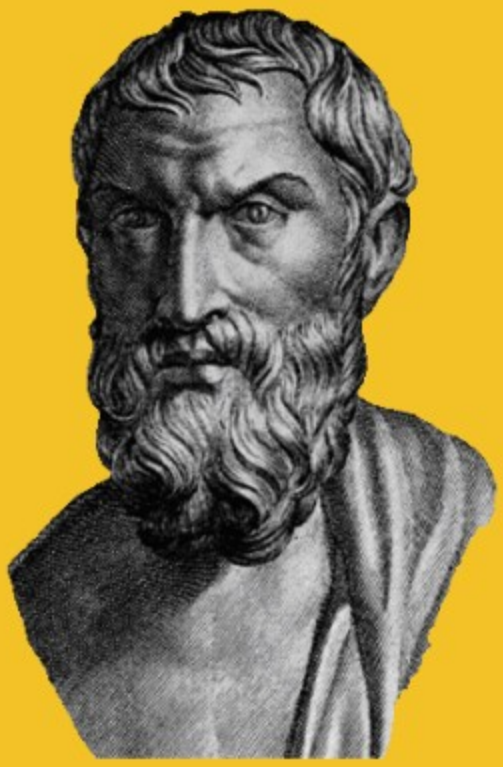
THE TRIPOD OF TRUTH



An Introduction To The Book That Fell From The Heavens

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It is only by firmly grasping a well-reasoned scientific study of Nature, and observing ***Epicurus' Canon of Truth that has fallen, as it were, from heaven****, which affords us a knowledge of the universe. Only by making that Canon the test of all our judgments can we always hope to stand fast in our convictions, undeterred and unshaken by the eloquence of any man.*

Marcus Tullius Cicero. "On The Ends of Good and Evil"

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Introduction

Epicureanism is often considered to be a philosophy of life that may easily be summarized in the phrase "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die." The fact that this phrase is almost the polar opposite of the true teachings of Epicurus is the subject of this author's "*Ante Oculos: Epicurus and the Evidence-Based Life*."

But even those who properly understand that Epicurus counseled moderation in the pursuit of desires often fail to appreciate the deeper foundation on which Epicureanism is built, and it is that foundation which is the subject of the present volume. Because the structure stands or falls based on the soundness of its underpinnings, Epicurus' views on human knowledge deserve the special attention of anyone who wishes to live a happy life.

It is our great misfortune that Epicurus' main work on human knowledge, entitled "The Canon of Truth," is currently lost to the world. Perhaps at some point in the future the text will be recovered in a Herculaneum scroll, or in some other repository of ancient writings, but for now we are left with only fragments of the ideas that must have underpinned the work that Cicero relates the Epicureans considered as having "fallen from heaven."

As this volume is brief, it needs only a short introduction. The key issue here is the age-old question that each man must confront and decide for himself, which can be phrased in this way:

> *"There is so much that I do not know about myself, my world, and my place in the universe. What sources of information – what evidence – may I rely on to answer the questions I have about these things?"*

For untold ages, two groups of men have thrust themselves forward with the proposal that they can provide the answers to these questions.

The first group, which is perhaps the oldest, is that which promotes "religion" as the source of answers on these questions. In many variations, the priests of religion assert "revelation" – direct communication with "god" – and "faith" as the essential supplements to what man can see and hear with his own eyes and ears.

The second group, apparently much younger in the history of men, are the philosophers. In even greater variation than the religionists, the philosophers assert that they can provide systems of thought – generally asserted to be rigorously pure "reason" – which will provide access to knowledge that eyes and ears can never provide.

The unifying theme of both these groups is that the common man is incapable of understanding the nature of the universe for himself, and that they – through their unique, superior equipment – will be happy to provide, **for a price**, what the individual cannot obtain for himself.

Thus we have arrived here, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, buffeted between these rival camps, and with the individual man as uncertain where the truth lies as if he were still dwelling in caves and wearing bearskins.

But at least once in the history of western civilization there was a period of several hundred years when a certain group of men rejected ***both*** these false alternatives. This group flourished under the Roman Republic and early Empire, but it readily acknowledged that its father figure was a Greek who had lived hundreds of years before – Epicurus of Samos.

For a period of some five hundred years, Epicurus and his philosophy taught eager men throughout the Roman and Greek world a way of thinking and living that has seen no equal in all the years since

then. The enemies of this way of life demonized it as "hedonism" – effectively the worship of the lowest forms of sensual pleasures as the best that life has to offer men. Slowly, as the years passed and virulent strains of religion suppressed all dissent, this false characterization was all that remained. Virtually nothing but misrepresentation remained of the philosophy that had for the first time offered man emancipation from the oppression of religion and false philosophy.

Along with the loss of a clear view of the conclusions of Epicurus, however, the greater loss has been the loss of the ***foundations*** on which the conclusions were based. Absent those foundations, Epicureanism appears mired in the same muck of "faith" and "unsupported assertion" as the religions and false philosophies that combined to oppose it, and this result is exactly what Epicureanism's opponents wished to achieve. Only by creating in the mind of men the idea that Epicureanism has no stronger foundation than the most mystical of religions, or the most contradictory of philosophies, could this result have been achieved. And after the efforts of thousands of years, the foundations of Epicureanism have been almost wholly obscured. To the extent most men have any understanding of Epicureanism at all, it appears to them that Epicurus constructed his philosophy on the same unsupportable assertions as Plato, Christianity, Judaism, of any of their thousands of variants.

This appearance is not even close to the truth – but here we will turn to Epicurus' own words – to the extent they remain to us – and allow him to explain to you that the vicious alternatives of religion and false philosophy are not the only paths open to man.

The Book That Fell From The Heavens

In his book "*On The Ends of Good and Evil*," Marcus Tullius Cicero recorded the existence of a work by Epicurus entitled "*The Canon of Truth*." According to Cicero, the Epicureans of his day considered this book to be at the center of their philosophy:

> *It is only by firmly grasping a well-reasoned scientific study of Nature, and observing Epicurus' Canon of Truth that has fallen, as it were, from heaven, which affords us a knowledge of the universe. Only by making that Canon the test of all our judgments can we always hope to stand fast in our convictions, undeterred and unshaken by the eloquence of any man.*

Epicurus' ancient biographer, Diogenes Laertius, recorded that the subject of this book was man's **means of obtaining knowledge**. Diogenes wrote:

> *[Epicurus] divides philosophy into three parts. The canonical, the physical, and the ethical. The canonical part, which serves as an introduction to knowledge, is contained in the single treatise which is called the Canon. The physical part embraces the whole range of speculation on subjects of natural philosophy, and is contained in his thirty-seven books on Nature. He also discusses this subject again in an elementary manner in his letters. ... Most people are in the habit of combining the canonical part with the physical part; which they then designate as the Criterion of Truth….*

No copies of the Canon of Truth are known to exist today, but we do have two of Epicurus' letters that illustrate his approach to the science of knowledge, and we have a number of other texts that appear to be reliable on the same subject. This work is devoted to an attempt to assemble from these ancient texts an outline of the material that the Canon of Truth would likely have contained.

Cicero wrote that the purpose of the Canon was to provide a "test of all our judgments." It is therefore logical to expect that among the first issues which Epicurus would have addressed was the problem of whether it is even *possible* to obtain information on which to make judgments that could pass such any test of reliability. The leading school against which Epicurus fought throughout his career – that of Plato – held that man's senses *cannot be trusted* as a source of knowledge, and that *reasoning alone* was the only method by which to determine truth.

