

Updated FAQ Entry: Why Should I Care About Epicurean Physics When So Much Science Has Changed In The Last 2000 Years?

Post by “Peter Konstans” of June 17, 2026 at 10:12 AM

The notion of moral responsibility is not the same as the notion that human behavior is (to some degree) reformable. Moral responsibility implies that humans are rational agents endowed with free will. If one accepts physicalism, that is just false, an illusion that stems from folk psychology.

Humans act the way they act for two inexorable reasons and for no other reasons. One reason is a rational attempt to adapt to environmental pressures in a way that increases their biological fitness. For example, a guy in some ghetto becoming a two-bit criminal to make some decent money, or the two women we encounter in Procopius' Wars who were going around slaughtering people for meat to survive the famine caused by Justinian's war in Italy.

The other reason is simply the unique configuration of someone's brain chemistry. If you were born with such anomalies in your brain chemistry that conduce you to derive pleasure from the suffering of others, then your moral behavior can't and won't change unless some suitable pharmacological substance steps in to interfere with the chemistry.

So common sense can kick and scream as much as it likes but humans are not responsible for their behavior, whatever the heck that behavior is. They do what they do because from their point of view they have perfectly compelling neurobiological (and biology is just physics) reasons to do precisely what they do.

No philosophy, no advice, no magic formula made up of a string of words can bring down the iron walls of the environment and the brain. Someone's environment is what it is and someone's brain is what it is. This fixes human behavior in full.

Now, the absence of moral agency doesn't mean humans can't influence other humans. This is trivially easy to do by means of manipulating the circuits of human neurobiology that govern pleasure and pain. This technique is morally neutral and people use it as they please both to benefit others and to do harm.

For example, all sorts of scammers and swindlers use it to extract some leverage by taking advantage of the many vulnerabilities caused by people's primeval need to seek pleasure and comfort and to avoid danger and pain. And once they have the leverage, they use it against them.

Epicurean philosophy is just another means to influence people's neurobiology in a manner that benefits people to the maximum extent that the environment and the unique brains of the recipients allow it. This has nothing to do with moral agency, moral responsibility, free will, the social contract or other such intellectual fables.

And there's no such thing as wisdom by the way. There's just knowledge of how the physics of something works and then there's a set of illusions about how it works. So wisdom is indistinguishable from knowledge which is why it's impossible to maximize the chances of a decent life without being illusion-free. And here's where physics kicks in.

In fact, if Epicurus lived today he would probably advise us that we shouldn't read any literature that isn't strictly science-based. Works of fiction and storytelling are good at entertaining us but they're also good at misleading us about the nature of reality and ruining our life. It's no accident that people who consume lots of romantic novels suck at actual relationships.