

## Sunday June 22 - Topic: Prolepsis

Post by "Cassius" of June 20, 2025 at 9:12 PM

It has been suggested that this week we do a general review of Prolepsis / Anticipations. This is a deep topic with lots of uncertainty but several of us have discussed this numbers of times and i think we can have an articulate discussion about the general outlines of the topic that would be of help to newer people. And so this will be our June 22nd topic for our Sunday Zoom discussion.

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Post by "Rolf" of June 21, 2025 at 3:09 AM

This would be helpful and greatly appreciated!

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Post by "TauPhi" of June 21, 2025 at 6:52 AM

I probably won't be able to join this Sunday but in case prolepsis is being discussed, I think this can help new people to understand the idea of Epicurean prolepsis. There's a book called '*Thinking, Fast and Slow*' by *Daniel Kahneman*. **Disclaimer:** I haven't read the book and I don't know how scientifically sound the book is. System 1 presented in the book, however, is pretty close to describing what Epicurus might have in mind with his prolepsis description. Maybe it's something worth talking about.

Here are relevant excerpts from Wikipedia:

Quote

The book's main thesis is a differentiation between two modes of [thought](#): "System 1" is fast, [instinctive](#) and [emotional](#); "System 2" is slower, more [deliberative](#), and more [logical](#).

Quote

In the book's first section, Kahneman describes two different ways the brain forms thoughts:

- **System 1:** Fast, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic, unconscious. Examples (in order of complexity) of things system 1 can do:
  - determine that an object is at a greater distance than another
  - localize the source of a specific sound
  - complete the phrase "war and ..."
  - display disgust when seeing a gruesome image
  - solve  $2 + 2 = ?$
  - read text on a billboard
  - drive a car on an empty road
  - think of a good chess move (if you're a chess master)
  - understand simple sentences
- **System 2:** Slow, effortful, infrequent, logical, calculating, conscious. Examples of things system 2 can do:
  - prepare yourself for the start of a sprint
  - direct your attention towards the clowns at the circus
  - direct your attention towards someone at a loud party
  - look for the woman with the grey hair
  - try to recognize a sound
  - sustain a faster-than-normal walking rate
  - determine the appropriateness of a particular behavior in a social setting
  - count the number of A's in a certain text
  - give someone your telephone number
  - park into a tight parking space
  - determine the price/quality ratio of two washing machines
  - determine the validity of a complex logical reasoning
  - solve  $17 \times 24$

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## Post by "Don" of June 21, 2025 at 7:48 AM

I am still drawn to the idea that prolepsis is the subconscious faculty of "pattern recognition" or the mental faculty of discerning significant patterns within the cacophony of sensation. Over time, similar patterns are recognized and fine tuned. Sensations flood our minds constantly. Prolepsis allows us to make sense of sensations, then once patterns are identified within the sensations, we can begin to assign concepts to those patterns cognitively/consciously.

For example, let's use an infant. Her visual senses pick up sensory stimulation. Prolepsis allows her to identify a pattern. She has no language to attach a word to the pattern, but she can pull a recurring pattern from the sensations of lights, shapes, colors, shadows flooding her visual field. The pattern comes and goes. Leaves and returns. Pleasurable feelings accompany this pattern. Later, she will be reinforced to accompany this visual pattern with the sound "mama." The sensations come first, prolepsis comes next, rational assignment of concepts follows after that.

That's where my head is at right now; however, I'm still not wed to a dogmatic acceptance of Epicurean categories and concepts of how the mind works. Epicurus was brilliant in some of his ideas with very little empirical evidence available to him. But his ideas are 2,000+ years old. That's one reason I like to read about modern cognitive science, and I still think the most intriguing research is the work of Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett and others about the minds using prediction as a means of dealing with the world. That prediction to me smells a lot like prolepsis, too.

[Theory of constructed emotion - Wikipedia](#)

[Predictive coding - Wikipedia](#)

I think that [Cassius](#) doesn't necessarily like endorsing one scientific view too much or trying to shoehorn Epicurean philosophy into a modern theory, and I agree somewhat. For me, modern science - investigations into nature - is a way to update Epicurus' spirit if not the letter of his physics.

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 21, 2025 at 8:18 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I think that Cassius doesn't necessarily like endorsing one scientific view too much or trying to shoehorn Epicurean philosophy into a modern theory, and I agree somewhat. For me, modern science - investigations into nature - is a way to update Epicurus' spirit if not the letter of his physics.

