

# What If Anything Has Changed About Human Nature In the Last 2000 Years?

**Post by “Don” of January 3, 2024 at 4:48 AM**

[Epicurean Sage - Living Unknown](#)

The Epicureans are said to have encouraged *lathe biosas*, living unknown or not calling attention to oneself. This is a controversial fragment, but Diogenes...  
sites.google.com

While the phrase *lathē biōsas* is mentioned specifically by Plutarch and Julian, the sentiment has echoes elsewhere in the philosophy. The link above is my translation and commentary on those "characteristics of the Epicurean sage" as outlined by Diogenes Laertius that, from my perspective, illustrate this concept of "keeping one's head down" or, at least, not seeking out fame or not being concerned with making a name for oneself.

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**Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 3, 2024 at 2:28 PM**

So, to all you smart, interesting people (all of you) I ask a question: since the classical authors referenced here lived 2000+ years ago, has anything changed? What, if anything, is new in the philosophy of life (contrasted to these classical perspectives)?

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**Post by “Godfrey” of January 3, 2024 at 3:17 PM**

To me, that question is so open ended as to be pointless to attempt to answer. Would it perhaps be more useful to ask what are some commonalities between then and now? After all, a case could be made that most, if not all, of contemporary western philosophy is built on the foundations laid 2000+ years ago.

Maybe there's a more specific way to ask the previous question that would be more helpful for discussion.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of January 3, 2024 at 3:40 PM

To clarify, let me rephrase the original question:

"So, to all you smart, interesting neurobiologists I ask a question: since the classical authors referenced here lived 2000+ years ago, has anything changed? What, if anything, is new in the understanding of the functioning of life (contrasted to these classical perspectives)?"

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of January 3, 2024 at 3:51 PM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

... since the classical authors referenced here lived 2000+ years ago, has anything changed? What, if anything, is new in the philosophy of life (contrasted to these classical perspectives)?

We leave it for each individual to clearly see that modern science has greatly developed beyond what was known in the time of Epicurus.

As for the existential issues, these still apply today...the fear of death, unnecessarily becoming anxious regarding mortality or entertaining ideas about an after-life, god, etc, etc...what Epicurus had to say still has relevance.

The goal for this EpicureanFriends forum is to study the extant texts and to apply the philosophy as presented by Epicurus. A student of Epicurus takes the aspects of the philosophy which resonate and tests it, and applies it to their own lives.

So this forum is a place for focusing solely on what Epicurus taught.

I wonder, perhaps you aren't feel the resonance 🤔. I'm not out to convert or convince anyone 😊. Of course anyone is welcome to study other philosophies, and one can find elsewhere many other places on the internet for other philosophies.

The current limitation of this Epicurean forum right now is that there is a lot of information which is not presented in a very "linear" manner. The threads are not straightforward, and require a lot reading. Each person will need to dive in for themselves, and also need to study the extant texts in order to make sense of it all. We also recommend a book by Norman De Witt "Epicurus and His Philosophy".

I urge you and wish you well, to pursue what personally works best for you. 😊

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## Post by “Martin” of January 3, 2024 at 9:43 PM

### Quote

since the classical authors referenced here lived 2000+ years ago, has anything changed? What, if anything, is new in the philosophy of life (contrasted to these classical perspectives)?

In reply to this question from comment #2, these are the changes / apparently new ideas of which I am currently aware of:

Beliefs in an almighty, all-knowing god have become dominant and although now somewhat on a decline have left their marks, in particular by the false concept of sin, false promise of an afterlife in heaven and association of pleasure with sins.

The program of materialism has worked out extremely well with science now providing explanations with evidence regarding all macroscopic phenomena humans can naturally sense. Increasingly sophisticated instrumentation is needed to find what is still unknown. The advancement of science has enabled pushing back the overbearing religions.

Mathematics has grown from just arithmetic and geometry for accounting and engineering and a speculative toy of idealistic philosophers to a large set of branches which go far beyond numbers and geometry. Especially calculus has been revolutionary and instrumental to develop better scientific theories.

