is trying to break free of the Stoic/Academic framework of false goals, and we have to rethink even the terminology to make sure we are not boxed in.

As you say it takes time to put these things together and time to analyze them, and over time you and I and others can come back here and comment on new things that jump out at us.

Nothing else really jumps out at me but I have a comment on this - this too is true "Justice is a contract not to cause pain to one another." I've been in some private conversations lately about how controversial this is - the implication being that "injustice" is nothing but breach of an express or implied agreement. There are plenty of things that are horrible in the world that we can and should want to take action to attack and to change, but unless there was a prior agreement between the parties which was breached, no matter how horrible we consider the problem, it's not a problem of "justice/injustice." It's a problem of "I personally find that intolerable and I am not going to put up with it, and I don't need a god or a false standard of virtue or "justice in the air" to tell me it's ok before i do it!" 😊

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## Post by “Mako” of January 20, 2018 at 2:46 PM

Cassius, thank you very much for your input! It is reassuring to hear that I am starting off on the right foot. I will save the article for reading this weekend and do some research on the other source you mentioned. 😊

Your vision of pleasure and the vessel makes great sense to me. If I am recalling rightly, Epicurus did say that the things that shape each of our happy lives are the things we reason bring us pleasure when we are sober and not troubled. In fact, your Full Cup model resonates even more with this thought. Nature has made pleasure simple by giving a "fluid" nature. Pleasure may vary in its shape and form, but fits in the vessel just the same.

The justice topic is one of the things that I am hesitant to mention to my peers who ask about Epicureanism, especially given that in some it immediately summons to mind some of the controversial and horrible images that you mentioned. I've been called "uncaring" and "ignorant" because I choose not to join the chorus of voices damning a particular atrocity, even when it occurs outside my realm of life.

We are to become more self-reliant and secure protection from others, knowing that our true friends will support us *if* we need it - therefore, why should I take a stance on a matter that cannot impact my life if it will only make me enemies and pain from having to defend a position? It is much easier, and in my opinion in line with Nature's true justice, to concern myself with what *can* harm me, determine if I can avoid it/make a contract with it, and entirely remove the possibility of fear from uncertainty. The "dark side" of this might be a sort of Epicurean vigilantism, especially if the philosophy were less altruistically hedonistic and more self-centered. A scary thought!

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 20, 2018 at 3:38 PM

There are indeed scary aspects of it and I agree that it is not a subject to bring up lightly - which is why we speak of it infrequently on facebook. And yet it is a good example of Epicurus carrying through the "atomistic universe" premise to its ultimate conclusions, and as we face death and other sobering aspects of reality, it's something else that has to be faced in its proper time. But certainly as not one of the first steps, and certainly not with strangers. 😊

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## Post by “Hiram” of January 22, 2018 at 11:05 AM

on this:

#### Quote

2.2 Reasoning should be in line with the ultimate goal of life, and should use the senses and observations as its criteria for determining what is painful and pleasurable, and therefore what is true.

I think you should later take time, when you have time, to study the Canon. This sounds like you confuse what is pleasant with what is true. Or that you think because something "feels good" it must be true, which might be misinterpreted as religious wishful thinking, or misappropriated by wishful thinking.

What our tradition teaches is that **pleasure and aversion are true experiences, but they are true in a way which is different from how the things reported by our five senses are true. Within the canon, each set of faculties has its own jurisdiction over one function. Only EYES can see, only EARS can hear, and only PLEASURE-AVERSION can report what is pleasant or not. So each has jurisdiction over one aspect of reality.**

Therefore that something is "true" does not follow from something being pleasurable. It is true if ANY of the faculties report it, with pleasure and aversion being only one of the legs of the canon.

You may find more on this in the second half of this dialogue:

<http://societyofepicurus.com/dialogue-on-the-social-contract/>

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### Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2018 at 11:15 AM

Good point I did not pick up the first time. The first part of the sentence I think is good, but the word "true" doesn't fit, as you say. More applicable instead of "true" would be "what is to be pursued and avoided."

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### Post by "Hiram" of January 22, 2018 at 11:16 AM

[Quote from Mako](#)

The gods are immortal beings that are imperceptible to us. (\*\*)

(\*\*) My confusion shows here. Epicurus denied the existence of a God, but I thought I recall him also saying they exist, but are not as man believes them to be. They immortal and happy, the model that we seek to follow by living a pleasurable life. Was Epicurus using the word "God" to demonstrate this, but not actually claiming there were heavenly figures above us?

I don't recall Epicurean sources saying that the gods are imperceptible, as this would make the entire system fall: our philosophy is based on the study of nature, ergo SOME form of perception must be possible.