I am all for discussing modern validations of Epicurean theory too, but the reason for my different emphasis is to get people on board with the philosophical issues that Epicurus was dealing with so we can see why he thought this issue was important.

Much like atomism is an explanation of the way the world works that is graspable and gives confidence that the universe is natural rather than divine, I we need to understand that

Epicurus was assembling a theory to provide confidence that a reasonable explanation of knowledge can be grasped without requiring us to believe in ideal forms, recollection of past lives, etc.

When you grasp at a conceptual level what Epicurus was doing, you're not as likely to fall to the problem of toying with the theory as a purely historical predecessor to modern science. Just like there's a lot more to Lucretius than atomism, you see that a big-picture analysis of the problem of knowledge is still very relevant today.

As DofO said in identifying the ultimate question:

Quote

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

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

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## Post by “Don” of June 21, 2025 at 9:30 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am all for discussing modern validations of Epicurean theory too, but the reason for my different emphasis is to get people on board with the philosophical issues that Epicurus was dealing with so we can see why he thought this issue was important.

That's very helpful and helps me understand your position better. I want to address the two different aspects of that paragraph.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

modern validations of Epicurean theory

While I find it intriguing when modern science parallels ancient Epicurean philosophy, I'm very reluctant to say that modern science "validates" Epicurean theory. When modern findings coincide with ancient theory, it's important to remember the findings and theory were arrived at by very different methods. Maybe Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans intuitively arrived at a theory that sounds like modern science. My post above talking about the predictive model of cognition paralleling Epicurean prolepsis is a good example. I find it intriguing but I am not under the mistaken impression that Epicurus had some kind of prescient insight into modern methods of cognitive science. That's not my purpose. Epicurus came to his ideas from what Einstein called "[thought experiments](#)." So, "validate" isn't quite what I'd use. That word goes further than I would go, but I wanted to at least get this out there.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

why he thought this issue was important

Now this I completely endorse. By looking for natural - one can say scientific in the modern sense - explanations, we reinforce the complete lack of any reason to look for supernatural explanations. That's the "spirit" of Epicurean philosophy with relation to modern science from my perspective.

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### **Post by “Bryan” of June 21, 2025 at 10:58 AM**

Here is a list of words used by Epikouros that are all based on the same verb which prolepsis is built upon (λαμβάνω).

[Prolepsis List 1.pdf](#)

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### **Post by “Patrikios” of June 21, 2025 at 5:15 PM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

I am still drawn to the idea that prolepsis is the subconscious faculty of "pattern recognition" or the mental faculty of discerning significant patterns within the cacophony of sensation. Over time, similar patterns are recognized and fine tuned. Sensations flood our minds constantly. Prolepsis allows us to make sense of sensations, then once patterns are identified within the sensations, we can begin to assign concepts to those patterns cognitively/consciously.

[Don](#) i fully agree with your premise on "pattern recognition". Many years ago (1980s) I got interested in how to do personal brain training. That led to studying the biological processes of our brain's **Reticular Activating System** (RAS). RAS acts as a gatekeeper (filter) that determines what information reaches consciousness based on emotional and motivational relevance. I think this is the biological process behind how prolepsis works as a pre-conceived notion or innate concept that helps filter and organize our experiences.

So, I think this is what Epicurus meant by focused, repetitious study (epibole), so we condition (program) our brains to use the resulting natural comprehension (prolepsis) of when/how to apply Epicurean principles to make better choices and avoidances. With enough training, our subconscious uses Kahneman's System #1 (Fast Thinking mode), to arrive at the optimal decision (based on our prior learning & experiences). It is then left to our rational thinking brain to listen to the felt sensations (e.g. 'gut feeling') to acknowledge these balanced decisions that "feel right", and are based on sound scientific, rational facts.

Is this close to your understanding?

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**Post by "Cassius" of June 21, 2025 at 7:24 PM**

## **Prolepsis Discussion Outline**

FWIW at the moment my plan is to organize tomorrow's session to maximize getting all participants up to speed on what the sources say about the background of the dispute. We can then after that, and in this thread, take up any relevant modern theories that people want to discuss.

1. Review of the pre-Epicurean background to which Epicurus was reacting, including Plato's Meno Paradox, [based on our prior discussions on that here](#).

