

Epicurean Isonomy In The Context Of Statements By Balbus As To Gradations In Life In Book 2 of "On the Nature of the Gods"

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2025 at 8:45 PM

Today I came across the video below by Gregory Sadler, and it occurs to me to make note of it here as potentially being related to Epicurean views of isonomy. This citation is from Balbus presenting what I gather is the Stoic view of a natural progression in forms of life, but Sadler says several times that this was an argument made by several schools. Certainly if Cicero knew of this, then the Epicureans were familiar with the argument as well.

Since we have so little about isonomia other than the short reference by Velleius in book one of the same work, I'm putting this here as food for future research on whether Epicurean isonomy might share *some* parallels with what Balbus is describing. No doubt the Stoics would argue that this natural progression arises from intelligent design by a divine creator.

But I don't think that it's obvious that the Epicureans could not have developed a similar idea of gradation arising purely from the operation of nature WITHOUT a preexisting intent. On that point, even Balbus refers to nature and says "As in vines or cattle we see that, unless obstructed by some force, nature progresses on a certain path of her own to her goal of full development,"

[Joshua](#) will recall the statement of DeWitt that even though nature is nonpurposive, it has created a purposive being in humans. Is it likewise at least arguable (and in fact it is probably better to say it is obviously true) that regardless of the fact that nature had no intent to do so, nature has in fact produced gradations in abilities which we can easily recognize?

And it might be interesting to consider how recognition of such gradations might relate to prolepsis / anticipations, given that prolepsis appears to be central to the argument of how divinity is recognized.

<https://youtu.be/jlSnIXTy01w>

Here's the main quote which I gather is from the Loeb edition of Cicero's On The Nature of the Gods. I have not had time to examine the before and after statements to evaluate the context from which this comes.

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

Book Two - Balbus - 33 "Again, if we wish to proceed from the first rudimentary orders of being to the last and most perfect, we shall necessarily arrive in the end at deity. We notice the sustaining power of nature first in the members of the vegetable kingdom, towards which her bounty was limited to providing for their preservation by means of the faculties of nurture and growth. 34 Upon the animals she bestowed sensation and motion, and an appetite or impulse to approach things wholesome and retire from things harmful. For man she amplified her gift by the addition of reason, whereby the appetites might be controlled, and alternately indulged and held in check. But the fourth and highest grade is that of beings born by nature good and wise, and endowed from the outset with the innate attributes of right reason and consistency; this must be held to be above the level of man: it is the attribute of god, that is, of the world, which must needs possess that perfect and absolute reason of which I spoke. 35 Again, it is undeniable p157 that every organic whole must have an ultimate ideal of perfection. As in vines or cattle we see that, unless obstructed by some force, nature progresses on a certain path of her own to her goal of full development, and as in painting, architecture and the other arts and crafts there is an ideal of perfect workmanship, even so and far more in the world of nature as a whole there must be a process towards completeness and perfection. The various limited modes of being may encounter many external obstacles to hinder their perfect realization, but there can be nothing that can frustrate nature as a whole, since she embraces and contains within herself all modes of being. Hence it follows that there must exist this fourth and highest grade, unassailable by any external force. 36 Now this is the grade on which universal nature stands; and since she is of such a character as to be superior to all things and incapable of frustration by any, it follows of necessity that the world is an intelligent being, and indeed also a wise being.

Post by “Joshua” of August 7, 2025 at 9:12 PM

This post is copied from another thread on teleology;

[\[other thread\]](#)

OK, I am off work. You have raised a number of excellent points and I agree that we need to refine this mass of material down to something digestible.

Relevant Texts

[All citations in this section are to translations by Cyril Bailey]

Epicurus, [Letter to Pythocles](#), sections 115-116;

Quote

The signs of the weather which are given by certain animals result from mere coincidence of occasion. For the animals do not exert any compulsion for winter to come to an end, nor is there some divine nature which sits and watches the outgoings of these animals and then fulfills the signs they give.

[116] For not even the lowest animal, although 'a small thing gives the greater pleasure,' would be seized by such foolishness, much less one who was possessed of perfect happiness.

All these things, Pythocles, you must bear in mind; for thus you will escape in most things from superstition and will be enabled to understand what is akin to them. And most of all give yourself up to the study of the beginnings and of infinity and of the things akin to them, and also of the criteria of truth and of the feelings, and of the purpose for which we reason out these things. For these points when they are thoroughly studied will most easily enable you to understand the causes of the details. But those who have not thoroughly taken these things to heart could not rightly study them in themselves, nor have they made their own the reason for observing them.

- The animals do not migrate for the purpose of changing the seasons,
- The seasons do not change for the purpose of moving the animals,
- And no divine mind has set these things into motion.