There are three interpretation of the gods.

The realist interpretation of the gods says their bodies are atomic and they are real animals living in intermundia. It seems like the "anticipations" are supposed to be the way we perceive them (with the mind) according to the realist view, but I personally reject this: anticipations only happen AFTER you have perceived something once, and then the imprint becomes familiar. Others may say via dreams we may receive particles from the gods, sort of the same way that neutrinos and other galactic particles travel through our bodies daily without our knowing. Others may argue that the gods are not directly perceived, but are inferred from the doctrine of innumerable worlds, which posits that life exists throughout the universe and there's no reason to think we are the apex of life forms; so gods are those animals that are vastly superior to us in the ecology of the universe.

The idealist interpretation says they are cultural and mental constructs meant for contemplation, but not physically real. The atheistic interpretation is that this is an obsolete teaching and that religious pleasure may be natural, but it's unnecessary.

All options are explored here: <http://societyofepicurus.com/for-there-are-gods/>

The goal of religious piety is to experience "pure, unalloyed pleasure", as per Philodemus' scroll "On Piety", a commentary on which can be found on the SoFE webpage. So that is the key point to take away: if you're going to engage in religious practices, make sure to study that in order to protect your experience and maximize the benefit.

The third interpretation (which I and Ilkka endorse most vocally) is explained here: <https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2014/10/15/the...epicurean-gods/>

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2018 at 11:47 AM**

Another good catch Hiram. Dewitt explains the evidence of the gods through images and/or anticipations in his chapter on party. Also the argument from isonomia etc which I prefer is in that same chapter and in "on the nature of the gods"

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**Post by "Hiram" of January 22, 2018 at 11:57 AM**

I hope you or someone else who better understands isonomia would write a clear essay explaining it. It never made sense to me, and in fact I think in our last conversation on the subject we proved it was an incorrect theory. Maybe you can publish, comment on, or edit that dialogue, if you can find it? I am not able or willing to defend isonomia without understanding what I'm talking about.

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2018 at 1:42 PM**

"and in fact I think in our last conversation on the subject we proved it was an incorrect theory." < I will have to look back and see what you're referring to there, as I don't recall agreeing that it is an incorrect theory at all. To the extent that it means "equitable distribution" or "distribution along a spectrum from highest to lowest" I am perfectly fine with it and think that it makes perfect sense.

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**Post by "Hiram" of January 22, 2018 at 1:51 PM**

A concise essay on isonomia would really help. I think the question was whether this "law" really followed as an inference from the infinity of the universe.

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2018 at 1:52 PM**

Here is the best and really only information I have, which is from DeWitt. I've never seen anything else on the topic:

File

### [DeWitt on Isonomy](#)



DeWitt on Isonomy, one of the Epicurean arguments for divinity



Cassius

January 22, 2018 at 1:51 PM

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2018 at 2:01 PM**

I just read it again. There is a lot of speculation in there. I see DeWitt thinks "equitable apportionment" is the better phrase, and that he is talking about forces that prevail on a universal level rather than on a local level. There's just not a lot to work with here.

This is the paragraph from Cicero as translated by Yonge:

“Surely the mighty power of the Infinite Being is most worthy our great and earnest contemplation; the Nature of which we must necessarily understand to be such that everything in it is made to correspond completely to some other answering part. This is called by Epicurus ἰσονμία (isonomia); that is to say, an equal distribution or even disposition of things. From hence he draws this inference, that, as there is such a vast multitude of mortals, there cannot be a less number of immortals. Further, if those which perish are innumerable, those which are preserved ought also to be countless.”

<http://www.newepicurean.com/epicureandocs/velleius/>

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2018 at 2:14 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/305-mako-s-epicurean-outline/>

DeWitt's discussion of this part seems very interesting to me: "Further, if those which perish are innumerable, those which are preserved ought also to be countless." It's not exactly the same point, but I gather what DeWitt is also observing is that while individual local bodies which comes together always end up destroyed / disassociating in the end, that is not true from the perspective of the universe as a whole, at which level the entirety is never destroyed / disassociated. Thus the forces of creation/sustenance prevail over the forces of destruction in the end. It's hard to know if this was what Epicurus was talking about, much less whether the idea would seem valid if we had a full discussion of it. But there clearly are several very subtle arguments going on here. All this does indeed in my mind spin around with the issues of eternity and infinity which Epicurus stressed we need to study in great detail. We've only scratched the surface of all this.

