

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 19, 2026 at 8:15 AM

Epicurus is right that some things happen by chance but chance works on the basis of mathematical probability and probability works on the basis of determinism. If I have a fair six-sided die and throw it my result will be a number from 1 to 6. It will never be a 7. If I throw the die 100 times in a row my chance of getting the same number is one in a few thousands of the number of atoms in the observable universe and there's no way to alter that chance as long as the die is fair. If some way to increase the odds with a fair die existed then that would be clear evidence of the supernatural.

If, as all the evidence suggests, the supernatural doesn't exist, then we must conclude by logical necessity that the physical facts fix all the facts. The universe is just fermions and bosons, and everything that can be made up of them, and nothing that can't be made up of them. All the facts about fermions and bosons determine or 'fix' all the other facts about reality and whatever exists in this universe or any other universe if, as physics may end up showing, there are other universes.

Another way of expressing this fact-fixing by physics is to say that all the other facts—the chemical, biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural facts supervene on the physical facts and are ultimately explained by them.

Unless we posit that there is an immortal soul or something, humans are just natural objects, in other words physical scum (or physical foam if 'scum' sounds politically incorrect and scary). In this case whatever humans can and can't do is fixed by physics. So Epicurus is right that some things happen because of 'us' but 'we' are just physics and we can't do something that physics doesn't allow. The physics of our bodies allow some unlucky people to get cancer even if they avoid all the possible environmental risks of cancer. So cancer and many other bad things happen because of 'us' and indeed they 'must' happen simply because physics allow them to happen and whatever physics allow 'must' occur by statistical necessity.

Money is not something we agreed on. Agreement is only possible when there are workable alternatives to choose from which aren't chosen. Unless one thinks that barter exchange is how a complex society can conduct its business then money is a political and economic factum brutum that we absolutely require. It is political in the sense that you need political power to issue it and it's economic in the sense that no complex society can possibly exist without it.

What money can buy depends on the current property relations which in turn depend on the level of technology. In a society like Afghanistan which is just a patchwork of tribal affiliations money can and does exist because the patchwork is complex enough. But the primitive arrangement of the current property relations there means that money can't buy you everything that is in high demand. For example sex isn't for sale. Either you have to break the 'law', meaning the tribal customs, to get it (and then die) or you have to buy or sell your way into 'marriage' (which in Afghanistan usually just means having a slave-wife, the same as the pallakidai of Epicurus' time) instead.

In the stone age no money is possible because the level of technology doesn't allow complex societies at all. In the far more complex agrarian societies (made gradually more complex as the advent of metallurgy, wheeled transport and horse riding enabled the easy subjugation of small communities and villages) money was not yet strictly necessary for biological survival but it was quite necessary for buying the political right not to be bullied. Everyone had to find some good money to pay their taxes (used to be called tribute) and if you couldn't meet your obligations you were either converted into some form of alienable property in the form of enslavement or you had to join the ranks of outcasts such as the late Roman bagaudae to survive for as long as you could, which was usually not very long.

In industrialized societies money is strictly necessary for biological survival as you can't find any decent food and shelter at all without it. Since eating from trash cans, doing cheap drugs, sleeping on benches and getting beaten by the cops is not a workable lifestyle alternative (it's more of a deathstyle than a lifestyle), you need to secure a steady source of liquidity to buy groceries and also to buy your rights to use a shelter by paying mortgages. Those who occupy themselves with having enough liquidity to make ends meet are poor and those who occupy themselves with the exercise and management of their property rights are rich. That's how the physics of society work and that's the only way they can work under the current arrangements (which of course weren't chosen).

So money is not a status symbol, it's the physical force that makes the world (meaning human affairs) go around. In terms of liquidity even the nominally richest people are poorer than they seem. Elon Musk is on paper the richest person in the world but he couldn't convert his nominal wealth into cash if he wanted to without immediately seeing his wealth evaporate. That's because wealth actually comes from holding property rights, which are just legal papers that are only as strong as the willingness and ability of the state apparatus to guarantee and enforce them, not from holding money.

If you had one billion in cash stashed under your bed you would be holding money. But if you did nothing to convert that money into property rights you wouldn't truly be rich in a social sense, your wealth wouldn't be secure and you wouldn't gain any significant social status.

Of course, social status should not be confused with power. Having social status means you enjoy broad esteem (people love giving you compliments) but having broad esteem, doesn't mean you have any meaningful power. In the late Republic many Roman senators (nominally

the rulers of the universe) belatedly realized to their horror that their life and property, even their beloved dutiful wives, weren't secure at all.

Power is the practically uncontested ability to alter energy flows (meaning the arrangement and combination of human bodies and socially useful things) at will. Governments can freeze the assets of people they don't like at will. That's true power. In societies with highly complex property relations, 'power' is not embodied in persons but diffused in institutions. That's why it's possible to publicly mock nominal rulers like prime ministers and presidents, and even make a career out of it, without suffering any harm.