Epicurus, [Letter to Herodotus](#), section 64;

Quote

[64] Further, you must grasp that the soul possesses the chief cause of sensation: yet it could not have acquired sensation, unless it were in some way enclosed by the rest of the structure. And this in its turn having afforded the soul this cause of sensation acquires itself too a share in this contingent capacity from the soul. Yet it does not acquire all the capacities which the soul possesses: and therefore when the soul is released from the body, the body no longer has sensation. For it never possessed this power in itself, but used to afford opportunity for it to another existence, brought into being at the same time with itself: and this existence, owing to the power now consummated within itself as a result of motion, used spontaneously to produce for itself the capacity of sensation and then to communicate it to the body as well, in virtue of its contact and correspondence of movement, as I have already said.

This passage (and the subsequent passages as well, to some extent) is relevant because of the pains Epicurus goes to to avoid teleological language;

- The body, having come into existence with the soul, affords opportunity to the soul to experience sensation.
- The body, having afforded this opportunity to the soul, acquires its own share in this "contingent capacity" from the soul - that is, the body acquires its share in sensation.
- We can summarize this ateleological view in the following way: **the use of any natural thing is afforded by its existence, not the other way around.**
- By contrast, the existence of any artificial thing could be said to be afforded by its planned use. A table is brought into being for the purpose of dining. The human hand is pressed into service (say, of transferring food from the table to the mouth) only after it is found to exist.

The most important text, as cited by [Cassius](#) above, is Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5;

Quote

[823] Herein you must eagerly desire to shun this fault, and with foresighted fear to avoid this error; do not think that the bright light of the eyes was created in order that we may be able to look before us, or that, in order that we may have power to plant long paces, therefore the tops of shanks and thighs, based upon the feet, are able to bend; or again, that the forearms are jointed to the strong upper arms and hands given us to serve us on either side, in order that we might be able to do what was needful for life. All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use. Nor did sight exist before the light of the eyes was born, nor pleading in words before the tongue was created, but rather the birth of the tongue came long before discourse, and the ears were created much before sound was heard, and in short all the limbs, I trow, existed before their use came about: they cannot then have grown for the purpose of using them.

[843] But, on the other side, to join hands in the strife of battle, to mangle limbs and befoul the body with gore; these things were known long before gleaming darts flew abroad, and nature constrained men to avoid a wounding blow, before the left arm, trained by art, held up the defence of a shield. And of a surety to trust the tired body to rest was a habit far older than the soft-spread bed, and the slaking of the thirst was born before cups. These things, then, which are invented to suit the needs of life, might well be thought to have been discovered for the purpose of using them. But all those other things lie apart, which were first born themselves, and thereafter revealed the concept of their usefulness. In this class first of all we see the senses and the limbs; wherefore, again and again, it cannot be that you should believe that they could have

been created for the purpose of useful service.

[858] This, likewise, is no cause for wonder, that the nature of the body of every living thing of itself seeks food. For verily I have shown that many bodies ebb and pass away from things in many ways, but most are bound to pass from living creatures. For because they are sorely tried by motion and many bodies by sweating are squeezed and pass out from deep beneath, many are breathed out through their mouths, when they pant in weariness; by these means then the body grows rare, and all the nature is undermined; and on this follows pain. Therefore food is taken to support the limbs and renew strength when it passes within, and to muzzle the gaping desire for eating through all the limbs and veins. Likewise, moisture spreads into all the spots which demand moisture; and the many gathered bodies of heat, which furnish the fires to our stomach, are scattered by the incoming moisture, and quenched like a flame, that the dry heat may no longer be able to burn our body. Thus then the panting thirst is washed away from our body, thus the hungry yearning is satisfied.

- "All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but **what is born creates its own use.**"

Further Reading

Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, page 67;

Quote

The limited teleology at which Epicurus finally arrived had nothing to do either with creationism or adaptation of organ to function. It had nothing to do with the universe at large, which was ruled by natural laws. It had nothing to do even with animals, although animal behavior afforded evidence that pleasure was the end or telos of living. It was recognized, to be sure, that animals possess volition and that certain kinds of animals are actuated by innate ideas to organize themselves into herds for mutual protection, but only the rational human being was believed capable of intelligent planning for living and for keeping steadily in view the fact that pleasure is the end or telos ordained by Nature. This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

Ian Johnston, [Lecture on Lucretius](#);

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

The poem's influence, according to Stuart Gillespie and Donald Mackenzie, can be linked to a range of twentieth-century poets and philosophers. So pervasive is its presence in the intellectual climate that for one critic at least (Stuart Gillespie) Charles Darwin's claim that he had not read Lucretius is rather like Milton's claiming that he had not read Genesis.