The ancient justifications of slavery are no more accepted. Instead, machinery has made it partially obsolete, and wage slavery has come up and is widely accepted.

The improvement in material conditions have made it more likely that the results of the hedonic calculus of an individual Epicurean goes much more beyond minimalism today than at Epicurus' times.

The term "hedonic treadmill" has been coined and is used in academic philosophy to dismiss all types of hedonism, ignoring that the hedonic calculus prevents a consistent Epicurean from getting trapped on a hedonic treadmill.

Whereas the non-sceptics of the ancient philosophers including Epicurus thought their respective teachings to be true, fitness of a model to its intended purpose has mostly replaced truth. The concern for truth has been reduced to the truthfulness of logical constructs and protocols of events. This in turn facilitates dismissal of religions and grasping pleasure as the goal.

## Post by “Don” of January 3, 2024 at 10:12 PM

We'll put, [Martin](#) .

I would add that what has changed in 2000+ years is culture. Human nature is pretty much the same.

All the way back to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, 4000+ years ago, the stories talk about the fear of death, the search for immortality, the grief of losing loved ones, desire for sex, and so on. The Babylonians, the Egyptians, the ancient Indians and Persians, the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Medieval philosophers, were all addressing how we, as finite mortal beings, make sense of and interact with an infinite cosmos. How do we come to grips with the fact that we die? How do we skillfully understand our desires? The culture in which we humans all live has changed, but the fundamental questions they were addressing with their religions and philosophies remain.

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## Post by “Joshua” of January 3, 2024 at 11:34 PM

Here's my attempt at a somewhat nuanced answer;

The most interesting changes have been in the **Physics**. The Greek atomists turned out to be substantially correct in a lot of big ways, and charmingly wrong, as everyone was then, in a lot of small ways. They correctly surmised; 1.) that the center of the Earth was not the center of the cosmos, and that in fact the cosmos had no center. 2.) that the laws that govern celestial phenomena are the same as those we experience "down" here. The heavenly orbs actually *are* bodies, and not gods. They actually *are* made of common matter, and not a fifth aethereal essence. 3.) matter can neither be created nor destroyed.

Their most glaring omission, common to all of the ancients, was their lack of any understanding of gravity as a force. Without gravity, it is difficult to make a convincing account of the cosmos. Some modern day flat-earthers have hit upon a novel solution to this problem--they propose that the disc and its dome move upwards at a constant rate of acceleration, but even this could not have served in an infinite Epicurean cosmos. Most of the explanations of atmospheric and celestial phenomena found in Lucretius have, of course, been superseded by a better and more accurate understanding of their causes. As for the natural gods of Epicurus living in the intermundia, I find simple atheism an apt substitute. The worst possible thing you can do to a god is render it unnecessary--a god with no explanatory power is in itself one assumption too far. Just my opinion.

In **canonics** or epistemology, a huge and complex revision is worth mentioning. In 5th and 4th century Greece, philosophers were prone to using mathematical principles to 'prove' moral truths. A successor to Pythagoras argued that ten was the number of the celestial spheres, and his logic in this was that 10 is the sum of a point, a line, a surface, and a volume-- $1+2+3+4$ . Owing to the perfection of this number, it must be reflected in the heavens...but of course not. The Platonists made the study of geometry a prerequisite to the study of philosophy, and as geometry is a process of rediscovering invisible mathematical facts, so a philosophy of pure reason is a process of 'recollecting' innate knowledge of absolute moral truths--the truths we forgot when we were interred in our bodily prisons. Geometry leads us out of one cave, and philosophy another. In the film *Lincoln*, Daniel Day-Lewis quotes Euclid on the transitive property as evidence for regarding slavery as unnatural and immoral. It makes for excellent cinema, but poor moral philosophy. The point in contention was precisely whether  $a$  and  $c$  really were both equal to  $b$ . Those who argued against the proposition had no trouble finding their justification in what they were assured was a higher law than geometry.

