

Episode 334 - EATAQ 16 - Further Epicurean Analysis of the Problems With The Stoic "Kataleptic Impression"

Post by "Cassius" of May 16, 2026 at 10:10 AM

Welcome to Episode 334 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 podcast episodes.

This week we start are continuing our series reviewing Cicero's "Academic Questions" from an Epicurean perspective, which gives us an overview of the issues that split Plato's Academy and helps us understand Epicurus' position on the same issues. This week will continue in Book Two, where we will take up [Section 8](#)

Our text will come from

[Cicero - Academic Questions - Yonge](#) We'll likely stick with Yonge primarily, but we'll also refer to the Rackham translation here:

- [Cicero On Nature Of Gods Academica Loeb Rackham : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

[media]<https://www.speaker.com/episode/72117502/media>

Post by "Cassius" of May 17, 2026 at 6:23 AM

In today's episode I want us to take the time to read Wikipedia's definition of "katalepsis" as I think it's going to help us to keep this in mind as we proceed further:

[Katalepsis - Wikipedia](#)

The current version is relatively short and straightforward so I'll memorialize it here. I note that it's kind of funny and illuminating that the main way the term "cataleptic" has come down to us today is the medical use of describing "pathological bodily rigidity":

Quote

Katalepsis

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For pathological body rigidity described with the same word, see [Catalepsy](#).

Katalepsis (**Greek**: κατάληψις, "grasping") is a term in [Stoic](#) philosophy for a concept roughly equivalent to modern [comprehension](#).^[1] To the Stoic philosophers, *katalepsis* was an important premise regarding one's state of mind as it relates to grasping fundamental philosophical concepts, which was followed by the **assent**, or adherence to the truth thus understood.

According to the [Stoics](#), the [mind](#) is constantly being bombarded with impressions ([phantasiai](#)).^[2] Some of these impressions are true and some false. Impressions are true when they are truly affirmed, false if they are wrongly affirmed. [Cicero](#) relates that [Zeno](#) would illustrate *katalepsis* as follows:

He would display his hand in front of one with the fingers stretched out and say "A visual appearance is like this"; next he closed his fingers a little and said, "An act of assent is like this"; then he pressed his fingers closely together and made a fist, and said that that was comprehension (and from this illustration he gave to that process the actual name of *katalepsis*, which it had not had before); but then he used to apply his left hand to his right fist and squeeze it tightly and forcibly, and then say that such was knowledge, which was within the power of nobody save the wise man.^[3]

Katalepsis was the main point of contention between the Stoics and the two schools of [philosophical skepticism](#) during the [Hellenistic period](#): the [Pyrrhonists](#) and the [Academic Sceptics](#) of [Plato's Academy](#). These Sceptics, who chose the Stoics as their natural philosophical opposites, eschewed much of what the Stoics believed regarding the [human mind](#) and one's methods of understanding greater meanings.^[4] To the Sceptics, all perceptions were [acataleptic](#), i.e. bore no conformity to the objects perceived, or, if they did bear any conformity, it could never be known.^[5]

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Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2026 at 6:30 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5089-episode-334-eataq-16-further-epicurean-analysis-of-the-problems-with-the-stoic-k/>

This short section from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy on "[Ancient Greek Skepticism](#)" is also right on point:

ii. Attack on the Stoics

In general, the [Stoics](#) were the ideal target for the skeptics; for, their confidence in the areas of metaphysics, ethics and epistemology was supported by an elaborate and sophisticated set of arguments. And, the stronger the justification of some theory, the more impressive is its skeptical refutation. They were also an attractive target due to their prominence in the Hellenistic world. Arcesilaus especially targeted the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, for refutation. Zeno confidently claimed not only that knowledge is possible but that he had a correct account of what knowledge is, and he was willing to teach this to others. The foundation of this account is the notion of *katalêpsis*: a mental grasping of a sense impression that guarantees the truth of what is grasped. If one assents to the proposition associated with a kataleptic impression, i.e. if one experiences katalêpsis, then the associated proposition cannot fail to be true. The Stoic sage, as the perfection and fulfillment of human nature, is the one who assents only to kataleptic impressions and thus is infallible.