John Tyndall, [Address at Belfast](#);

Quote

Trace the line of life backwards, and see it approaching more and more to what we call the purely physical [54/55] condition. We come at length to those organisms which I have compared to drops of oil suspended in a mixture of alcohol and water. We reach the protogenes of Haeckel, in which we have 'a type distinguishable from a fragment of albumen only by its finely granular character.' Can we pause here? We break a magnet and find two poles in each of its fragments. We continue the process of breaking, but, however small the parts, each carries with it, though enfeebled, the polarity of the whole. And when we can break no longer, we prolong the intellectual vision to the polar molecules. Are we not urged to do something similar in the case of life? Is there not a temptation to close to some extent with Lucretius, when he affirms that 'nature is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods?' or with Bruno, when he declares that Matter is not 'that mere empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who wrings forth all things as the fruit of her own womb?' Believing as I do in the continuity of Nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye. By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2025 at 9:23 PM

Definitely I had that passage about eyes etc not being born to use them in mind when I wrote the first post.

Do you reach any preliminary conclusions after citing that material? No doubt we are in agreement that there is no purpose in the mind of nature (nature has no mind) to create differences between things that are born.

And yet there are differences in things which are born, and our minds assign gradations to them, and the differences do in fact exist regardless of what we think of them.

Were the gradations in differences predictable once the process started, even though nature did not have conscious intent to create them?

Was it predictable from the existence of monkeys that humans would arise?

If so, is that not an Epicurean theory of gradation / isonomy arising from nature totally naturally and without divine design?

No doubt there are lots of ways to ask these questions.

Is it predictable and expectable that given that there are humans on earth who live to be 100 years old, that there are beings on other worlds who live to be 1000 years old?

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2025 at 9:35 PM

The statements by Velleius as to isonomy, with some before and after context, from Book One:

[Quote from Cicero - On Nature of The Gods - Book One](#)

XIX. These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles steremnia; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

Moreover there is the supremely potent principle of infinity, which claims the closest and most careful study; we must understand that it has the following property, that in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart. This property is termed by Epicurus isonomia, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the causes of destruction are beyond count, the causes of conservation also are bound to be infinite.

You Stoics are also fond of asking us, Balbus, what is the mode of life of the gods and how they pass their days. The answer is, their life is the happiest conceivable, and the one most bountifully furnished with all good things. God is entirely inactive and free from all ties of occupation; he toils not neither does he labor, but he takes delight in his own wisdom and virtue, and knows with absolute certainty that he will always enjoy pleasures at once consummate and and everlasting.

Post by “Joshua” of August 7, 2025 at 10:22 PM

It depends on precisely what we mean by 'gradations'. Here is a passage from *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, discussing the gradations evident in modern biology which demonstrate the pathway by which light-sensitive cells developed over millions of generations into the complex eyes found in modern humans;

Quote

Evolution also posits that modern organisms should show a variety of structures from simple to complex, reflecting an evolutionary history rather than an instantaneous creation. The human eye, for example, is the result of a long and complex pathway that goes back hundreds of millions of years. Initially a simple eyespot with a handful of light-sensitive cells that provided information to the organism about an important source of the light; it developed into a recessed eyespot, where a small surface indentation filled with light-sensitive cells provided additional data on the direction of light; then into a deep recession eyespot, where additional cells at greater depth provide more accurate information about the environment; then into a pinhole camera eye that is able to focus an image on the back of a deeply-recessed layer of light-sensitive cells; then into a pinhole lens eye that is able to focus the image; then into a complex eye found in such modern mammals as humans.

All the intermediate stages of this process have been located in other creatures, and sophisticated computer models have been developed which have tested the theory and shown that it actually “works.”

However, the popular conception of evolutionary biology--that organisms get successively bigger, stronger, faster, and smarter in the course of generations--is descriptively accurate in some cases but wholly wrong when considered as prescription of nature. Mutation and selection may give rise to faster organisms when those faster organisms are better fit for their environment than their slower counterparts, but when the metabolic expense of speed does not make a species more fit to survive in its environment than members of that species who do not 'pay' that metabolic cost will be better fit than those that do. This is why populations of antibiotic-resistant bacteria lose their resistance when that antibiotic is no longer used; individuals with the genetic resistance lose the benefit but still suffer the cost, and those individuals are out-competed by individuals without resistant genes.

Quote

Was it predictable from the existence of monkeys that humans would arise?

There was always some chance that humans could arise--we know this because we exist--but no, I do not think we can safely say that this outcome was ever likely. It *seems* likely to us because it happened, and we're living the outcome. This is the very definition of [Hindsight bias](#). If an asteroid hadn't cratered into the Yucatán Peninsula at the K-Pg boundary, and a new language-using species had arisen from the non-avian dinosaurs that are now extinct, it might seem to *that* species that their existence was predictable. We have excellent reasons to suspect otherwise.