Epicurus emphatically rejected ***both*** of these Platonic assertions. As Cicero recorded:

> *Theoretical logic, on which [the] Platonic school lays such stress, Epicurus held to be of no assistance either as a guide to conduct or as an aid to thought. In contrast, he deemed Natural Philosophy to be all-important. Natural Philosophy explains to us the meaning of terms, the nature of cause and effect, and the laws of consistency and contradiction.*

Epicurus emphasized "Natural Philosophy" because he observed that *reason is dependent on the senses* for the evidence with which it operates. All efforts to reason will *necessarily be false* if the evidence on which that reasoning is based is itself false. In many passages throughout his works, Epicurus fully endorsed the vital role of reason in evaluating the evidence of the senses, but his key insight was that reason is *necessarily a secondary tool*. Reason is not a tool of cognition – it is not a faculty provided by nature through which we can perceive reality. In all things, reason is reliant for its accuracy on the information obtained through the senses. Thus a foundation of Epicurean thought is the observation that ***reason alone, unsupported by any evidence obtained through the Natural faculties, can never be used to contradict a fact that has been established by the senses to be true.***

This point cannot be emphasized enough. Although it may seem obvious that neither "reason alone" nor "revelation" provide reliable evidence that contradicts the senses, men throughout the ages continue to assert, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that such means can be used to contradict the plain facts of reality. It therefore became a central Epicurean argument to observe that ***Nature demands that men***

rely on their senses if they wish to live – and punishes those who disobey. Men who do not use their eyes to see a cliff in his path, and then turn to avoid it, find that their lives come to a quick end. Despite their protests to the contrary, even the priests and the false philosophers find that they must use their senses – every day – to obtain the knowledge that is necessary to sustain their lives. Thus Nature is the final arbiter of this (and all) questions: the senses ***are*** up to the task of providing to men the information that is necessary to life.

But the priests and false philosophers refuse to abandon their protests; they argue that the knowledge to live successfully on earth is not sufficient, and they demand answers to the thousands of questions about the nature of man and the universe that have no ready answer. What, indeed, would an Epicurean reply to demands to know the unknowable? Do not these limits require us to rely on abstract reason or revelation?

In response to the desire to know the answer to unanswerable questions about the nature of the universe, it is likely that the Epicurean would have turned to Epicurus' famous classification of the desires, which he applied to a multitude of situations. Epicurus observed that all desires (including the desire for knowledge) can be divided into three categories. These are: (1) those desires that are natural *and* necessary for life, (2) those desires that are natural *but not* necessary for life, and (3) those desires which are *neither* natural *nor* necessary for life.

Those desires that Nature has established to be both natural *and* necessary for life, such as air, food, water, clothing, and shelter, are relatively easy to obtain. Similarly, those desires which are natural, but not necessary, such as the desire for luxuries in the same categories, are not so easy to gain or keep, but in most cases are still obtainable through exercise of a reasonable degree of effort. On the other hand, Nature has established that those desires that are neither natural nor necessary, such as *political power, extensive wealth*, or *intense lusts*, are difficult or impossible to obtain or keep.

These three categories provide the key for the proper attitude to take toward the desire for knowledge, just as much as for the desire for material possessions. Thus we see that the impossible questions posed by the priests and false philosophers are asked in violation of the laws of Nature.

The knowledge that is natural and necessary for life, such as that which is required to sustain one's life by avoiding cliffs, is easy to obtain by simply opening one's eyes and observing what is in front of us to be seen. The knowledge that is natural but not necessary for life, such as that which is required to improve one's living conditions through agriculture and the applied sciences, is also readily available given reasonable mental effort. *But Nature has established that knowledge that is neither natural nor necessary for life, such as the desire that some men have to know all the facts of an infinite universe, which is clearly beyond the ability of any single man to know, is impossible to obtain. No man in any age has the ability to comprehend the movement and the nature of the stars and the planets in boundless space, so therefore it made no sense to concern oneself unduly about them. In regard to such things that Nature has established to have no practical relationship to us and to be clearly beyond the limits of our knowledge, Epicurus held that man's proper attitude is: "****It is not good to desire what is impossible****."*

Epicurus' recognized that *Nature herself* has prescribed the limits of what is possible to man, and the Epicureans held this view to be at the very core of their philosophy. Titus Lucretius Carus, composer of the great Epicurean poem *On The Nature of Things* which is among our best surviving texts on the subject, praised this insight in one of his most famous passages:

> *When human life – before the eyes of all – lay foully prostrate upon the earth, crushed down under the weight of religion, which glowered down from heaven upon mortal men with a hideous appearance, one man — a Greek — first dared to lift up his mortal eyes and stand up face-to-face against religion. This man could not be quashed either by stories of gods or thunderbolts or even by the deafening roar of heaven. Those things only spurred on the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the tight bars placed on Nature's gates. The living force of his soul won the day, and on he passed, far beyond the flaming walls of the world, traveling with his mind*

and with his spirit the immeasurable universe. And from there he returned to us – like a conqueror — to tell us what can be, and what cannot, and on what principle and deep-set boundary mark Nature has established all things. Through this knowledge, superstition is thrown down and trampled underfoot, and by his victory we are raised equal with the stars.

The Tripod Of Truth

Once Epicurus established that knowledge of the truth is possible, he turned to the examination of the faculties which Nature provides man through which to gather evidence by which to judge the truth. Epicurus held that Nature equips men with three basic faculties: (1) the Five Senses, (2) the Pain / Pleasure mechanism, and (3) the "Anticipations" (an intuitive / conceptual faculty of crucial importance, to which we will turn later).

Nature provides that through these faculties, men are readily able to obtain the basic knowledge that they need in order to obtain such things as food, water, and shelter. The facts of such matters, and the answers to the common questions about them, are literally right before men's eyes.

But in regard to men's desires to answer the many questions that are natural to ask, but for which the answers are not directly in front of our eyes, *Nature provides only the evidence provided by the three faculties*. In many cases this available evidence is limited or unclear, so the question all men must face becomes, "*How should I reach a reliable conclusion in such circumstances?*"

Here we return to the controversy mentioned earlier: the Platonic philosophies, and the religious schools, held that abstract reasoning or divine revelation provide information that can *supplement, or even* ***contradict***, the evidence that Nature provides through the three categories of faculties..

Epicurus rejected the contentions of both religions and Platonists. Recognizing that reason is dependent on the senses, and revelation can never be verified except through evidence provided by those same senses, Epicurus held that Nature demands that *we never abandon the evidence that Nature herself has placed before our eyes*. Instead, Nature requires that men must start with the evidence that she has given us the means to determine with clarity, and never entertain the notion that Nature's evidence can be contradicted. The method which Epicurus stressed thus started with the examination of those things which are close at hand and for which evidence is clear; these we first establish these in our minds with certainty. Only then, armed with the concepts we form on these established facts, do we apply those concepts to new evidence, obtained from those same Natural faculties. It is only here that reason enters into the process, through the application of the laws of consistency and contradiction referenced by Cicero. ***Never*** may we accept any conclusion that would contradict some matter that has already established with certainty, because no theory open to reason can ever be valid if it violates observed facts. Most certainly it is possible that old theories must at times be discarded, when it is determined that newly-discovered facts cannot be incorporated into the prior concepts. But because reason is dependent on the validity of the information provided by the faculties, the evidence of reality provided by the faculties is the ultimate test of truth, and "reasoning" unsupported by any facts can never be considered valid.

Now we can more readily see why Epicureanism is so firmly based on the study of Nature. The process of examining those things which are close at hand ***is*** the process of studying Nature, and it is this process which is termed "Natural Philosophy." As Cicero relates in the following passage, confidence in the validity of the senses to determine truth, and the study of Nature, are inseparably intertwined:

> *...[W]ithout a firm understanding of the world of Nature, it is impossible to maintain the validity of the perceptions [which we reach based on] our senses. Every mental presentation has its origin in sensation, and no knowledge or perception is possible unless the sensations are reliable, as the theory of Epicurus teaches us that they are. Those who deny the reliability of sensation and say that nothing can be known, by excluding the evidence of the senses, are unable even to make their own argument. By abolishing knowledge and science, they abolish all possibility of rational life and action. In contrast, Natural Philosophy supplies courage to face the fear of death, and resolution to resist the terrors of religion. Natural Philosophy provides peace of mind by removing all ignorance of the mysteries of Nature, and provides self-control, by explaining the nature of the desires and allowing us to distinguish their different kinds. In addition, the Canon or Criterion of Knowledge which Epicurus established shows us the method by which we evaluate the evidence of the senses and discern truth from falsehood.*

It is essential to the happiness of every man that he understand this issue in his own mind, and that each man be able to explode the sham attacks of religion and false philosophy against the means that *Nature* has provided for obtaining knowledge. Lucretius recorded Epicurus' scorn for such arguments as follows:

> *[I]f a man contends that nothing can be known, he knows not whether this contention itself can be known, since he admits that he knows nothing. I will therefore decline to argue the question against him who places his head where his feet should be. And yet granting that this man knows his contention to be true, I would still ask this question: Since he has never yet seen any truth in any thing, how does he know what "knowing" and "not knowing" are? What has produced his knowledge of the difference between the true and the false, and between the doubtful and the certain?*
>
> *You will find that all knowledge of the true comes from the senses, and that the senses cannot be refuted. For anything which on its own can distinguish that which is false from that which is true must by nature possess a higher certainty than the thing which it judges.*
>
> *Well, then, what can fairly be accounted of higher certainty than the senses? Shall reasoning alone be able to contradict the sensations? No, not when reasoning is itself wholly reliant on the senses for its accuracy. If the evidence of the senses is not true, then all reasoning based on that evidence is rendered false. Are the ears able to take the eyes to task, or the sense of touch take the ears to task? Shall the sense of taste or smell or vision call into question the sense of touch? No, for each sense has its own separate and distinct office and power. ... It therefore follows that no sense can refute any other. Nor can any sense take itself to task, since equal credit must be assigned to the evidence it produces at all times. What has at any time appeared true to each sense must be taken as a true sensation.*
>
> *At times you may experience sensations which your reason is unable to explain — for example, why a tower close at hand is seen to be square, but when seen at a distance appears round. In such cases it is better, if you are at a loss for a reason to explain this, to admit that you do not know the truth of the matter, rather than to accept an explanation that makes no sense. If you accept as true a possibility that contradicts your senses, you have set the stage to let slip from your grasp all those other things which you know to be manifestly true. In so doing you will ruin the groundwork of all your beliefs, and wrench up all the foundations on which life and existence rest. For not only would all reason give way, but life itself would fall to the ground, unless you pursue the truth and choose to trust the senses, shunning the steep cliffs of life that must be avoided. All that host of words drawn out in array against the senses is quite without meaning.*
>
> *If, in the construction of a building, the measuring stick first applied by the builder is crooked, or his square is untrue and swerves from its straight lines, or if there is the slightest hitch in any part of his level, all the construction will turn out to be faulty, crooked, sloping, leaning forward or backward, without symmetry, so that some parts seem ready to fall, and others do fall, all ruined by the first erroneous measurements. So too, all reasoning of things which is not founded on the senses will prove to be distorted and false.*

As Lucretius observed, key to disarming the arguments of the followers of Platonic or religious schools is to remember that whether they be based on "abstract reason" or "divine revelation," ***such arguments contradict themselves*** because the person who makes them ***relies on Nature's faculties*** to speak, hear, and conduct the argument. This is the likely meaning of Lucretius' colorful phrase that such men "***put their head where their feet should be***." When one is in doubt whether a tower is square or round, priests assert that men should ask God for divine revelation, and Platonists assert that men should look to abstract logical formulas. Such nonsense turns men upside down, and reverses the endowments of Nature, for as Epicurus saw, the proper way to resolve the doubt about the tower's shape is *to walk toward the tower and find out by seeing the fact for oneself.*

The ancient Epicureans considered this fatal flaw in the Platonic / religious argument to be important enough that they enshrined its full and complete refutation among the Forty Principal Doctrines of Epicurus:

> *If you resist the senses, you have nothing left to which you can refer, or by which you may judge, the falsehood of the senses which you condemn.*

Obtaining A Clear View Through Nature's Faculties

Before we proceed further with the ancient texts, it will be helpful to review the three Natural faculties, and dispel a number of misconceptions about them:[1]

The first category includes "the five senses" – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste – which provide men direct evidence about specific aspects of their surroundings.

The second category is the "pleasure-pain mechanism," sometimes referred to as "the passions." Through this faculty Nature provides men with immediate evidence of what is good or bad in the sense of pleasing and displeasing. The passions tell us that fire causes pain when it burns us, and that honey is pleasant when we taste it.

The third category is the "Anticipations," also referred to as the "Preconceptions." Just as the five senses and the pain/pleasure mechanism provide direct automatic responses to certain stimuli in our environment, the Anticipations were considered to be "intuitions" or *dispositions* to evaluate conceptual matters in particular ways. Although the ancient texts are ambiguous on this point, it seems likely that Epicurus referred to Anticipations as "*pre*-conceptions" because he held that they exist *prior to any experience with examples of the matter being observed*. An example of an anticipation would be man's disposition toward general principles of "justice." Perhaps the most firmly established example of an Anticipation is that which is contained in the first Principle Doctrine of Epicurus, which derives from the common notion that the gods are imperishable and perfect certain characteristics of their natures which would necessarily follow.

The essential unifying aspect of these three categories of faculties is that Nature has established them as a ***direct means*** of obtaining evidence about reality. These are but means, however, and these faculties do not ***evaluate*** the evidence which they gather and transmit. Thus the evidence provided in any single sensation may not necessarily represent a full picture of the object being observed, and *the faculty itself does not tell us that this information is incomplete*. All evidence received through the faculties must be processed by the mind, and it is the mind which must consider any limitations under which that evidence was obtained. Each faculty faithfully reports to the mind what it observes *without processing the information first*, so the faculties can never be charged with misinterpreting the information that they transmit. All evidence must be interpreted in the mind, and it is in the mind where error occurs if we fail to process the information provided by the faculties correctly.

Stated in very simple terms, Epicurus held that the mind operates by taking the information provided by the faculties, establishing it to be true by evaluating the evidence of multiple observations by reason, through the laws of consistency and contradiction. The mind then organized this information into concepts, and these concepts are then used to process new information as it is received. This operation can lead to error for many reasons, such as when we fail to consider any limitations in what was observed or when we fail to account for any distortions that might have intervened between the object and ourselves. In such cases our faculties do not fail us, but our minds reach mistaken conclusions because we are presume that our information is complete, when it is not. In many such cases, we jump to an incorrect conclusion based on some prior experience or disposition toward reaching a particular conclusion. In the words of Lucretius:

> *Many are the marvels … we see which seek to shake the credit of the senses. But such efforts are quite in vain, since the greatest part of these cases deceive us on account of the opinions which we add ourselves, taking things as seen which have not been seen by the senses. For nothing is harder than to separate those facts that are clearly true from those that are doubtful which the mind adds itself.*

In all cases it is the task of the mind is to verify that we have obtained a a "clear view" of the object being observed before reaching a conclusion. Our method of confirming that a clear view has been

obtained is to obtain multiple reports through as many of the three basic faculties as possible, and verify (by comparison) that the information received proves to be consistent. Only when we have a clear view, confirmed by such number of consistent observations as are appropriate under the circumstances, are we justified in concluding that we have sufficient evidence to grasp what is true and judge that we have reached a determination on a matter.

Until we have worked to place ourselves in position to grasp a clear view, we are vulnerable to misinterpretation of the evidence. Classic examples of this are when we see a square tower at a distance that appears to be round, or when we see a straight stick partially submerged in water that appears to be bent. Under these conditions, the distance and the water distort the image. If our minds do not compensate, we may jump to the incorrect conclusion that the tower is in fact round and the stick is in fact bent. The means to correct this error is not revelation or abstract reasoning, but through use of the faculties that Nature has provided: walking toward the tower for a closer view, and removing the stick from the water and looking at it again. Only by taking action to obtain a clear view can we be sure that we have obtained sufficient evidence to reach an accurate conclusion.