Arcesilaus argued against the possibility of there being any sense-impressions which we could not be mistaken about. In doing so, he paved the way for future Academic attacks on Stoicism. To summarize the attack: for any sense-impression S, received by some observer A, of some existing object O, and which is a precise representation of O, we can imagine circumstances in which there is another sense-impression S', which comes either (i) from something other than O, or (ii) from something non-existent, and which is such that S' is indistinguishable from S to A. The first possibility (i) is illustrated by cases of indistinguishable twins, eggs, statues or imprints in wax made by the same ring (*Lucullus* 84-87). The second possibility (ii) is illustrated by the illusions of dreams and madness (*Lucullus* 88-91). On the strength of these examples, Arcesilaus apparently concluded that we may, in principle, be deceived about any sense-impression, and consequently that the Stoic account of empirical knowledge fails. For the Stoics were thorough-going empiricists and believed that sense-impressions lie at the foundation of all of our knowledge. So if we could not be certain of ever having grasped any sense-impression, then we cannot be certain of any of the more complex impressions of the world, including what strikes us as valuable. Thus, along with the failure to establish the possibility of katalêpsis goes the failure to establish the possibility of Stoic wisdom (see Hankinson [1995], Annas [1990] and Frede [1983/1987] for detailed discussions of this epistemological debate).

Post by "Cassius" of May 17, 2026 at 6:39 AM

For comparison, the key section of Diogenes Laertius 12:

[EpicureanFriends Side-By-Side Diogenes Laertius Ten](#)

I'll quote here the HICKS version just to highlight how the underlined part is a very critical section to look at closely. Bailey and Yonge say here that "he says the same thing" instead of "his own statements" so they plant the presumption that Epicurus agrees with "the Epicureans generally." This Hicks version does not convey that same conclusion. Whether it is correct to say that Epicurus agrees with "the Epicureans generally" is the central question. But if it was so certain that Epicurus agreed, why was it necessary to write that reference distinguishing "*the Epicureans generally*" at all?

31

They reject dialectic as superfluous; holding that in their inquiries the physicists should be content to employ the ordinary terms for things. Now in *The Canon* Epicurus affirms that our sensations and preconceptions and our feelings are the standards of truth; the Epicureans generally make perceptions of mental presentations to be also standards. His own statements are also to be found in the *Summary* addressed to Herodotus and in the *Sovran Maxims*. Every sensation, he says, is devoid of reason and incapable of memory; for neither is it self-caused nor, regarded as having an external cause, can it add anything thereto or take anything therefrom.

Post by “Don” of May 17, 2026 at 7:10 AM

FWIW, katalepsis shows up in Diogenes Laertius:

33] By preconception they mean **a sort of apprehension** or a right opinion or notion, or universal idea stored in the mind ; that is, a recollection of an external object often presented,

Τὴν δὲ πρόληψιν λέγουσιν οἰονεὶ **κατάληψιν** ἢ δόξαν ὀρθὴν ἢ ἔννοιαν ἢ καθολικὴν νόησιν ἐναποκειμένην

I think it's hiding in other forms within the texts. [Bryan](#) pulled these out in the past, I think.

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2026 at 7:23 AM

Thanks Don. By the time of DL he'd have been inundated by the Stoic v Skeptic debate and surely would have compared Stoic vs Epicurean views on prolepsis. "A sort of" presumably indicates parallels but not exactly the same (?)

I want to go looking for where DL describes Zeno's version of this in the Stoic section, but haven't got there yet.

Post by "Cassius" of May 17, 2026 at 7:30 AM

Apparently katalepsis is in here somewhere:

[Lives of the Eminent Philosophers/Book VII - Wikisource, the free online library](#)

45. The study of syllogisms they declare to be of the greatest service, as showing us what is capable of yielding demonstration; and this contributes much to the formation of correct judgements, and their arrangement and retention in memory give a scientific character to our conception of things.

An argument is in itself a whole containing premisses and conclusion, and an inference (or syllogism) is an inferential argument composed of these. Demonstration is an argument inferring by means of what is better apprehended something less clearly apprehended.

A presentation (or mental impression) is an imprint on the soul: the name having been appropriately borrowed from the imprint made by the seal upon the wax. **46.** There are two species of presentation, the one apprehending a real object, the other not. The former, which they take to be the test of reality, is defined as that which proceeds from a real object, agrees with that object itself, and has been imprinted seal-fashion and stamped upon the mind: the latter, or non-apprehending, that which does not proceed from any real object, or, if it does, fails to agree with the reality itself, not being clear or distinct.

Dialectic, they said, is indispensable and is itself a virtue, embracing other particular virtues under it. ^[27] Freedom from precipitancy is a knowledge when to give or withhold the mind's assent to impressions. **47.** By wariness they mean a strong presumption against what at the moment seems probable, so as not to be taken in by it. Irrefutability is strength in argument so as not to be brought over by it to the opposite side. Earnestness (or absence of frivolity) is a habit of referring presentations to right reason. Knowledge itself they define either as unerring apprehension or as a habit or state which in reception of presentations cannot be shaken by argument. Without the study of dialectic, they say, the wise man cannot guard himself in argument so as never to fall; for it enables him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and

to discriminate what is merely plausible and what is ambiguously expressed, and without it he cannot methodically put questions and give answers.