Post by “Joshua” of August 7, 2025 at 10:23 PM

Another passage from that Hitchens book;

Quote

Our own solipsism, often expressed in diagram or cartoon form, usually represents evolution as a kind of ladder or progression, with a fish gasping on the shore in the first frame, hunched and prognathous figures in the succeeding ones, and then, by slow degrees, an erect man in a suit waving his umbrella and shouting “Taxi!” Even those who have observed the “sawtooth” pattern of fluctuation between emergence and destruction,

further emergence and still further destruction, and who have already charted the eventual end of the universe, are half agreed that there is a stubborn tendency toward an upward progression. This is no great surprise: inefficient creatures will either die out or be destroyed by more successful ones. But progress does not negate the idea of randomness, and when he came to examine the Burgess shale, the great paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould arrived at the most disquieting and unsettling conclusion of all. He examined the fossils and their development with minute care and realized that if this tree could be replanted or this soup set boiling again, it would very probably not reproduce the same results that we now “know.”

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2025 at 11:04 PM

Lots to think about!

Should we conclude that after a thing has happened once, that in an infinite and eternal universe it will happen an infinite number of times, but that it is impossible and in fact improper to predict with any confidence after huge numbers of monkeys are born that there will ever be any more intelligent beings born anywhere in the universe?

Frances Wright might well say that yes that would be improper, but regardless of what we think of the logic, I tend to think that Epicurus' views of life on other worlds in fact goes in the other direction.

Hitchens would certainly be right that there are no guarantees in any individual circumstance, but to conclude that the forces which produced similar but many varying results many times before will never operate in such a way seems to me less defensible a conclusion. There is no necessity either way in a particular circumstance, but is not a process with has been observed to be in operation limited by nature rather than by necessity (?). Meaning that what we would expect should be grounded in study of nature, and not by a position that since we have not seen it, it is not possible? So in predictions we can use progression or variation in what we have seen to form rational expectations as to what is possible, always knowing that the "supernatural" is the limit, without prejudging what is natural? Once again I would see a role for pattern recognition and rational distinction between what is possible by nature and what is not.

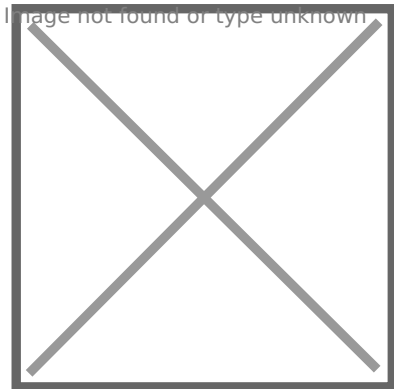
Lots of questions.

Post by "Joshua" of August 7, 2025 at 11:46 PM

Quote

Should we conclude that after a thing has happened once, that in an infinite and eternal universe it will happen an infinite number of times, but that it is impossible and in fact improper to predict with any confidence after huge numbers of monkeys are born that there will ever be any more intelligent beings born anywhere in the universe?

Oh, I was only speaking about this Earth. In an infinite and eternal cosmos anything that is *possible* within that cosmos should be expected to exist an infinite number of times. If you assign each letter in the Latin alphabet to a number (a->1, b->2, etc) somewhere in the infinity of digits behind the decimal point in the number Pi one would expect to find a sequence of numbers that happens to spell out the collected works of William Shakespeare. This particular supposition is currently theoretical, and awaiting formal proof.



[Q: Since pi is infinite, do its digits contain all finite sequences of numbers?](#)

Mathematician: As it turns out, mathematicians do not yet know whether the digits of pi contains every single finite sequence of numbers. That being said, many...
www.askamathematician.com

Quote

There is no necessity either way in a particular circumstance, but is not a process with has been observed to be in operation is limited by nature rather than by necessity (?)

You may have to rewrite that last clause for me....

Post by "Cassius" of August 8, 2025 at 5:47 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

[Quote from Joshua](#)

You may have to rewrite that last clause for me....

It was getting late when i finally finished editing that post last night. The basic point i was attempting to make is that atomism is at heart both anti-supernatural and anti-chaotic, in that it is the atoms and their properties that leads us to conclude there are no supernatural forces, but also gives the regularity to what we generally see (all things are not chaotic).

So it is generally possible to make rational predictions based on the principles of atomism even though there are no supernatural forces of necessity.

I expect this thread is going to take a lot of time and a lot of input from others before I am personally ready to take a firm position.

As usual for what we do here at the forum there are two core but separate questions:

(1)what did Epicurus actually say?

(2) do we agree with it?

We can't be sure about (2) before we have a grasp of (1).

I also recall that one of the analogies or issues you have quoted before is something to do with the ability to infer or predict all the possibilities of various oceans from knowing the characteristics of s a single drop of water. Do you recall the source for that one?