Nowadays engineers use mathematics to build not only bridges, an art the Romans *had* mastered, but also skyscrapers and jet airplanes, and the last people on Earth to endorse the numerology of the Pythagoreans would be working mathematicians. No longer a hindrance to understanding nature, math has become more helpful than nearly anything else available to us.

This is the first of two cases where it could be plausibly argued that Epicurus threw the baby out with the bathwater. The problem was never geometry itself, but the false analogy made by his contemporaries between geometry and moral epistemology.

The second example is part of his **ethics**. False belief about the gods was a source of great frustration to Epicurus, and one of the many causes of false belief was epic poetry, which he thought was full of lies. It *was* full of lies, or as we would say 'fictions', and the Epicurean satirist Lucian of Samosata was merciless in his mockery of the form in *A True Story*. But the solution when it arrived (very late) was more literacy and not less; we consume fiction in books, film, and television by the truckload, but only the genuinely pathological believe *everything* they read. We are very fortunate that Lucretius did not share his purported distaste for poetry.

I'll think about the question some more! I do think it's helpful to push past the obvious and often trivial scientific errors and into some of the deeper questions. Prof. David Glidden made a comment in passing during our podcast interview that the resurgence of atomism in the renaissance and the enlightenment probably had a role in postponing research into microbiology. I'm ashamed to say I haven't followed up on that, but that is exactly the kind of critique that would hold my interest.

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**Post by "Martin" of January 4, 2024 at 4:36 AM**

One more important innovation in philosophy to add to my list in comment #6 is Utilitarianism, which attempts to move the goal to pleasure of the many and to make pleasure of the many measurable. It arises out of Bentham, Mill, more recently Stinger, and their followers not understanding how Epicurus' way of claiming pleasure as the goal does not lead to egoism and that Epicurus' philosophy trusts feelings and is not just a logical system within which positions or actions to take can be readily inferred from a few axioms like a mathematical theory as other philosophers have attempted to present their respective philosophies.

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 4, 2024 at 10:05 AM

Wow, you all really jumped into this! Fabulous, and thank you. With your permission I have copied all of the answers since the question of #13 so that I may study the extensive and interesting answers from you. There is plenty of food for thought in all of those.

First, I need to acknowledge due respects to you Kalosyni.

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The goal for this EpicureanFriends forum is to study the extant texts and to apply the philosophy as presented by Epicurus

It is certainly not my intention to divert you or this group from your intended goal. So, if questions such as the one in my entry, #13, are uncomfortable then I will not inquire similarly again.

Yet, I'm delighted to see the answers that have derived. You all have a wealth of knowledge about the classical philosophers. Kudos to you all!

What interests me is this overview: In regard to humans "being" is 'then' different from 'now'? I am interested in this question because of another question: "Has the human brain changed in the last couple of thousand years?" So, all of you, so steeped in the history and works of the classical philosophers, provide a fascinating reflection on those questions.

In my view, I don't live then. I live now. And, my philosophy reflects my current "now". Indeed, it is built from a history of perspectives that go back to some very, very insightful people of "then" - the great philosophers that you all recognize so well (and can quote with authority!). And, I think we are all impressed by what those greats knew then (else Epicureanfriends would not exist). Further, I think we are all aware that in many respects the insights of "then" still apply to "now". Thus we reference Godfrey:

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

"So, to all you smart, interesting neurobiologists I ask a question: since the classical authors referenced here lived 2000+ years ago, has anything changed? What, if anything, is new in the understanding of the functioning of life (contrasted to these classical perspectives)?"

And, to answer IMO, the human brain has changed little in the ensuing 2000+ years. And that is an issue. The world has changed greatly in certain ways (obvious to all). Yet, human beings, and being human, have not changed greatly. Thus, we sit at this fascinating time. It is not just a time when we may consider philosophy of how to live. It is the time when AI will bring a new "player" to the arena and to those discussions. We will, and do, struggle with questions about how the interactions with our new player will go.