48. Overhastiness in assertion affects the actual course of events, so that, unless we have our perceptions well trained, we are liable to fall into unseemly conduct and heedlessness; and in no other way will the wise man approve himself acute, nimblewitted, and generally skilful in argument; for it belongs to the same person to converse well and to argue well, to put questions to the purpose and to respond to the questions put; and all these qualifications are qualifications belonging to the skilled dialectician.

Such is, summarily stated, the substance of their logical teaching. And in order to give it also in detail,^[28] let me now cite as much of it as comes within the scope of their introductory handbook. I will quote verbatim what Diocles the Magnesian says in his *Synopsis of Philosophers*. These are his words:

49. “The Stoics agree to put in the forefront the doctrine of presentation and sensation, inasmuch as the standard by which the truth of things is tested is generically a presentation, and again the theory of assent and that of apprehension and thought, which precedes all the rest, cannot be stated apart from presentation. For presentation comes first; then thought, which is capable of expressing itself, puts into the form of a proposition that which the subject receives from a presentation.”

50. There is a difference between the process and the outcome of presentation. The latter is a semblance in the mind such as may occur in sleep, while the former is the act of imprinting something on the soul, that is a process of change, as is set forth by Chrysippus in the second book of his treatise *Of the Soul (De anima)*. For, says he, we must not take “impression” in the literal sense of the stamp of a seal, because it is impossible to suppose that a number of such impressions should be in one and the same spot at one and the same time. The presentation meant is that which comes from a real object, agrees with that object, and has been stamped, imprinted and pressed seal-fashion on the soul, as would not be the case if it came from an unreal object.

51. According to them some presentations are data of sense and others are not: the former are the impressions conveyed through one or more sense-organs; while the latter, which are not data of sense, are those received through the mind itself, as is the case with incorporeal things and all the other presentations which are received by reason. Of sensuous impressions some are from real objects and are accompanied by yielding and assent on our part. But there are also presentations that are appearances and no more, purporting, as it were, to come from real objects.

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2026 at 7:37 AM

Here's the Perseus link from which we can look for variations of *katalepsis*:

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, ΙΣΤΟΡΙΩΝ Ζ](#)

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2026 at 7:49 AM

I can't find a good authoritative page I can screen clip but at the hazard of it being wrong here is chatgpt:

VII.46 is where Diogenes is summarizing Stoic epistemology. The Greek wording varies slightly by edition, but the key line containing *katalepsis* is essentially:

Quote

κατάληψιν δέ φασιν εἶναι συγκατάθεσιν καταληπτικῆς φαντασίας

A fairly literal translation:

Quote

They say that *katalepsis* is assent to a cognitive impression.

Here is a word-by-word interlinear layout:

| Greek | Transliteration | Basic sense |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| κατάληψιν | katálēpsin | apprehension / cognitive grasp |
| δέ | de | and / moreover |
| φασιν | phasin | they say |
| εἶναι | einai | to be |
| συγκατάθεσιν | synkatáthesin | assent / acceptance |
| καταληπτικῆς | katalēptikēi | cognitive, grasping |
| φαντασίας | phantasiai | impression / appearance |

A more natural English rendering:

Quote

“They say that apprehension consists in giving assent to a cognitive impression.”

Now to your specific concern: the form you wanted is not dictionary-form **κατάληψις**, but:

κατάληψιν

That ending **-ιν** marks the **accusative singular** form. Greek dictionaries list the nominative:

κατάληψις → katálēpsis

So the morphology is:

- κατάληψις = nominative (“apprehension”)
- κατάληψεως = genitive (“of apprehension”)
- κατάληψιν = accusative (“apprehension” as object)

The Stoic chain being described here is:

φαντασία → κατάληψις → ἐπιστήμη

- impression
- cognitive grasp
- knowledge

That sequence becomes particularly important for Epicurean comparisons because Epicureans accepted sensory impressions as criteria but rejected the Stoic notion of a special “cognitive” impression guaranteed by nature.

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2026 at 7:54 AM

So it seems I've been repeating the Epicurean formulation "[all sensations are true](#)" for many years without fully appreciating that some people (the Stoics) say that some sensations are true and others are false.

I think I've tended to flip back and forth between the Skeptic view that NO sensations are true and the Epicurean [ALL sensations are true](#) without realizing that the Stoics tried to maintain that some sensations in themselves are true and others are false.

To me, specifically identifying the Stoic view and comparing it to the Epicurean view is very helpful.