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## Post by "Mako" of February 2, 2018 at 11:39 AM

I apologize for another regular absence, especially when there was such great discussion going on here. What's been said so far suggests to me that I need to reexamine my understanding of Epicurean truth. Sound understanding is proving to be most elusive to me.

### [Quote from Hiram](#)

What our tradition teaches is that **pleasure and aversion are true experiences, but they are true in a way which is different from how the things reported by our five senses are true. Within the canon, each set of faculties has its own jurisdiction over one function. Only EYES can see, only EARS can hear, and only PLEASURE-AVERSION can report what is pleasant or not. So each has jurisdiction over one aspect of reality.**

I can see now how truth from the senses versus truth regarding pleasurable should not be confused, although this has now left me somewhat confused. How can pleasure-aversion confirm to you what is truthfully pleasurable *without* using the truth that is provided by the senses? Is my misunderstanding originating from the wording, or am I confusing how the input of sensual truth plays in to forming truth regarding pleasure, which is now starting to seem like personal preference rather than truth.

Forgive my extremely simplistic and potentially biased example, I am not well versed in philosophical exchange (or I'm simply failing to see the big picture): I enjoy looking at some categories/forms of art. My eyes perceive two pieces, one I enjoy looking at and one I do not

enjoy as much. My sense of vision confirms for me that there are two pieces of art that are wholly separate from one another. Past experience/knowledge of looking at these two forms of art identifies that one belongs to one category, and the other to another category (woodwork versus ceramic pottery, for example). Similarly, experience of what is personally pleasurable to me allows me to immediately identify which one I like, even though these pieces are individuals out of a group. I could not have formed any of this experience without the observational truth provided from my eyes over separate experiences of looking at them. Therefore, I could not have formed the truth that I find greater pleasure in one form of art without the truth that is provided from my observational senses. *That is, unless sensual truth only goes so far as to confirm that there are two pieces of art in front of me, and truth from pleasure-aversion tells me I prefer one of them over the other - and that's it.*

I welcome and greatly appreciate anyone with the inclination to dissect this example and point out which, if any, parts of my reasoning are in line with how I should be holding truth from the senses and truth from pleasure-aversion together. A somewhat revised outline follows:

#### 1. Nature / Physics

1. All matter is composed of bodies, which travel within the void.
2. The senses receive matter and allow the body to perceive it.
3. Nothing can be created from nothing, and similarly, nothing may be rendered to nothing.
4. (\*)

#### 2. Knowledge /Truth

1. Nature allows us to perceive truth from the senses. The senses observe and confirm what is and is not true.
2. For those things that the senses cannot confirm, reasoning rooted in experience and evidence of what is known to be true is applied. This is the process for reasoning on things that are imperceptible or unknown, though "truth" that is the solely the product of reasoning should not be considered absolute.
3. The *experience* of the senses, which identifies what is pleasurable and what is painful, suggests to us what is to be pursued and avoided. Nature confirms that this is the impetus for choice and avoidance since other life, unable to reason beyond sensations of pleasure and pain, acts solely based on experience. (\*\*)
4. Nature provides that the ultimate goal of life is to live pleurably. This is proven by the reasoning above, that life unable to reason chooses pleasure over pain.
5. Reasoning should be in line with the ultimate goal of life, and should use the senses and observations as its criteria for ~~determining what is painful and pleasurable~~ determining what things to choose and avoid.
6. There are limits imposed by Nature, such as mortality and the limits of pleasure. We must not attempt to overcome these limits.
7. It is the nature of life that we experience inherent pain by need, such as need of food and water.

### 3. Ethics / How to live

1. The highest state of pleasure is when all pain, be it need or desire, is removed. After this, we experience no greater pleasure.
2. All choice and avoidance should be made to achieve and maintain a pleasurable life, free of pain. We should act to avoid pain and fear firstly.
3. To obtain the highest state of mental pleasure, you must reflect on pleasure, pain, your choices and observations in regards to the ultimate goal of life, the limits of life, and what can be confirmed as true.
4. You must enjoy your present blessings while recalling happiness past, without worrying for the future, which is uncertain. However, you must actively choose to make your future happier than your present.
5. Pleasure should always be chosen for pleasure's sake, but simplicity should only be chosen if it begets pleasure. In the same way, we must accustom ourselves to simplicity so that we are happy when we have little, and enjoy luxury all the more.
6. The wise man will live pleasantly, well and justly only if each of these virtues are present simultaneously.
7. Friendship will secure lasting happiness, but the wise man may protect himself from men and the prison of ignorance by living quietly and withdrawn from the public.
8. Good, evil and justice are subjective constructs. Nature truly defines what is good and evil as what is pleasurable and painful, respectively. Justice is a contract not to cause pain to one another.