So, ultimately, I ask questions such as in entry #13 to see what perspectives we bring to this era. If the admonitions/instructions/advocacies of 2000 year ago apply without change to this era then that will lead to one set of conclusions about this era. If there are changes, then what changes? I think you all have added greatly to those considerations. Thanks again.

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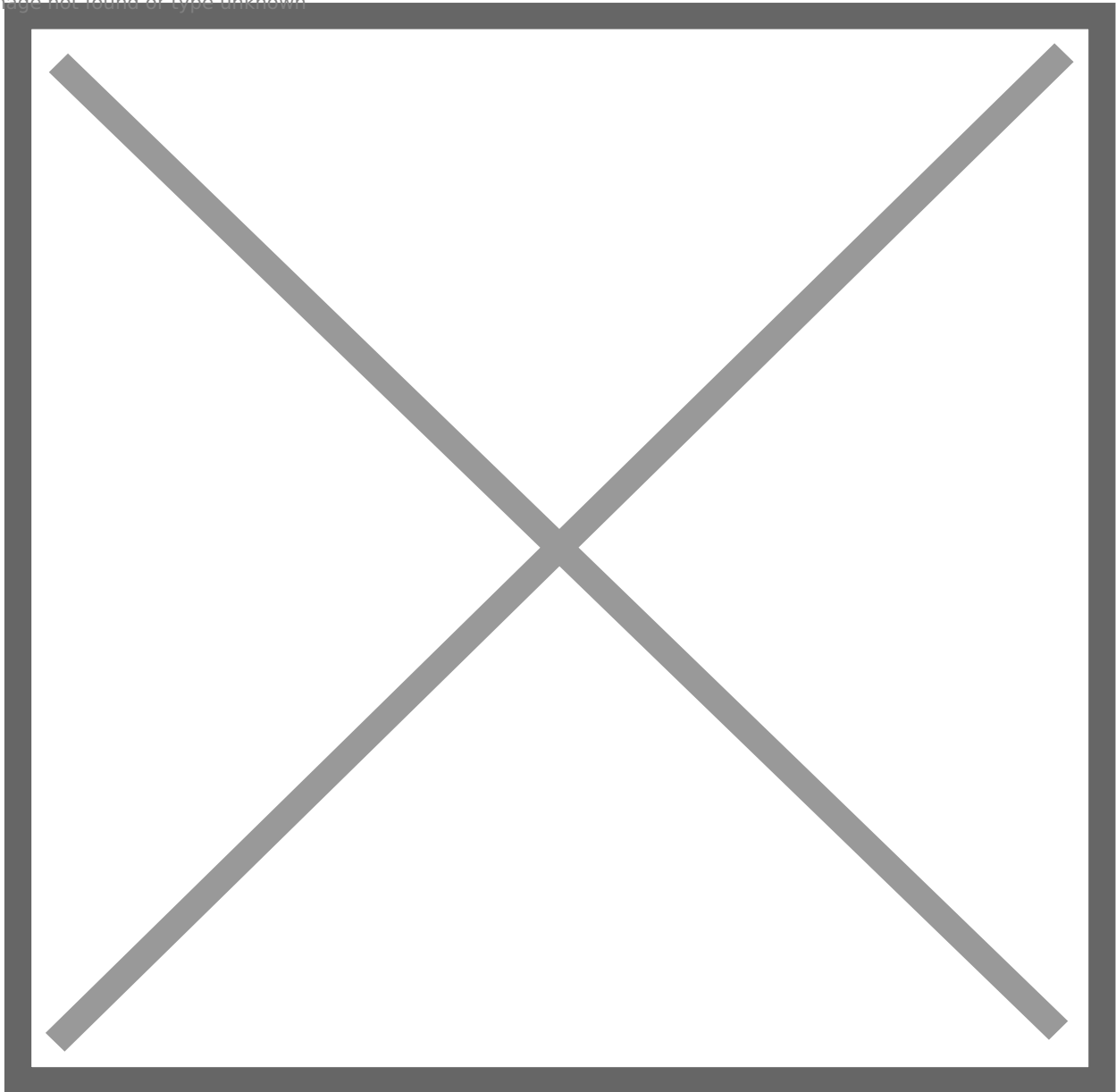
## **Post by "Don" of January 5, 2024 at 12:20 AM**