2. Review of the Epicurean sources, which we'll take up using DeWitt's organization in Chapter 8 (Section 3) of Epicurus and His Philosophy. These sources will include:

1. [Diogenes Laertius Section 33](#)

1. 33. The concept they speak of as an apprehension or right opinion or thought or general idea stored within the mind, that is to say a recollection of what has often been presented from without, as for instance 'Such and such a thing is a man,' for the moment the word 'man' is spoken, immediately by means of the concept his form too is thought of, as the senses give us the information. Therefore the first signification of every name is immediate and clear evidence. And we could not look for the object of our search, unless we have first known it. For instance, we ask, 'Is that standing yonder a horse or a cow?' To do this we must know by means of a concept the shape of horse and of cow. Otherwise we could not have named them, unless we previously knew their appearance by means of a concept. So the concepts are clear and immediate evidence. Further, the decision of opinion depends on some previous clear and immediate evidence, to which we refer when we express it: for instance, 'How do we know whether this is a man?'
2. 34. Opinion they also call supposition, and say that it may be true or false: if it is confirmed or not contradicted, it is true ; if it is not confirmed or is contradicted, it is false. For this reason was introduced the notion of the problem awaiting confirmation: for example, waiting to come near the tower and see how it looks to the near view. The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined. Of investigations some concern actual things, others mere words. This is a brief summary of the division of their philosophy and their views on the criterion of truth. Now we must proceed to the letter.

2. Cicero's ["On The Nature of The Gods" Book I Beginning Section XVI](#)

1. ... Anyone pondering on the baseless and irrational character of these doctrines ought to regard Epicurus with reverence, and to rank him as one of the very gods about whom we are inquiring. For he alone perceived, first, that the gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there but possesses untaught some preconception of the gods? Such notions Epicurus designates by the word prolepsis, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing, without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed. The force and value of this argument we learn in that work of genius, Epicurus's Rule or Standard of Judgement.
2. XVII You see therefore that the foundation (for such it is) of our inquiry has been well and truly laid. For the belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom or law, but rests on the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind; their existence is therefore a necessary inference,

since we possess an instinctive or rather an innate concept of them; but a belief which all men by nature share must necessarily be true; therefore it must be admitted that the gods exist. And since this truth is almost universally accepted not only among philosophers but also among the unlearned, we must admit it as also being an accepted truth that we possess a 'preconception,' as I called it above, or 'prior notion,' of the gods. (For we are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word *prolepsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before.) We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that "that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak."

3. If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshiping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

3. Epicurus' References in the Letter to Menoecus and [Principal Doctrines](#)

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## Post by “Bryan” of June 22, 2025 at 11:48 AM

To contrast Cicero's use of "belief" above (in Latin, "opinio"), we have:

"[Epíkouros] himself called *belief* 'the sacred illness.'"

(ὁ αὐτὸς [ Ἐπίκουρος ] τὴν οἴησιν "ἱερὰν νόσον" ἔλεγεν, Fragment 195 from the Florilegium Monacense)

Which seems to mean that *holding to opinions without evidence* is harmful -- even though those opinions are widely respected.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 22, 2025 at 12:19 PM**

Bryan's word list:

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### **Post by “Rolf” of June 22, 2025 at 1:59 PM**

Thanks for today everyone! Your perspectives were very helpful. Don, Bryan: It was great to finally meet you “in-person”.

I’m interested in hearing more about the epicurean perspective(s) on gods. Are there any recommended podcast episodes on this topic?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 22, 2025 at 2:21 PM**

Rolf I am pretty sure this is the one where Don appeared with us:

Thread

#### **[Episode 256 - Epicurean Gods: Real, Or Ideal Thought Constructs?](#)**

Welcome to Episode 256 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most 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 find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we**

**discuss this and all of our...**



Cassius

November 18, 2024 at 2:05 PM

there's also the full series of episodes on Cicero's "On The Nature of The Gods" that begins with episode 226:

Thread

**[Episode 226 - Cicero's On The Nature of The Gods - Epicurean Section 01 - Introduction](#)**

**Welcome to Episode 226 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most 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 find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread...**



Cassius

April 21, 2024 at 11:31 AM

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**Post by "Don" of June 22, 2025 at 4:00 PM**

It was a pleasure to put faces to names for those I hadn't met yet, and always good to see those with whom I have had conversations in the past.