With this as background we can more easily understand what Diogenes Laertius relates about the Canon:

> *In regard to the five senses, [Epicurus states] that the senses themselves are devoid of reason, and they are not capable of receiving any impressions from memory. For they are not by themselves the cause of any impression, and when they have received any impression from any external cause, they can add nothing to it, nor can they subtract anything from it. Moreover, they are not within the control of the other senses; for one sense cannot judge another, as all observations have an equal value, and their objects are not identical. In other words, one sensation cannot control another, since the effects of all of them influence us equally. Also, reason by itself cannot pronounce judgment on the senses; for … all reasoning rests on the senses for its foundation. Reality and the evidence provided by the senses establish the certainty of our faculties; for the impressions of sight and hearing are just as real, just as evident, as pain.*
>
> *It follows from these considerations that we should judge those things which are obscure by their analogy to those things which we perceive directly. In fact, every notion proceeds from the evidence provided by the senses, either directly, or as a result of some analogy, or proportion, or combination to that which we do perceive directly, reasoning always participating in these operations. ….*
>
> *In regard to the preconceptions, Epicurus meant a sort of comprehension, or right opinion, or notion, or general idea which exists within us. In other words, a preconception is a kind of mental recollection of an external object that we experience before we perceive it. For instance, one example is the idea: "Man is a being of such and such Nature." At the same moment that we utter the word man, we conceive the figure of a man, in virtue of a preconception which we owe to the preceding operations of the senses. [An anticipation is] therefore the first notion which each word awakens within us …. In fact, we could not seek for anything if we did not previously have some notion about it. To enable us to affirm that what we see at a distance is a horse or an ox, we must have some preconception in our minds which makes us acquainted with the form of a horse and an ox. We could not even give names to things, if we did not have a preliminary notion of what the things were.*
>
> *These preconceptions then furnish us with certainty. And with respect to judgments, their certainty depends on our referring them to some previous notion which has already been established to be certain. This is how we affirm or judge the answer to any question; for instance, "How do we know whether this thing is a man?"*

Not Blank, But Etched

Of the three faculties, the third – the Anticipations – is the one that has suffered most from the loss of Epicurus' original texts, and most men today follow Aristotle and Locke in holding that the mind at birth is essentially blank.[2]

Diogenes Laertius' definition of the Anticipations leaves more questions unanswered than it resolves. Once again, *"By preconception, the Epicureans mean a sort of comprehension as it were, or right opinion, or notion, or general idea which exists in us; or, in other words, the recollection of an external object often perceived anteriorly."*

Fortunately, in addition to Laertius, Cicero preserved for us an illuminating discussion of Anticipations in his work ***On The Nature of The Gods*.** In the course of recounting the various opinions held by poets and philosophers about the nature of the gods, Cicero relates:

> *"Now whoever reflects on the rashness and absurdity of these tenets [held by other religions and philosophies], must inevitably entertain the highest respect and veneration for Epicurus, and perhaps even rank him in the number of those beings who are the subject of this dispute, for he alone first founded the idea of the existence of the gods on* ***the impression which nature herself hath made on the minds of all men****. For what nation, what people are there, who have not, without any learning, a natural idea, or prenotion of a Deity? Epicurus calls this* preconception*; that is,* ***an antecedent conception of the fact in the mind, without which nothing can be understood, inquired after, or discoursed on****; the force and advantage of which reasoning we receive from that celestial volume of Epicurus, concerning the Rule and Judgment of things.*
>
> *Here, then, you see the foundation of this question clearly laid; for since it is the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, custom, or law, that there are Gods; it must necessarily follow that* ***this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or rather innate in us****. That opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature must infallibly be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are Gods; for in this we have the concurrence, not only of almost all philosophers, but likewise of the ignorant and illiterate. It must be confessed that the point is established, that* ***we have naturally this idea****, as I said before, or pre-notion of the existence of the Gods.... On the same principle of reasoning we think that the Gods are happy and immortal; for that nature, which hath assured us that there are Gods,* ***has likewise imprinted in our minds*** *the knowledge of their immortality and felicity; and if so, what Epicurus hath declared in these words, is true: "That which is eternally happy cannot be burdened with any labour itself, nor can it impose any labour on another; nor can it be influenced by resentment or favour; because things which are liable to such feelings must be weak and frail."*

This viewpoint is squarely at odds with the standard notion of the "blank slate" – the "unscribed tablet" – popularized by Aristotle and Locke. Due to the loss of the original texts we have little additional ancient material with which to elaborate on the nature and function of the Anticipations. I take the liberty of submitting, however, in this volume devoted to Epicurus, that fruitful leads to the Epicurean position can be found in a curious set of dialogues produced in the late eighteenth century by the English philosopher Jackson Barwis. Barwis wrote explicitly in opposition to the Lockean view, and if we substitute in our minds for a moment the term "Nature" where Barwis refers to divinity, we may yet glimpse the outlines of an argument in support of Anticipations worthy of Epicurus himself:[3]

> *The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, moral principles. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.*
>
> *When we are told that* benevolence *is* pleasing*; that* malevolence *is* painful*; we are not convinced of*

these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain; not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

Every being in the universe, continued he, must receive its principles from the Divine Creator of all things. The reason of man can create no principles in the natures of things. It will, by proper application, enable him to know many things concerning them which, without reasoning, he never could have known; and to explain his knowledge, so acquired, to other men: but the principles of all created beings are engendered with, and accompany, the existence which they receive from their Creator. And in a point so truly essential as that of morality is to the nature of such a creature as man; God has not left him without innate and ever-inherent principles. He has not left to the imbecility of human reason to create what he knew it never could create, and what we know it never can create.

Even in the abstracted sciences of arithmetic and geometry, reason can create no principles in the natures of the things treated of. It can lay down axioms, and draw up propositions concerning numbers, extension, and solidity; but numbers, extension, and solidity, existed prior to any reasoning about them.

And here I must observe that the assent or dissent that we give to propositions in these sciences, which are but little interesting to our nature, is drawn from a source widely different from that which we give to moral *propositions. Thus, when we are told that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and see the demonstration; we say simply,* true. *That they are equal to three right angles; false. These things being irrelative to morals, they move no conscious sentiment, and do therefore only receive our bare assent or dissent as a mere object of sense; in the same manner as when we say a thing is, or is not, black or white, or round or square; we use our eyes, and are satisfied. But the truth or falsehood of moral propositions must be judged of by another measure; through a more interesting medium: we must apply to our internal sense*; *our divine monitor and guide within; through which the just and unjust, the right and wrong, the moral beauty and deformity of human minds, and of human actions, can only be perceived. And this* internal sense *must most undoubtedly be* innate*, as we have already shown; it could not otherwise have existence in us; we not being able, by reasoning, or by any other means, to give ourselves any* new sense*, or to create, in our nature, any principle at all. I therefore think Mr. Locke, in speaking of innate* moral *principles, ought, at least, to have made a difference between propositions relative to morals, and those which have no such relation.*

He paused. -- It seems so, said I; and seeing him ready to say more, I begged he would proceed.

He continued thus:

If we, in this matter, pay any regard to the analogy of nature, can we rationally allow innate principles, or inherent natural laws, to all the beings we have any knowledge of, and deny them to man alone? Were we to consider his soul and body as distinct natures, and not as too intimately united, perhaps, to be easily separated, could we allow innate principles to the body and none to the foul but what it must create for itself? -- It must be absurd. -- It must be absurd to suppose that man, who is utterly incapable of thoroughly understanding the true natures of those principles by which every other being exists and is actuated; should be left to contrive and create principles for the conduct of the most refined part of the creation that we are acquainted with; for the human soul. *Assuredly, as all created beings are endued with certain natural principles, necessarily innate, and ever-inherent in them; and which make their several different natures to be what they are; so man, or the soul of man, cannot, as a created being, exist without innate and ever-inherent principles.*

At this point we must leave the further pursuit of Anticipations for consideration in other volumes. The student of Epicurus is urged, however, to consult Barwis' *Dialogues Concerning Innate Principles* in full, and there he may well find keys to a much deeper understanding of this fascinating topic.

Waiting on Nature

Now that we have established the five senses, the pain/pleasure mechanism, and the Anticipations as the three fundamental faculties through which all knowledge is gained, we next turn to this important question: *"How does the mind process the information provided by these three faculties and determine from them whether an opinion is true or false?"*

On this subject, Diogenes Laertius recorded the following:

> *The Epicureans refer to 'opinion' as supposition, and say that it is at times true, and at times false. An opinion which is supported by evidence, and is not contradicted by other evidence is true. An opinion which is not supported by evidence, and is contradicted by other evidence, is false. On this account they have introduced the expression of "waiting," such as when, before pronouncing that a thing seen is a tower, we must wait until we approach it, and learn what it looks like when we are nearby.*

From this we see that Epicurus held that in order to determine whether an opinion is true we must verify the evidence provided by each faculty to determine if it provides an accurate picture of the thing being observed. The mind accomplishes this by first starting with the evidence that is nearby, and for which it has a clear view, and forming an opinion, or concept that it judges to be true, of the matter being considered. The mind then takes each new sensation provided by any faculty and compares it against this conception that is known to be true based on prior evidence. If the conception is supported by the evidence, and not contradicted by the evidence, then the opinion is true. If the mind finds that new evidence contradicts the opinion, or that it has formed an opinion without any evidence to support it, then the opinion must be judged to be false. In this process, the mind must consider all sensations from all the faculties, without ignoring any, because all sensations are true reporters of what they observe. Not until the mind obtains a clear view, with clear evidence supporting the conclusion, and with all evidence that at first seemed contradictory reconciled with it, may the mind reach the conclusion that its opinion is true.