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

"Has the human brain changed in the last couple of thousand years?"...And, to answer IMO, the human brain has changed little in the ensuing 2000+ years.

I would completely agree. In fact, I would argue the human brain hasn't changed much since we evolved to evade predators, organize hunts, gather beneficial plants, and begin to tell stories around the fire. Human brains seem to have taken their modern shape about 300,000 years ago. The rest is culture.

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[Brains](#)

[humanorigins.si.edu](http://humanorigins.si.edu)

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**Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 5, 2024 at 7:43 AM**

Don, though I appreciate the insightfulness of your perspective (brain hasn't changed since species began) I hope you are wrong.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

Just for perspective, I would point out that the image you have is misleading, as I'm sure your know, since it represents the idea of a great change in volume, which is not correct. And, at least what I read puts our species at about 200,000 years old. Further, as we know, elephant brains are much larger than ours. So, size is only one issue of brain function.

But, the real problem for human brains in this era is intellectual sophistication. In the last approximately 5000 thousand years we have created science. And, science has taken our species far, far beyond personalized beliefs. Yet, there are still large portions of the human population that are quite willing to discount and discredit science when it runs counter to their personal preferences or "hidden" agendas. In the U.S. we have seen this recurrently in the recent era.

So, it is my personal perspective that we are running up against the limits of the human brain. We evolved for a very different life circumstance and we are failing to intellectually keep up with the perspectives applicable to today. Rejection of science, diversion into "alternative facts", and unfounded intellectual belief systems, based on preference rather than any objective data, are getting us into trouble. In this era of planetary perspective we need to be objective, but many reject that simply out of preference.

AI will push the issue. If we allow it to go forward then it will demonstrate what science would advocate. Then humans will either destroy it (go to war with it, which is our penchant), or many humans will be made obsolete by it (creating huge social upheaval).

The only graceful way forward is to hope the human brain will be capable of adapting to now. That, unfortunately, remains a pertinent question.