Post by "Joshua" of August 8, 2025 at 8:37 AM

Quote

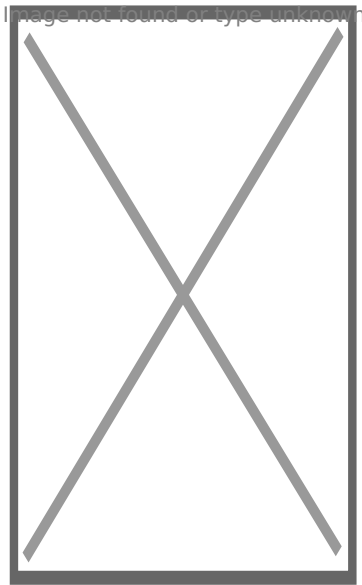
I also recall that one of the analogies or issues you have quoted before is something to do with the ability to infer or predict all the possibilities of various oceans from knowing the characteristics of s a single drop of water. Do you recall the source for that one?

"From a drop of water,' said the writer, 'a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it."

-*A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle (from the Sherlock Holmes stories)

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 8:49 AM

And of course to throw things into the pot there is Philodemus' "On Signs" / "On Methods of Inference" which is also dealing directly on the Epicurean view of when it is and is not appropriate to draw inferences.



[Philodemus: On methods of inference: a study in ancient empiricism : Philodemus : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](http://uf.catalog.fcla.edu/uf.jsp?st=UF001032148&ix=nu&l=0&V=D)

<http://uf.catalog.fcla.edu/uf.jsp?st=UF001032148&ix=nu&l=0&V=D>
archive.org

Post by “TauPhi” of August 8, 2025 at 1:05 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is it predictable and expectable that given that there are humans on earth who live to be 100 years old, that there are beings on other worlds who live to be 1000 years old?

I exist. If I live in boundless and eternal universe, it's predictable and expectable that there are infinite number of TauPhies-like creatures inhabiting the universe. This is a possibility inspired by reason.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

I exist. If I live in boundless and eternal universe, it's predictable and expectable that there are infinite number of SuperTauPhies that are stronger than Superman, older than Methuselah and wiser than Solomon. This is a possibility inspired by dreams.

Epicurean universe is boundless and eternal but it is also limited by what kind of matter can exist in it (atoms' types are innumerable but not infinite and natural laws govern matter's interactions). In Epicurean universe if A exists, infinite As exist. If B exists, infinite Bs exist. But it absolutely doesn't mean that if A exist, B exists as well. That kind of inference is not grounded in reason but in dreams.

Quote

[...] This property is termed by Epicurus isonomia, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals [...]

Velleius' claim is an example of inference grounded in dreams. I highly doubt his description of isonomia is correct. Isonomia in this form could be used to justify the existence of pretty much anything and everything and it's not compatible with the universe bound by natural laws.

The way I see it - predictions and expectations influenced by what we think we know about the world around us are reasonable. If they are influenced by ungrounded imagination, they may or may not materialise but I definitely wouldn't base my life around them. Facts are useful. Dreams are entertaining at best.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 2:08 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I exist. If I live in boundless and eternal universe, it's predictable and expectable that there are infinite number of TauPhies-like creatures inhabiting the universe. This is a possibility inspired by reason.

I exist. If I live in boundless and eternal universe, it's predictable and expectable that there are infinite number of SuperTauPhies that are stronger than Superman, older than Methuselah and wiser than Solomon. This is a possibility inspired by dreams.

I think that the real question is what is the dividing line between "TauPhies-like creatures" in the first paragraph and the examples in the second. What is it about the examples in the

second paragraph that justifies labeling them as "dreams" versus simply "Tau-Phi-like creatures which are 10% stronger or 10% longer-lived" than the example we have here and now?

Post by “Joshua” of August 8, 2025 at 2:47 PM

There is another consideration to note here, and that is that not all imagineable boundless and eternal universes are the same.

Imagine a universe that is boundless and eternal, but where a particular force in that universe like gravity peaks at an epicenter in space and asymptotically approaches zero on every infinite line radiating away from that epicenter. I can imagine a rim around the core of that peak beyond which star formation becomes impossible. If the same universe had a similar peak in time rather than space, toward which the speed of light would eternally accelerate and away from which it would infinitely decelerate. Such a universe would be infinite and eternal, but might only be fit for life in a finite and temporary zone around the correlation of both peaks in spacetime. If somewhere in the infinite number of digits behind the decimal in Pi we eventually encounter an endless string of nines, we've reached the Borg and the end of all variety.

Post by “TauPhi” of August 8, 2025 at 2:56 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think that the real question is what is the dividing line between "TauPhies-like creatures" in the first paragraph and the examples in the second. What is it about the examples in the second paragraph that justifies labeling them as "dreams" versus simply "Tau-Phi-like creatures which are 10% stronger or 10% longer-lived" than the example we have here and now?

The dividing line is our understanding of nature based on our experiences and acquired knowledge. People who get confident about reality based on what they can imagine are prone to venture boldly into the realms which may or may not exist. Problems start when they conflate reality with their imagination.

10% longer-lived? Sure, we know that variation in human lifespan can be higher than 10%. Reasonable possibility.