Thus the determination of truth is a process in which the observer must actively seek out, gather, and process the information that is obtainable. One should expect that very often this process will take time, and until such time as a clear view is achieved – if ever – the observer must "wait" before reaching a conclusion about the matter. In the meantime, conflicting evidence requires that we classify the matter as uncertain, rather than true or false. In the example of perceiving whether a tower at a distance is square or round, the observer must not take a position on the tower's shape until he approaches close enough to be certain. In regard to the stick partially submerged in water, the observer must wait until he removes the stick from the water before he can take the position that it is straight.

It is critically important to keep separate in our minds the distinction between what is true, what is false, and what is uncertain. If we have gathered enough information to have a clear view, we must classify the matter as true or false. If we do not have sufficient information to have a clear view, we must classify the matter as uncertain. The failure to identify and keep these categories separate leads inevitably to confusion.

These principles from the Canon were enshrined in two Principal Doctrines which may be paraphrased as follows:

> *If you consider those ideas which are only an opinion, and must await further information before they can be verified, to be of equal authority with those ideas which bear about them an immediate certainty, you will not escape error. For if you do this you will be confusing doubtful opinions with those which are not doubtful, and true judgments with those of an uncertain character.*
>
> *You must not discard any evidence provided by a sense simply because it does not fit your prior conceptions, and you must always distinguish between those matters which are certain and those*

which are uncertain by keeping them separate. You must always do this so you can determine whether your conclusion goes beyond that which is justified by the actual evidence of the senses. You cannot be confident of your determination unless your conclusion is justified by actual, immediate, and clear evidence which comes from the senses, from the pain/pleasure mechanism, and from the conceptions of the mind which arise from the anticipations. If you fail to keep these distinctions in mind, you will be injecting error into the evaluation of the evidence provided by the senses, and you will destroy in that area of inquiry every means of distinguishing the true from the false.

By now we should see clearly the sense in which Epicurus meant "all sensations are true." In summary, the truth of a matter comes not through isolated sensations but through obtaining and evaluating varieties of evidence from each of the three faculties. Where we find that our opinion is confirmed by multiple observations of direct evidence, and no other evidence exists which contradicts that opinion, then we judge the opinion to be true. This process necessarily involves accounting for any limitations in the sensations or any distortions that may exist between us and the object being observed. Because all sensations truly report what they observe, we must never ignore the implications of any observation, or take any evidence out of context, or elevate the evidence of one sensation over contradictory evidence from another. When we fail to heed any evidence that contradicts our opinions from any faculty, or when we confuse what has been confirmed as true with what we should realize is only tentative, we are apt to go wrong. Before we reach firm conclusions we must wait until we have obtained a clear view that has been confirmed by direct evidence from our three faculties, and we must never allow any opinion that is not supported by evidence, or is contradicted by any evidence, to be considered true.

The Letters of Epicurus

Now we are prepared to observe how Epicurus himself applied these rules by turning to excerpts from two of his remaining letters, the letter to Herodotus and the letter to Pythocles.

First, the letter to Herodotus, on general aspects of the study of Nature:

Epicurus to Herodotus, wishing he may do well.

For those, Herodotus, who are not able to work through in detail all the things which I have written about Nature, or who are not able to investigate the longer books which I have composed on the subject, I have prepared this abridgment of the whole system on Nature to enable them to recall accurately the most fundamental points. I have done this so that on all occasions they may be able to refer to the most important principles as they devote themselves to the study of nature. And it is indeed necessary that as we proceed in the study of the details of the main principles, we always keep in mind the essential points of the whole system. This is because we have frequent need of the overall view, and it is only less often that we need the detailed exposition. For it is frequently necessary to go back to the main principles, and fix in our minds the principles on which we may rest, so that we may arrive at the most complete understanding of the truth.

An accurate knowledge of the details in the various areas of study may be obtained if we thoroughly grasp and keep in mind the general principles. Even for those who are well advanced in the study of nature, the most essential benefit of all accurate knowledge is the capacity to make a rapid use of what the mind has already observed and apprehended, and this can be done if we sum everything up in elementary principles and outlines. For it is not possible to summarize a complete description of the whole system if one cannot embrace in his own mind by means of short formulas all the principles that might be set out over time in greater detail.

The method I have described is valuable, and since I urge others to constantly occupy themselves with the study of nature, and I find my own happiness in a life engaged in that study, I have composed for you this summary of the most important principles of the whole doctrine.

First of all, Herodotus, one must determine with exactness the meaning and concept behind every word so that we are able to refer to that concept as an established standard as we pursue our research. Otherwise, the judgments that we reach will have no foundation, and we will go on studying to infinity without understanding, because we will be using words devoid of meaning. In fact, it is absolutely necessary that we grasp directly the fundamental concept which each word expresses, without need of reminder, if we are to have a standard on which to rest all our investigations. In order to do this we must keep all our investigations in accord with and reconciled to the evidence from our senses, especially in those matters in which our minds have grasped a clear view and reached a firm judgment. We must do this so we may identify that point in the examination where we find it necessary to reserve judgment as to the truth of a matter, which will occur when we do not have immediately perceptible to us sufficient evidence to form a clear determination.

When this foundation is once laid, we may pass on to the study of those things about which the evidence is not immediately clear to us. [On questions such as this there are a number of fundamental principles of nature which we must keep in mind:]

First of all, we must admit that nothing can come from that which does not exist. Were this fact otherwise, then everything would be produced from everything, and there would be no need of any first beginnings, or seeds.

Second, if that which disappeared were so absolutely destroyed as to become non-existent, then everything would soon perish, as the things into which they would be dissolved would have no

existence. As a result of these first two principles, we conclude that the universe as a whole has always been in existence as it now is and always will be in existence. For there is nothing else into which the universal whole can change, and there is nothing beyond the universe which can penetrate into it and produce anything new.

Next, we observe that everything that exists in the universe is formed from bodies that have a material existence of some kind. We know this because our senses bear witness in every case that bodies have a real existence, and the evidence of the senses, as I have said before, must be the rule of our reasoning about everything, even that which we are not able to perceive directly. We also consider that what we call the void, or space, has a real existence, as otherwise there would be nothing on which the bodies could be contained, or across which they could move, as we see that they really do move. As a result of these observations we conclude that one cannot conceive, either through human perception, or through any analogy founded on perception, anything that exists which is not either an attribute, or an incident of material things or empty space, which we call matter and void.

Of those things that are material, some are composed of single elements, and others are formed from combinations of elements. The elements are indivisible, and thus are impervious to any kind of transformation. If this were not so, everything would eventually dissolve into non-existence. The elements exist unchanging by their own nature, even though the combined bodies which they compose change and dissolve, because the elements are absolutely solid, and as such they offer no point through which any destructive force can enter. It follows, therefore, as a matter of absolute necessity, that the fundamental material of the universe must be composed of elements that are themselves indivisible.

In addition, the universe is boundless. We know this because we observe that anything which has a bound has an extreme point on that boundary, and that extreme point is seen to face something else. Because the universe has no extreme point, it has no limit, and because it has no limit it must be boundless.

Furthermore, the universe is boundless both in the number of material things and in the extent of empty space. We know this because if the empty space were boundless, but the number of material things were not, then the material things would never come together, but would be carried about and scattered throughout empty space, never colliding and never staying in one place. On the other hand, if the number of material things were boundless, but the extent of empty space were not, the material things would not have room to take their place or move about.

…

[As we move to the consideration of phenomena such as the nature of sight and images], we must consider that there may be [various] manners in which things of this kind are produced. But we must never accept anything in these various possibilities which at all contradicts the senses, and [in evaluating these things] we must consider in what way the senses are exercised and the relationship that is established between the external objects we observe and ourselves.