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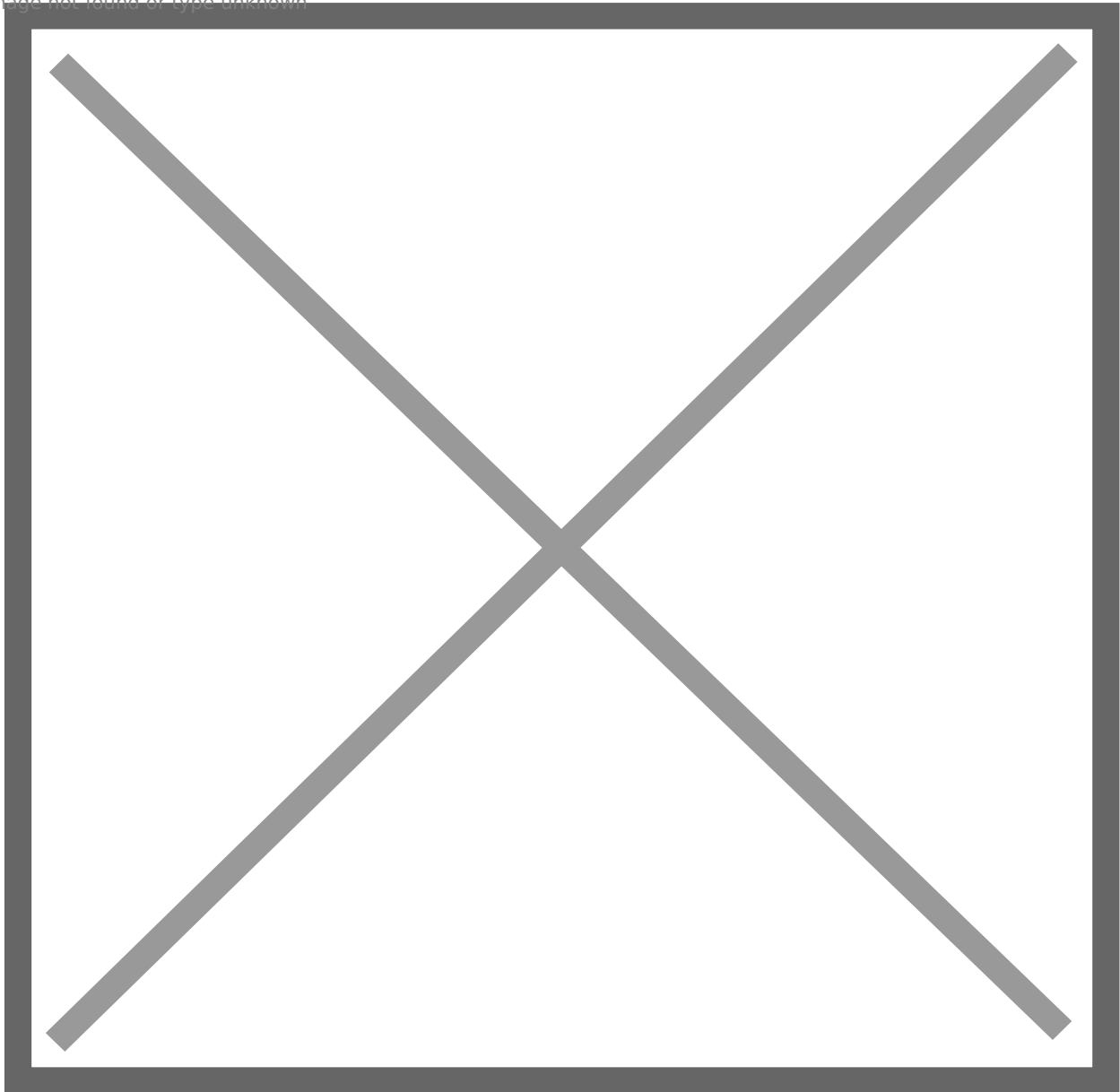
## Post by “Don” of January 5, 2024 at 9:31 AM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Don, though I appreciate the insightfulness of your perspective (brain hasn't changed since species began) I hope you are wrong

The brain has changed dramatically in volume and structure since our early hominin ancestors. I believe that photo comparison from the Smithsonian is comparing early hominin brain size to "modern" humans 200,000 years ago. The general timeframe for homo sapiens (that "sapiens" had always struck me as being a little to full of ourselves!) appearing seems to be at least 300,000 per this article:

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### [An Evolutionary Timeline of Homo Sapiens](#)

Scientists share the findings that helped them pinpoint key moments in the rise of our species  
[www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com)

"In the case of H. sapiens, known remains only date back some 300,000 years"

It sounds like you're headed toward the ideas expressed by the "extended mind" thesis.

### [Extended mind thesis - Wikipedia](#)

<https://youtu.be/Nf2a3XAZugU?feature=shared>

<https://youtu.be/HUjZpWe-zHs?feature=shared>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Rejection of science, diversion into "alternative facts", and unfounded intellectual belief systems, based on preference rather than any objective data, are getting us into trouble. In this era of planetary perspective we need to be objective, but many reject that simply out of preference.

Just a word of caution (not that I disagree!!), but don't start heading too fast or too far into contemporary political ramifications or discussions of those ideas. Just a heads up.

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### **Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 5, 2024 at 12:48 PM**

Thanks Don. Oh yes, if we are considering the whole line of hominid evolution then certainly brain size has markedly increased. I thought we were just talking about our species. And, 300K is outside of what I have generally seen advocated for our species in specific. However, maybe there is still discussion of this.