Post by "Patrikios" of May 17, 2026 at 11:06 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In today's episode I want us to take the time to read Wikipedia's definition of "kataleptis" as I think it's going to help us to keep this in mind as we proceed further:

[Cassius](#) ,

I was trying to better understand the difference between kataleptis and prolepsis. I recall reading this paper from David Glidden on [Epicurean Prolepsis](#). Glidden researches Diogenes Laertius and Cicero, when he explains this aspect.

Quote

What these same sources say about Epicurean prolepsis is always from a Stoic perspective, even when the author (Diogenes Laertius, Cicero) is trying to be fair. Diogenes Laertius¹ report of Epicurean prolepsis is painfully groping, looking for the right Stoic expressions to describe the device: "*By **prolepsis** they mean a kind of **kataleptis** or right opinion or concept or universal thought (consensus omnium) stored in the mind --that is, the memory of a frequent appearance from the outside.*"

When you record this episode, it may be helpful to explain how these two Greek terms (**prolepsis & kataleptis**) were used by the different schools of thought (stoics, skeptics, epicureans).

Thanks again for the depth of discussion and research you and [Joshua](#) bring to this review of Cicero's "Academic Questions".

Post by "Bryan" of May 17, 2026 at 11:32 AM

We can review Zeno of Citium's "Analogy of the Closing Hand" for contrast (from *Academica* 2.145):

1. An open hand represents **φαντασία** (an appearance)

2. Partially closed fingers represent **συγκατάθεσις** (assent that the appearance is true)

3. A closed fist represents **κατάληψις** (thorough comprehension),

4. Finally, the other hand enclosing the fist represents **ἐπιστήμη** (understanding) – true knowledge, possessed only by the wise.

This is contrasted (Academica 2.142) with "a different judgment exists for Epicurus – who thinks all judgment is established in the senses, in the acquaintance with things, and in pleasure"

[Quote from Don](#)

I think it's hiding in other forms within the texts.

Yes, Epicurus uses the verbal form of **κατάληψις**, for example at 10.78b he says:

"καὶ Τοῦτο **Καταλαβεῖν** τῇ διανοίᾳ ἔστιν ἀπλῶς εἶναι"

"...and to **thoroughly comprehend** with the mind that this [reality] exists is absolutely possible."

10.125a. "Οὐθὲν γάρ ἐστιν ἐν τῷ ζῆνδεινὸν **τῷ κατειληφότι** γνησίως τὸ μηδὲν ὑπάρχειν ἐν τῷ μὴ ζῆν δεινόν"

"Nothing is terrible in living **for the one who has thoroughly comprehended**, in a genuine way, that nothing exists as terrible in not living."

Philodemus, On Piety, 1.66A.1882-1911 "καὶ καθάπερ κἀν τῷ δευτέρῳ καὶ τριακοστῷ, καὶ τῶν θεῶν Ἐναργεῖαι, Φησὶν, **καταλαμβάνεσθαι** τὸ ὄν"

"and just as in the Second-and-Thirtieth [book 32 On Nature, Epicurus] says, the evident Realities of the gods **are thoroughly comprehended** as existing"

Interestingly we have both prefixes in "προ-κατα-λαμβάνειν," which is best read as intensifying προ-λαμβάνειν (thus meaning "**thoroughly anticipated**" and not "**comprehended**")

VS 47 "Προκατείλημμαί σε – ὦ Τύχη!"

"I have thoroughly anticipated you - O Chance!"

Post by "Cassius" of May 17, 2026 at 11:32 AM

Ok we just finished recording and I am not sure that we hit your precise point Patrikios but I think you will be pleased with this episode and we can come back to that next week. The section we are in is very deep and what you are raising is definitely a part of that.

Post by "Cassius" of May 17, 2026 at 12:20 PM

I cross-posted with Bryan and just now see his #12

[Quote from Bryan](#)

This is contrasted (Academica 2.142) with "a different judgment exists for Epicurus - who thinks all judgment is established in the senses, in the acquaintance with things, and in pleasure"

This sentence covers a lot but I would think it would be true that

"judgment is ESTABLISHED in the senses" means more like "judgment is *validated* by or *is tested against* the perceptions of the senses, the anticipations, and the feelings."

With the key point being as in the other citations that judgment takes place in the MIND, not in any of the three categories of faculties, and this is where a major difference arises from the Stoics, who believe that some sensations are "true" and others "false" and that apparently some sensations are so "clear" that the wise man can recognize the true ones as true and the false ones as false, *if* he is really good at dialectic and syllogisms.

Post by "Cassius" of May 22, 2026 at 12:45 PM

Episode 334 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "Further Epicurean Analysis Of The Problems With Stoic Kataleptic Impressions."

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