…

[We must also consider] the possibility of error and false judgments. These arise due to our supposing that a preconceived idea will be confirmed, or at any event will not be overturned, by additional evidence when we receive it. Falsehood and error arise when we form an opinion prematurely, without waiting for additional evidence to confirm or to contradict our conclusion before reaching it. [We must always recognize that] the representations we receive from images have been received by our intelligence like reflections from a mirror, whether those images are perceived in a dream or through any other conceptions of the mind or the senses. But [we cannot conclude that] these representations resemble the objects from which they came closely enough so that we can call them real and true unless we are examining objects that we perceive directly. Error

arises when we receive impressions which our minds accept as a direct representation but which in fact are not. In such cases, due to considerations that are unique to ourselves, our minds mistakenly take these indirect perceptions and form conceptions which go beyond the reality of the actual object. Error results when our minds reach conclusions based on evidence that is not confirmed, or is contradictory, rather than based on evidence that we directly observe to be confirmed and uncontradicted.

We must carefully preserve these principles so that we will not reject the authority of our faculties when we perceive truth directly. We must also observe these principles so that we will not allow our minds to believe that what is false or what is speculative has been established with equal firmness with what is true, because this results in everything being thrown into confusion.

As to the heavenly phenomena, such as the motion and course of the stars, their rising and setting, the eclipses, and all other appearances of this sort, we must beware of thinking that they are produced by any superior being whose business it is to regulate the order of the world. For a god is a being which is immortal and perfectly happy, free of cares and anxieties. Benevolence and anger, however, far from being compatible with perfection, are on the contrary the consequence of weakness, of fear, and of the desire which a thing has for something that it lacks. Therefore we must not fancy that the globes of fire which roll on in space are gods which enjoy a perfect happiness, and which give themselves, with reflection and wisdom, the motions which they possess.

On this subject we must respect the established notions, but only if they do not at all contradict the respect due to the truth. For nothing is more calculated to trouble the soul than the strife of contradictory notions and principles. We must therefore conclude that from the first movement of the heavenly bodies at the time of the organization of the universe, there results some sort of necessary cause which regulates their course to this very day.

Let us be well assured that it is to natural science which belongs the determination of the causes of these heavenly phenomena. Happiness comes through the study of natural science, by which we acquire the knowledge of analogous phenomena, which then aids us in the understanding of ethical matters. The heavenly phenomena, on the other hand, admit of several explanations. There is no reason that they must necessarily be of a particular character, and one may explain them in various manners. In short, a moment's consideration will show that the heavenly phenomena have no relationship with gods, which are imperishable and happy beings which suffer no destruction or confusion.

As for the theoretical knowledge of the rising and setting of the stars, of the movement of the sun between the tropics, and of the eclipses, and all other similar phenomena, that is utterly useless as far as having any influence upon happiness. Moreover, those who possess knowledge of the movement of the stars, but are nonetheless ignorant of Nature and of the most probable causes of that movement, are no more protected from fear than if they were in the most complete ignorance. Such men experience the most lively fears, for the knowledge of the motion of the stars that they do possess inspires in them troubles which they cannot resolve, and those troubles cannot be dissipated except through a clear perception of the reasons for these phenomena.

As for us, we find many explanations of the motions of the sun, of the rising and setting of the stars, of the eclipses, and of similar phenomena. One must not think that this method of explanation is insufficient to procure happiness and tranquility. Let us content ourselves with examining how it is that similar phenomena are brought about directly under our own eyes, and let us apply these observations to the heavenly objects and to everything which is known only indirectly. Let us despise those people who are unable to distinguish those facts which may be explained in various ways from those facts which can only be explained in one single way. Let us disdain those men who do not understand the means of explaining the heavenly phenomena in ways that do not excite fear in us. Once we understand that a phenomenon can be brought about by Nature in any of several natural

ways, rather than by the gods in a way that inspires fear, we shall not be more troubled at the sight of it than if we actually knew the real cause.

We must also recall that the thing which principally troubles the spirit of men is the persuasion which they cherish that the stars are gods, [which we must always remember are] beings that are imperishable and perfectly happy. Such men fear that their thoughts and actions are displeasing to the will of these superior beings. Deluded by these fables, such men fear an eternity of punishment, and they fear the insensibility of death, as if that could affect them. What do I say? It is not the falseness of their beliefs, but their lack of knowledge and blindness, which governs them in all things. This is true to such a degree that, not even considering the truth of whether they really fear their gods, they are just as much troubled as if they really believed in these vain phantoms.

Real freedom from this kind of trouble consists in being emancipated from all these things, and in preserving the recollection of the principles which we have established, especially those that are most essential. Accordingly, it is well to pay careful attention to the phenomena with which we are familiar and to the sensations, both general and particular, which we have confirmed to be true. In sum, we must take note of the immediate evidence which each of our faculties furnishes to us. For if we pay attention to those points where uncertainty arises, we shall divine the causes of confusion and fear correctly. In this way we may trace back the heavenly phenomena to their causes, and deliver ourselves from those feelings which inspire the common people with extreme terror at every step.

This, Herodotus, is a summary and abridgment of the whole question of natural philosophy. Study for yourself to prove that this reasoning is valid, and preserve it carefully in your memory. For the man who allows himself to be directed by it, even though he may not proceed to a profound study of the details, will have a great superiority of character over other men. He will personally discover a great number of truths which I have set forth in my other works, and these truths, being stored in his memory, will be a constant assistance to him. By means of these principles, those who study the details sufficiently will be able to bring their detailed knowledge to bear on the general subject, and they will understand without difficulty almost the entire circle of natural philosophy. Those, on the other hand, who have not yet arrived at a comprehensive understanding, and who have not been able to hear me lecture on these subjects, will be able to understand the main part of the essential ideas, and from them they will derive assistance for the tranquility and happiness of life.

Next, we turn to Epicurus's letter to Pythocles on matters of astronomy:

Epicurus to Pythocles, wishing he may do well.

Cleon has brought me your letter, in which you continue to show towards me an affection worthy of the friendship which I have for you. You devote all your care, so you tell me, to engraving in your memory those ideas which contribute to the happiness of life. And you entreat me at the same time to send you a simple abridgment and abstract of my ideas on the heavenly phenomena, in order that you may preserve the recollection of them without difficulty. For, you say, what I have written on this subject in my other works is difficult to recall, even with continual study.

I willingly yield to your desire, and I have good hope that in fulfilling what you ask I shall also be useful to many others, especially to those who are as yet novices in the real knowledge of Nature, and to those to whom the perplexities and the ordinary affairs of life leave but little time for leisure. Be careful then to seize on these precepts thoroughly, engrave them deeply in your memory, and meditate on them with the abridgment addressed to Herodotus, which I also send to you.

Know then, that the only aim of the knowledge of the heavenly phenomena, both those which we can observe directly, and those on which we can only speculate, is freedom from anxiety, and the calmness which is derived from a firm belief; and this is the aim of every science.

It is not good to desire what is impossible and to endeavor to articulate a uniform theory about

everything. Accordingly, we should not adopt here the method which we have followed in our researches into ethics or in the solution of problems of natural philosophy. There we said, for instance, that there are no other things except matter and the void, and that the atoms are the principle elements of things, and so on. In other words, we gave a precise and simple explanation for every fact that could be conformed to what we see [and observe directly].

We cannot act in the same way with respect to the heavenly phenomena. These phenomena may arise from several different causes, and we may arrive at many different explanations on this subject that are equally agreeable with the appearances that we can observe through the senses. In regard to the stars and planets we do not have the ability to reason out new principles and to lay down absolute rules for the interpretation of Nature, because the only guide for us to follow here are the appearances themselves. Our object then that we have in view is not to set up a system of vain opinions, but rather to attain a life that is exempt from every kind of fear and turmoil.

So long as we accept only those explanations of the heavenly phenomena that are conformable with the evidence we see, we are not inspired with any fears, as are those who allow that any hypothesis at all may possibly be true. But if we abandon the rule of accepting only those hypotheses that are reasonable, and we renounce the attempt to explain the heavenly phenomena by means of analogies that are founded on the evidence provided by senses, then we are conducting ourselves in complete disregard of the science of Nature in favor of falling into fables.