1000 year old? We never observed living humans even close to that. We currently don't know a

way to extend our life by that much. Can we imagine people living that long? Sure. We can imagine innumerable creatures having lifespans from 0 to infinity. Do they exist? We don't know but it's not reasonable to claim that they do only because we can imagine them, is it? This is what Velleius did in his description of isonomia.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 3:01 PM

Clearly just because something can be imagined does not make it possible, which I presume is the problem with Joshua's example

In regard to whether 10% is reasonable, and how many more % can be added and stay within reason, that is the question.

And the dividing line cannot reasonably be "whether I have seen it before."

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 3:05 PM

If I recall correctly, Frances Wright focuses on imagination as a problem in her book, but I do not recall that she offers a persuasive answer as to what is reasonable projection vs what gets labeled "imagination" as a way of dismissing ideas without explanation.

I would say this is the issue that has to be addressed and there are probably clues in Philodemus' On Signs. This is definitely one of the topics under discussion there.

Post by “TauPhi” of August 8, 2025 at 3:33 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In regard to whether 10% is reasonable, and how many more % can be added and stay within reason, that is the question.

I'm sorry, [Cassius](#) but I don't consider this the question. It's just a reformulation of how many grains of sand make a heap.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And the dividing line cannot reasonably be "whether I have seen it before."

"Whether I have seen it before." has very little to do with "understanding of nature based on our experiences and acquired knowledge". Please don't simplify my argument like that.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 3:54 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

. It's just a reformulation of how many grains of sand make a heap

And that is why having a position on how to resolve the heap paradox is so important.

Have you proposed an answer to that?

And I am not trying to rewrite your statement by focusing on whether a thing has previously been observed. That is a possible position some may and do take as a proposed solution, and the fact what it strikes many of us as obviously wrong is at least a starting point towards a better solution.

If I recall correctly from "on signs" the term that becomes relevant is "conceivability."

Post by “TauPhi” of August 8, 2025 at 4:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And that is why having a position on how to resolve the heap paradox is so important.

Have you proposed an answer to that?

I disagree. The resolution of this paradox is not important at all. It's just a word play based on vagueness of human language. How much do you need to love to love someone very much?

How dense a fog needs to be to be called a dense fog? How many times do you need to jump to be very tired? An attempt at answering such questions is pointless.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 4:41 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

An attempt at answering such questions is pointless.

We'll just have to disagree on that. 😊 Understanding the reasoning behind the paradox, and pointing out a resolution is as essential as understanding the error of arguing that motion is impossible. Epicurus himself employed it to illustrate the problems with those who assert that the good has some metaphysical explanation.

Again, we always have to keep in mind that there is a difference between (1) understanding Epicurus' position and (2) deciding whether we agree with it.

I'll include myself in this, and so far I don't think many of us have approached even an approximate understanding of phase one on either the heap paradox or the isonomy issue.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 7:58 PM

In regard to the sorites issue, I would say that this section of [Chapter 15](#) of Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens" is and addresses the same issue:

Quote

“What is in a substance cannot be separate from it. And is not all matter a compound of qualities? Hardness, extension, form, color, motion, rest — take away all these, and where is matter? To conceive of mind independent of matter, is as if we should conceive of color independent of a substance colored: What is form, if not a body of a particular shape? What is thought, if not something which thinks? Destroy the substance, and you destroy its properties; and so equally — destroy the properties, and you destroy the substance. To suppose the possibility of retaining the one, without the

other, is an evident absurdity."

"The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum," returned the youth, "but I never considered the error as extending to mind and life, any more than to vice and virtue."

I would say that Epicurus' question as reported by Cicero in [Part 3 of Tusculan Disputations](#) is making a similar point:

Quote

Why, Epicurus, do we use any evasions, and not allow in our own words the same feeling to be pleasure, which you are used to boast of with such assurance? Are these your words or not? This is what you say in that book which contains all the doctrine of your school; for I will perform, on this occasion, the office of a translator, lest any one should imagine that I am inventing anything. Thus you speak: "Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good; for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men, what would be the remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words? I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me, that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above."

I would presume that what this means is that abstractions such as "color" or "good" do not have an independent existence apart from the things that we are describing as colored or good. Nor do "happiness" or "pleasure" as concepts have any independent meaning apart from individual instances of real people experiencing real feelings.

On the other hand, words such as "color" and "good" are useful, and so everyone - including Epicurus - uses them. When we use them, it is important to understand that concepts have usefulness given by assignment of the human mind, but that these concepts are not created by supernatural forces or the reflection of ideal forms, and those who assert that these concepts have independent existence are wrong and asserting ideas that have dangerous implications.

If concepts do not original from gods or ideal forms, then we still have to answer the question of how to identify them and use them properly.

It's not generally considered to be necessary to see every cow that ever existed in order to form a useful concept of a cow.