And, yes, it is right to be cautious about politics. Yet, they are, directly or indirectly, commentaries on human cognition, and its limits. But, advice accepted.

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### **Post by "Don" of January 5, 2024 at 2:20 PM**

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Oh yes, if we are considering the whole line of hominid evolution then certainly brain size has markedly increased. I thought we were just talking about our species.

Yes, sorry for talking past each other. My only point for all that was to illustrate that over the course of evolution our "human" brains have changed considerably. However, since *H. sapiens* came on the scene 10s if not hundreds of millenia ago, we've basically had the same brain structures.

This tells me that those living in caves and hunting mammoth were as clever, curious, and seeking of understanding of their world as Epicurus was as Lucretius was as I am. We don't inhabit some lofty perch from which we can "look down" on our forebears. We have more information, but I wouldn't say we necessarily have more wisdom.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of January 5, 2024 at 6:11 PM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

So, it is my personal perspective that we are running up against the limits of the human brain. We evolved for a very different life circumstance and we are failing to intellectually keep up with the perspectives applicable to today.

This is an interesting perspective that I don't think that I've heard before in this context. I tend to think of the attitudes that you mention (studiously ignoring the politics!) as a matter of degree, not kind. By which I mean that we've had similar external issues repeatedly in the past: the inventions of movable type, photography, motion pictures, radio, television, Industrial Revolution, toasters, automobiles &c... In each step of progress there are people who may refuse to address the advancement, as well as people who will make use of it without having a clue as to how the particular thing works. For instance, I could never reproduce the computer that I'm typing on, but I'm happy to use it. Then there are others who refuse to even use a computer, or a cell phone, or what have you.

So is the issue that technology has advanced beyond our biological capability to incorporate it into our understanding of the world? Or is it lack of tolerance by institutions that are threatened by it? Consider the widespread history of the church torturing and killing innovative thinkers, or thousands of years of various instances of and manifestations of political corruption.

The latter two are problems that the Epicureans have addressed in various ways from their beginning. Perhaps examining this can bring some hope that we may have tools to address the current state of affairs.

As [Don](#) mentioned in another thread, could theories of extended cognition be useful in this regard as well?

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 5, 2024 at 7:33 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

We have more information, but I wouldn't say we necessarily have more wisdom.

[Don](#) Yes. Yet, we do now have science. We do now believe there is some way to understand the world other than by preferred belief systems. We do now recognize the relationships of the species. We do now understand far more about the universe in which we live. We do now know that consciousness is inside the brain rather than floating around as a mist, or a spirit outside of it. We do now even know how to create intelligence. So, there are reasons for optimism.

Certainly not every human has adopted these wisdoms. Yet, that is just simply the statement of evolution. Just as we are more insightful than *Homo erectus* or *Australopithecus*, the next iteration of the human lineage will be more insightful than we are (presuming we allow such evolution to occur).

I choose to remain optimistic.

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 5, 2024 at 8:09 PM

In #12 I said: "So, it is my personal perspective that we are running up against the limits of the human brain."

You responded:

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

This is an interesting perspective that I don't think that I've heard before in this context.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

could theories of extended cognition be useful in this regard as well

[Godfrey](#) In response to the issue of "running up against the limits of the human brain" I offer two perspectives, for the moment, that speak to the issue:

- 1) While we have invented science, and it has brought us endless technical advancements, look how many people willingly throw its data out when it is not convenient (recent examples: global warming, use of immunizations, and various political issues [not otherwise mentioned]).
- 2) The evolution of our technology has, broadly, proceeded from hunter-gatherer (simple tools), to agrarian revolution (largely use of hands with progressively more sophisticated tools), to industrial revolution (still use of hands with more tools), to electronic age (shifting to more use of brain and tools), to a service society (even more use of brain), and now to the coming era of

AI. And, in this era of AI our brains are going to be surpassed for many functions. However, we don't have another, higher level, function to offer.