It is possible that the heavenly phenomena may only appear to be similar to those things that we see taking place around us here on earth, but that in fact there is no real analogy, because the movement of the stars and planets may be produced by many different causes. Nevertheless, we must observe how each of these things appear to us, and we must distinguish the different circumstances under which they occur to determine if what we see in the skies can be explained by analogous phenomena which arise closer and under our own eyes.

...

It is possible that the moon has a light of her own, or that she reflects that of the sun. For we see around us many objects which are luminous themselves, and many others which have only a borrowed light. We will not be alarmed by any of the celestial phenomena if we always recall that there are many explanations that are possible. No fears will arise unless we allow ourselves to be foolishly carried away to propose an inconsistent and separate explanation for each phenomenon, sometimes in one way and sometimes in another.

The appearance of a face on the moon may depend either on the features of the moon, or on some interference with our vision, or on any other reasonable cause capable of accounting for such an appearance. One must not neglect to apply this same method to all the heavenly phenomena; for from the moment when one comes to entertain any theories that contradict the evidence of the senses, it will be impossible to possess perfect tranquility and happiness.

The eclipses of the sun and moon may depend either on the fact that these celestial bodies extinguish themselves, a phenomenon which we often see produced here under our eyes, or on the fact that other bodies, the earth, the heaven, or something else of the same kind, interposes between them and us. We must compare whatever different explanations appear reasonable to what we observe, and recall that it is not impossible that many causes may at one and the same time concur to produce the same effect.

...

The regular and periodic march of the heavenly phenomena has nothing in it that would surprise us if we would only pay attention to the analogous facts which take place here on earth under our own eyes. Above all things, let us beware against making a god interpose itself here, for we ought always to consider a god to be exempt from all toil and perfectly happy. Otherwise we shall find ourselves

giving vain explanations to the heavenly phenomena, as has happened already to a crowd of philosophers. Because they do not recognize what is really possible and what is not, they have fallen into vain theories, supposing that for all phenomena there is but one single mode of production, and rejecting all other explanations which are also founded on probability. They have adopted the most unreasonable opinions because they failed to place in the forefront of the analysis the evidence of the senses, which ought always to serve as the first basis for explaining all phenomena.

The difference in the length of nights and days may arise from the fact that the passage of the sun above the earth is more or less rapid according to the length of the regions of the sky through which it passes. Another cause may relate to the possibility that certain regions are passed through more rapidly than others, as is seen to be the case by our own eyes in earthly matters to which we can compare the heavenly phenomena. Those who maintain on this point that only one explanation is possible put themselves in opposition to facts, and lose sight of the bounds set to human knowledge.

The predictions about the future which are derived from the stars may, like those which we derive from animals, arise from simple coincidence. They may also have other causes, for example, some change in the air. These two suppositions both harmonize equally with the facts, but it is not possible to attribute these things to one cause or to another.

...

It is possible that thunder arises from the movement of the winds revolving in the cavities of the clouds, of which we may see an image in vessels of liquid in our own daily use. It may also arise from the noise of fire acted upon by the wind inside them, and from the tearings and ruptures of the clouds when they have received a sort of crystalline consistency. As is often the case, experience drawn from our senses teaches us that the heavenly phenomena, and thunder in particular, may be produced in many different manners.

....

The thunderbolt may be produced either by a violent condensation of the winds, or by their rapid motion and collisions. .... In short, one may give a number of explanations of the thunderbolt. Above all things we must always be on guard against fables, and fables will easily be avoided if one follows faithfully the phenomena that are observed directly in searching for the explanation of those things which are only perceived indirectly.

...

... [T]o assign one single cause to all these phenomena, when the experience of our senses suggests several, is folly. This is the conduct of ignorant astrologers who covet a vain knowledge and who assign imaginary causes to facts because they wish to leave wholly to the gods the care of the government of the universe.

... To give one uniform and positive explanation of all these facts, is not consistent with the conduct of any people but those who love to flash prodigies in the eyes of the multitude.

....

Further, the forecasts some give based on the conduct of certain animals arise from a fortuitous combination of circumstances; for there is no necessary connection between certain animals and winter. These animals do not produce winter; nor is there any divine being sitting aloft watching the exits of these animals, and then fulfilling signs of this kind. No folly such as this would occur to any being who is even moderately comfortable, much less to a god who is possessed of perfect happiness.

Imprint all these precepts in your memory, Pythocles, and you will easily escape fables, and it will be easy for you to discover other truths that are analogous to these. Above all, apply yourself to the study of general principles of the infinite, and of questions of this kind, and to the investigation of the

different criteria of knowledge, and of the principles of choice and avoidance, and to the study of the chief good, keeping in mind the purpose of all our researches. When the general questions are once resolved in your mind, the means to resolve all particular difficulties will become clear to you.

As to those who will not apply themselves to these principles, such men will neither be able to give a good explanation for these same matters, nor to reach that end to which all our researches tend, [a life of happiness].

In Conclusion and In Outline

The achievement of a life of happiness is no more accidental than the formation of the universe itself. If Epicurus taught anything at all, it was that happiness comes not by plucking flowers at first sight, and pursuing the pleasures of the moment, but by applying the tripod of truth – the faculties that Nature has herself provided – in the manner that Nature has established. In erecting this tripod Nature *has* established that "all sensations are true." The three legs of the tripod *do* report to the mind exactly what they observe, and the faculties *do not* lie. The faculties neither add to nor subtract from the information that they receive, and they do not judge, evaluate, or process that information – they are true *witnesses* to what they observe.

Considering the legs of the tripod to be as witnesses in a courtroom is a useful analogy. Just as a frequently occurs in court, a truthful witness may report accurately what he experienced, with no bias or prejudice. This testimony may accurately convey what the witness *believes* to be the truth, but nevertheless the jury may err if it relies solely on the testimony of one witness which is not corroborated by others, *because a single witness may not know the entire story*. No matter how honest a single witness may endeavor to be, it is the task of the jury to *evaluate* the witness' testimony to determine whether the witness possessed a full and complete picture of the object being observed, or whether additional testimony is needed. This is the role of the human mind in regard to sensations: the mind must adequately consider any limiting or distorting conditions under which the sensation was received in order to avoid misinterpreting the significance of any single sensation. When the eyes report that they see a large object at a distance, the mind must compensate for the distance, and for the single perspective, as it evaluates whether the object is round or square, or indeed whether it is a tower at all. When the eyes report that a stick in water appears to be bent, we apply our knowledge of the distortion that water causes to light which travels through it. In each case, we must suspend judgment until we have obtained the necessary information to have a clear view – we must act to walk toward the tower; we must remove the stick from the water, and until then we must clearly hold in our minds the limitations of the information we have received.

A true understanding of the tripod of truth also allows us to place in proper perspective the role of the pain / pleasure mechanism. As in all things, Epicurus held that *Nature* is the ultimate guide of conduct, and it is *Nature* that has specified what men find pleasurable and what men find painful. Epicurus' enemies argue that Epicurus erected "sensual pleasure" in the same position that the priests place "god," or the Platonist philosophers place "virtue." This is a complete inversion of the truth: pleasure is good only because *Nature provides that it is good*; pain is to be avoided only because *Nature provides it*. Epicurus did not erect Pleasure as an object of worship in place of the gods, it is Nature that from the beginning of time has erected its own authority, and over this authority neither priests nor philosophers have any ability to appeal.

Consider once again the tripod of truth as portrayed on the Boscoreale cup, shown on the cover of this volume. Pleasure, in the form of the bread for which both Epicurus and the piglet reach, does not exist floating in the air on its own, disconnected from reality, but based firmly on the three legs provided by Nature. It is *Nature,* not Epicurus, which endows all men with the pleasure / pain mechanism as a guide to proper conduct, equal in significance to the five senses and the Anticipations. But pleasure and pain constitute only one of the three legs of the tripod, and it is Nature, which has erected this tripod, which we see when we view the tripod as a whole.