These issues are going to bleed over into all sorts of other questions about when to form opinions as to concepts. We've discussed many times that Epicurus never saw or touched an atom and yet was convinced that they exist. That's the "down" direction, but the same analysis is going to be at work in the "up" direction, and I would expect Epicurus to be willing to reach conclusions about things that he cannot see or touch in the "up" direction just as he was in the "down" direction. The conclusions are going to need to be based on rational extrapolation from evidence, and not pure imagination ("it exists because I can imagine it") but rational extrapolations are not going to be limited to those things that have already been observed.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2025 at 8:04 PM

In [Chapter 16 of A Few Days In Athens Frances Wright](#) goes on and on about "imagination," but here is one passage where she focuses on it:

Quote

“The ascertaining the nature of existences, the order of occurrences, and the consequences of human actions constituting, therefore, the whole of knowledge, what is there to prevent each and all of us from extending our discoveries to the full limits prescribed by the nature of our faculties and duration of our existence? What nobler employment can we invent? What pleasure so pure, so little liable to disappointment? What is there to hold us back? What is there not to spur us forward? Does our ignorance start from the very simplicity of knowledge? Do we fear to open our eyes lest we should see the light? Does the very truth we seek alarm us in its attainment? — How is it that, placed in this world as on a theatre of observation, surrounded by wonders and endowed with faculties wherewith to scan these wonders, we know so little of what is, and imagine so much of what is not? Other animals, to whom man accounts himself superior, exercise the faculties they possess, trust their testimony, follow the impulses of their nature, and enjoy the happiness of which they are capable. Man alone, the most gifted of all known existences, doubts the evidence of his superior senses, perverts the nature and uses of his multiplied faculties, controls his most innocent, as well as his noblest impulses, and to poison all the sources of his happiness. To what are we to trace this fatal error, this cruel self-martyrdom, this perversion of

things from their natural bent? In the over-development of one faculty and neglect of another, we must seek the cause. In the imagination, that source of our most beautiful pleasures when under the control of judgment, we find the source of our worst afflictions."

Unfortunately Frances Wright is not going to give us much more help on these issues, because her book barely touches on atomism or physics of any kind -- a problem I attribute to her being much more of a skeptic than Epicurus himself, and therefore she was unwilling to argue for any clear method for how to distinguish true from false when only circumstantial evidence is available. If this book is any indication, Wright didn't seem to care at all about humanity's place in the universe as a whole, and I would say that that is a large part of why an otherwise very intelligent book seems to have made almost no impact in her time or afterwards.

Post by "Eikadistes" of August 8, 2025 at 8:27 PM

I've been wondering lately if Cicero (or a translator) misrepresents the context of *isonomy* as a *theological* concept, where ancient Epicureans may have only meant it as a *physical* one.

I haven't looked yet ... just wondering.

(I need to scour our sources and answer *this* for myself: do we have any instances of *any* Epicureans *ever* employing this term, outside of the penmanship of Cicero? I'm always critical of him, though, he studied under an Epicurean scholarch, so the misunderstanding may very well be my own.)

I'm considering that it makes less sense if "*immortals*" means "*deities*" rather than "*atoms/void*".

This idea of "*the balance of numerically distinct deities*" always puzzled me. So, it makes less sense when I read "*immortals*" as "*deities*" rather than "*particles and void*" or even "*laws of physics*".

Within the context of "cosmic maintenance", it makes *total* sense to me if "immortals" were a reference to the "*eternal, indestructible particles*" and the "*eternal, infinite void*". In the context of physical cosmology, *isonomy* might be conceived of as the principle that dictates the balance that "there are **p** particles for every **v** volume of void. If **p** were too high, there'd be no room to move. If **v** were too high, there'd be no *stuff*. But there's *stuff* that *moves*, so, *in principle*, we live in a goldilocks zone were the *metakosmíos* is imbued with a balanced ration of *particles-to-*

void; *physical isonomy*.

Lucretius compliments this *physical isonomy* (I'm appropriating the word here) with *emotional* and *political isonomies*, dramatized as a balance between the powers of Venus and Mavor. We could go on, identifying different binaries that require balance for a healthy state (of world, mind, friendships, etc.). I'm just wondering if the *theological isonomy* is the only kind every mentioned.

Post by “Pacatus” of August 9, 2025 at 5:18 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Clearly just because something can be imagined does not make it possible

Agreed, of course. But, the so-called “sorites problem” (where I agree with TauPhi*) aside, I recall that in modal logic there is a principle that would lead to something like this:

If it is logically *necessarily possible* that X exists in some (possible) world, then – in a model of infinite (logically) possible worlds – X will (*necessarily*) exist in at least one of them.

[My italics and underlines.]

Of course, it’s not logically necessarily possible that I have really understood all of that ... 😬



+++++

[This type of thinking has been offered as a “proof” of “God.” But if a “god” so defined is not logically possible (e.g. is defined incoherently) – let alone logically *necessarily* possible – then such a god cannot exist even within a model of infinite possible worlds.]