(\*) I am inclined to assume the idealistic view on the gods. Without confusing the rest of my early foundation, it is much simpler for me to comprehend the gods as such in this early stage of studies, but I hope to review all viewpoints later.

(\*\*) Does "instinct" appear anywhere in Epicurus' discussion? The entire principle that animals choose/avoid based on pleasure/pain is key to how we apply it, but is it ever suggested that they are given an imprint or suggestion of this to start with? For example, aposematism or "warning coloring" on certain predators gives immediate, inherently-provided feedback to potential predators to stay away from another organism, thus allowing both organisms to avoid harm.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2018 at 12:10 PM**

Yes Mako we need to drop back to the issue of "what is truth" and what Epicurus had to say about that, and the implications of the physics. I am not able to answer that fully now or ever, but here are some initial comments:

What is "truth"? Many people seem to think that there is an "objective" truth from which we can conclude that everyone at all places and all times will reach the same conclusion. And in fact Epicurus tells us to have confidence in many conclusions, such as that the universe is infinite and eternal, that nothing exists except matter and void, etc. And he also says that unless we can be confident of things immediately in front of us, we can have no confidence in things that are hidden.

But from that we have to think about the meaning of "truth" and what that means between different people at different times and different places, because there is no central god or central observation point from which we can stand and say "THAT is the truth of ice cream, or cats, or whatever....."

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### **Post by "Hiram" of February 2, 2018 at 2:12 PM**

Mako, Polystratus in "Irrational Contempt" made the case that your pleasure or aversion to other things is REAL, it's a real experience. He compared it to a magnet and how it attracts metal, but not other stones; or how some herbs serve as medicines when one is sick but not when one is whole.

So there are primary and SECONDARY (or relational) properties of bodies according to [Epicurus' letter to Herodotus](#), and Polystratus placed issues related to pleasure and aversion in the second category. Which means that there are different ways in which things can be true or real.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2018 at 5:25 PM**

Yes the issue I think does go more to the matter of what is "real" rather than what is "true." The senses are our key to determining what is "real," but if the "true" is defined to mean "absolutely true at all places and all times" then nothing ever gets us to that point because that is an impossible standard.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2018 at 8:07 PM**

Mako there is an article by Alexander Brown entitled "Epicurus on Truth and Falsehood" which I can upload here (or you can get on JSTOR) if you like. It focuses on the details of some commentary by Sextus Empiricus which bears on "truth." But I'm not really sure that I recommend that to you, however, as it might be more technical logic and hair-splitting than you are interested in reading. After glancing back at it I had a hard time finding a passage that jumped out at me as being a clear statement on the issue we're talking about.

I checked Dewitt and he has chapters on the Canon of Truth, and its relationship with Reason, which you probably ought to read first if you have not already. To me the best overview of the system before digging into particular details is always DeWitt.

But let us know how deeply you want to dig into that part because you may not find that necessary. I think the basics are the epistemology parts of the PD's (Bailey version):

1. We must consider both the real purpose and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.
2. If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false.
3. If you reject any single sensation and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion as to the appearance awaiting confirmation and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.
4. If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other nearer standard when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.

Plus a pretty direct expansion of the basic physics: If the universe is matter and void, and infinite in extent and universal in time, then there is no "absolute" point of perspective from which someone can say that anything is "absolutely true." And there are no "ideal forms" against which to compare for absolute truth, and no supernatural "god" to ask either. There are only particular perceptions of particular things at particular times, generalized into summary opinions / concepts, and the "test of truth" is whether our opinions / concepts correspond faithfully to the thing we are observing at the time, as measured by the information we get from our five senses, feelings, and anticipations. And it's also important to remember that the senses / feelings / anticipations are our test for what is "real" to us at any time, regardless of whether we move to another level of generalization by calling them "true."

After thinking about this and glancing back at the Brown article, I think what I would recommend as much as anything else if you are interested in reading on this beyond DeWitt is

the [Appendix by Phillip De Lacey to his translation of Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference."](#) The surviving part of the work by Philodemus is very interesting, but I would say start with the appendix on page 120. DeLacey gives a really interesting review of the development of Epicurean logic and how it relates to what came before in Greek thought. It has been a while since I read this but I remember that when I did, I thought it was excellent, especially in helping distinguish Epicurus from Plato and Aristotle.

I think we got started on this because Hiram pointed out that you probably meant "real" when you wrote "true," and that might be good enough for now. But the issue of reason and logic in the canon is pretty closely related to the same topic, and if I recall correctly the De Lacey article is a really good place to start reading if you want more.