It is thus completely Natural that men must frequently forsake pleasure and choose pain, because Nature's law for man is not found in momentary physical pleasure, but in the achievement and maintenance of a healthy mind and a healthy body, which alone can produce a life of happiness. The treason against Nature committed by ages of priests and false philosophers arises because some men

simply can not or will not accept Nature's verdict. Rejecting what can plainly be seen in the lives of every cat, dog, or other living sentient being, such men refuse to accept that Nature has established the pursuit of individual happiness as the goal of life *for men also*. It is nothing less than rebellion against Nature to insist that "virtue" or "the will of god" or "the good of others" – or any other standard – is superior to that which has been established by Nature. This is the true significance of those who look at the wonders of the universe and see "god" – such men are the despicable lawyers who have occupied the shadowy courtrooms of temples and academia throughout the ages, always ready to twist the evidence provided by Nature to suit their own corrupt prejudices.

The glory of Epicurus was to provide the example of how the vices of error and corruption can be recognized and defeated. The Epicureans recognized that happiness is guaranteed to no one, but that regardless of our circumstances, the wise man can achieve happiness, if he will follow the path set out by Nature. But this is a path that does not provide for long periods of rest at any point – life is short, and the constant task as we proceed through it is to apply our minds to the study of Nature. One method Epicurus recommended to assist us in this study was the preparation of outlines, so just as Thomas Jefferson closed his most famous letter on Epicurus with an outline of the master's principles, we therefore close this work with another such summary:

Only the foolish take the position that knowledge is impossible. Nature *requires* that we seek out and obtain knowledge if we wish to live happily – or at all. The scope of knowledge open to us is vast, and we should seek to expand it throughout our lives. It is equally important, however, always to remember the scope open to us is limited, and it is not good to ask for that which is impossible. There are Natural limits to the amount of knowledge a single man can obtain, we must keep a clear view of the limitations imposed by Nature. It is a critical mistake to concern ourselves with attempting to pursue knowledge beyond that which Nature allows, or through means other than those which Nature provides.

Nature provides men three faculties through which to obtain knowledge of reality. These three faculties are: the Five Senses, the Passions, and the Anticipations. The Five Senses are seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. The Passions are the feelings of pleasure and pain. The Anticipations are intuitive natural dispositions that Nature provides to assist us in the formation of abstract concepts.

The three faculties are reliable because they are true witnesses to what they observe. They do not evaluate, and they neither add to nor subtract from the information they receive.

None of the three faculties can contradict the other because they all rule supreme within their own area of expertise. Sensations from one faculty cannot invalidate sensations from another faculty, nor can different sensations from the same faculty invalidate each other. All information received through the faculties must be considered and reconciled if we are to gain a clear view of the matter being observed and separate the true from the false.

It is the role of the mind to take the evidence provided by the three faculties and process that information properly. The mind does not operate automatically, however, and error can occur during the process of evaluating the evidence. The key to avoiding error is to obtain a clear view of the matter being considered.

Until such time as we have obtained a clear view of a matter, we must "wait" before we reach a conclusion about it. When we do not have a clear view, we must firmly identify the matter as uncertain, and wait until we are able to obtain further evidence before taking a position on the truth of the matter.

At all times we must keep separate in our minds those things which we know to be true or false from those things which are uncertain. If we confuse together those things that are certain with those

things that are uncertain, we will lose grasp of the method by which we know anything to be true. Not only will we become hopelessly confused, we will then have no means to correct our error, and to separate the true from the false.

In order to arrive at truth in any new matter we must always start with those things for which we already have a clear view. We must then reason by analogy, by proportion, and comparison to separate those things that are uncertain from those things that we know to be true. Starting with those things that are directly before our eyes, we then apply that knowledge to those things which are distant or obscure, and in this way we expand the range of our clear view.

In those situations where we do not have a clear view of a matter, we must accept as possible any alternative which is supported by and can be squared with the evidence that we do know to be true. We must not, however, accept any theory for which there is no evidence whatsoever, or any theory which contradicts those matters that we do know to be true, and we must not allow ourselves to take inconsistent positions. When the facts support the possibility that any of several alternatives may be true, it is wrong to assert that we know which alternative is correct.

Abstract reasoning, or allegations of "revelation," *separated from the evidence provided by the three faculties*. are not direct sources of knowledge, nor do they rank higher or even equal in importance with the three faculties provided by Nature. This is because reason relies for its foundation on the accuracy of the sensations received through the three faculties; likewise revelation has no force without evidence from the faculties to support it. Truth comes through obtaining a clear view of the evidence being observed, not through abstract reasoning or revelation.

Although reason is dependent on the three faculties, the process of proper reasoning is the process of applying the laws of consistency, contradiction, and comparison to evaluate the evidence obtained through the Natural faculties. The wise man will govern all important affairs of his life by reasoning based on the evidence provided by the three faculties.

The first and most basic observation which we can see with our own eyes and can verify through our other faculties is that nothing is ever created from nothing. We know this not because we reason it to be true, but because all of the evidence that we obtain from our faculties establishes that all things come from other things. Never do we see any thing come from nothing.

Our second basic observation is that we also see that no thing is ever destroyed completely to nothing. Once again, we know this not because reason establishes it, but because our faculties establish for us, by experience, that nothing is ever destroyed completely to nothing.

Through these first two observations (that nothing comes from nothing, and that nothing goes to nothing), our faculties have provided all the proof we need to conclude that the universe as a whole has always existed. Those things that we see before our own eyes may constantly change, but they are never created from nothing by any god or by any supernatural force, nor are they ever completely destroyed. Some may argue that a reasonable case can be constructed that the universe was created by a supernatural god. But this is an example of the error that results from reasoning which is not based on evidence that our faculties can verify, and which contradicts existing evidence that we do know to be true. For all the evidence that we can observe establishes that no thing ever comes from nothing, and to accept for a moment that any thing ever came from nothing would be to accept something that contradicts all that we already know from our own experience to be true.

We also see that all of the universe is composed of a combination of things that exist and empty space, which we call matter and void. Our senses establish that all that we observe is composed of matter and void, and it is on these observations that our reason validates that nothing else exists but matter and void.

Because we have a clear view that matter is never created from nothing or totally destroyed, we reason by analogy that the fundamental material of the universe must consist of some type of indivisible particles which are themselves indestructible and possess unique properties that are eternal and unchanging.

All things, including living things such as men, are made up of this fundamental material of the universe. We can also observe that men and other living beings have free will, and can decide for themselves in what direction they wish to move. We thus conclude that the motion of the fundamental material of the universe is not fully controlled by laws of necessity that confine them to a necessary course. At least some of this fundamental material has the capacity to "swerve" – at no fixed time and no fixed place – from the course it otherwise would take.

From these basic observations, and others similar to them, we can derive truth about the nature of the universe, and gain confidence that our existence is governed by Natural Laws, rather than being governed by any divine being whose whims can override the laws of Nature.

Nature has provided that the desires and the knowledge necessary to live our lives are easy to obtain, and that the desires and the knowledge men naturally seek are also readily attainable by our efforts. But Nature has also provided that the desires which are vain and idle, including the desires for knowledge beyond that which is Natural are difficult or impossible to obtain or possess. For these arrangements we should be thankful to Nature, for if we follow Nature's laws and live our lives wisely, honorably, and justly, happiness will follow.

We conclude our introduction to the Tripod of Truth the same words of Cicero with which we began:

In sum, then, the theory I have set forth is clearer and more luminous than daylight itself. It is derived entirely from Nature's source. My whole discussion relies for confirmation on the unbiased and unimpeachable evidence of the senses. Lisping babies, even dumb animals, prompted by Nature's teaching, can almost find the voice to proclaim to us that in life there is no welfare but pleasure, no hardship but pain – and their judgment in these matters is neither corrupted nor biased. Ought we then not to feel the greatest gratitude to Epicurus, the man who listened to these words from Nature's own voice, and grasped their meaning so firmly and so fully that he was able to guide all sane-minded men into the path of peace and happiness, of calmness and repose?

[1] This analysis is drawn from the work of Norman W. DeWitt, a twentieth-century authority on Epicurus, and author of the book "*Epicurus and His Philosophy*."

[2] Further discussion of Epicurus' view of Preconceptions is beyond the scope of this work. Readers who seek further information on this topic should refer to Chapter VIII of Norman DeWitt's ***Epicurus and His Philosophy***

[3] I have collected Barwis' work in my ebook volume "On Three Legs We Stand."