+++++

* I am reminded of a similar language issue in the later Wittgenstein. We, in ordinary discourse, generally have sufficient understanding of what someone says when they use a phrase like “a heap of sand” (or even “a heap of love”) without needing an arithmetical rule.

Post by “Pacatus” of August 9, 2025 at 6:59 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would presume that what this means is that abstractions such as "color" or "good" do not have an independent existence apart from the things that we are describing as colored or good. Nor do "happiness" or "pleasure" as concepts have any independent meaning apart from individual instances of real people experiencing real feelings.

On the other hand, words such as "color" and "good" are useful, and so everyone - including Epicurus - uses them.

I think that is about as good a summary argument against the actual existence of such universals as "redness" or "goodness" - while retaining their semantic usefulness - as one could expect. 👍👍👍

As one process philosopher that I once read put it: it is the error of assuming that for every "substantive" that we have in our language, there must be an actual "substance" (existent). Once you abandon Platonic idealism, such universals also fall away (Bertrand Russell notwithstanding).

+++++

LATE EDIT: And, as you point out in another thread, those concepts can have meaning only in terms of contextualized actual individual experience.



Post by "Cassius" of August 10, 2025 at 5:21 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

(Bertrand Russell notwithstanding).

Pacatus what are you referring to there? I know Russell is a major figure but I am not familiar with the details of his works.



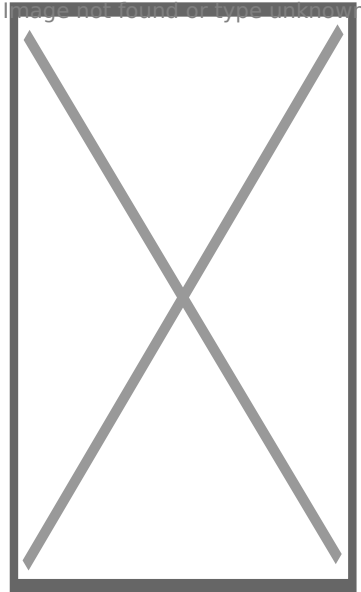
Post by "Don" of August 10, 2025 at 6:15 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

(Bertrand Russell notwithstanding).

Pacatus what are you referring to there? I know Russell is a major figure but I am not familiar with the details of his works.



[The problems of philosophy : Russell, Bertrand, 1872-1970 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Includes bibliographical references and index
archive.org

Disclaimer: I know very little about Russell's philosophy. I'm googling around, the work linked above was cited as a source for his views on universals, specifically chapter X (and it looks like chapter IX).

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2025 at 8:56 AM

Glad to see i am not the only one who is not super familiar with Bertrand Russell. I know he is extremely well known, but the impression I have of his views is not at all totally favorable - I gather he was much more inclined to skepticism than was Epicurus.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4667-epicurean-isonomy-in-the-context-of-statements-by-balbus-as-to-gradations-in-lif/>

However, he's a major figure, like Will Durant (with whom I was confronted recently) and so it's good to know where to find major points from influential people that are relevant to Epicurus.

Post by “Pacatus” of August 10, 2025 at 12:43 PM

I'm not that familiar with Russell either. I just vaguely recalled his defense of universals.

Post by “Don” of August 10, 2025 at 1:33 PM

It seems to me that "universals" is simply a high falutin' way of recognizing patterns across disparate individual entities, physical or abstract. To me, that sounds like the faculty of prolepsis and not some complicated philosophical construct. The fact that I can see a red barn and a red tractor and then a red leaf in Fall doesn't in any way make me believe in some universal "red-ness." It's my physical senses interacting with the physical world eliciting a response in my mind. That's extrapolating to other patterns across innumerable sensations and experiences.

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2025 at 3:34 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It seems to me that "universals" is simply a high falutin' way of recognizing patterns across disparate individual entities, physical or abstract. To me, that sounds like the faculty of prolepsis and not some complicated philosophical construct.

Yes I agree that's the basic point, stated in a very friendly way.

Stated more pointedly, there's a huge "life or death" divide between (1) the desire to look for universals in other worlds of ideal forms or divine aspects of this world, and (2) the desire to look for the best way of life in natural processes that are open to any normal human being with no requirement of priest or expert to explain it to you.

In my view an awful lot of the division between Epicurus and the other schools comes down to exactly this. Epicurus' opponents identified exactly this issue very early on, and they have treated him and his philosophy in a very unfriendly way for 2000+ years as a result.

As long as the discussion stays within the guard rails of "being happy" or "finding pleasure through simplicity," it's all fun and games and smiles.

Go much deeper than that, however, in discussion of Epicurus with an intellectual activist, and you'll find out what that activist really cares about, and it's not how best to balance pleasure and pain. That's why all this is so important.