There are other evolutionary perspective supporting the notion of "running up against the limits of the human brain" but hopefully the above two will suffice.

The next topic, "extended cognition", probably requires some discussion on its own, depending upon what we think this actually means. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy says, "Extended cognition takes the idea that your mind is 'on' your smartphone literally. It says that human cognitive states and processes sometimes spill outside our heads and into objects in our environment." So, is this the foundation you are considering? That is, do you think "the mind" exists, in part, outside of the skull?

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## Post by "Don" of January 6, 2024 at 12:01 AM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

1. Yet, we do now have science.
2. We do now believe there is some way to understand the world other than by preferred belief systems.
3. We do now recognize the relationships of the species.
4. We do now understand far more about the universe in which we live.
5. We do now know that consciousness is inside the brain rather than floating around as a mist, or a spirit outside of it.
6. We do now even know how to create intelligence.
7. So, there are reasons for optimism.

I wanted to break those out in to individual assertions to address each in turn and to try and turn this thread back into an exploration of Epicurus and his philosophy. We've gone far afield in this particular thread 😊.

1. Science is just a systematic way of investigating the world, unless you have a specific definition of science. I would argue Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans advocated a form of proto-science in their insistence of holding off on rigid opinions of the causes of phenomena until sufficient evidence was acquired. We've simply gotten better at our observations, measurements, and information gathering.
2. So did Epicurus. And I'd be curious what you mean by "preferred belief systems," because there are plenty of people who will stick with their "preferred belief system" regardless of evidence.

3. So did Lucretius! To the best of my memory, Lucretius firmly places humans with the other animals, and Epicurus looked at both animals and baby humans to arrive at the idea of pleasure being the supreme good/telos/summum bonum.
  4. Again, we're just better at gathering information with more sophisticated instruments. Epicurus, with only his imagination and what could be called thought experiments, posited the existence of multiple cosmoi (i.e., more than one world-system) in an infinite universe, the infinitesimally small particles making up all of the universe's matter, and other things about the universe that wouldn't be rivaled or exceeded for centuries.
  5. Epicurus certainly didn't think that the mind was 'floating around as a mist, or a spirit outside of it.' He saw the mind as inextricably linked to the physical body and composed of fine atoms. As far as we can determine, he posited that the feelings or mind or psyche was both spread across the body (think nervous system maybe?) but also centered in one aspect in the chest or abdomen. I think this is still a defensible position for him to have held at his time because we even today use words like "heart-sick, broken-hearted" and other physical phrases to evoke emotional and psychological states. It would make sense to think the mind was centered in your abdomen if you get sick to your stomach with fear or feel your "blood rising" when you're angry.
  6. LOL! That remains to be seen! I have certain issues calling cleverly-constructed algorithms "intelligence." They give the verisimilitude of "intelligence" while merely recombining vast inputs and making correlations programmed into the algorithm.
  7. As far as optimism... I like to think I'm optimistic. Or at least a realistic optimist. Human beings have always and will always be capable of expressing great compassion and altruism as well as of dealing great and horrendous harm and misery. Epicurus's idea of justice as being a social contract to neither intentionally harm no be intentionally harmed isn't a bad place to start.
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### **Post by “Martin” of January 6, 2024 at 1:04 AM**

#### Quote

"So, it is my personal perspective that we are running up against the limits of the human brain. We evolved for a very different life circumstance and we are failing to intellectually keep up with the perspectives applicable to today."

This is an interesting perspective that I don't think that I've heard before in this context.

I found this perspective expressed similarly e.g. in an opinion piece of physics professor Michael Dueren in the 2023 August/September issue of the German language "Physik Journal" at <https://pro-physik.de/zeitschriften/download/21453>

"Our brains are not trained for apocalyptic climate change."

(Google translation of "Unser Gehirn ist auf den apokalyptischen Klimawandel nicht trainiert.")

"The human brain dates back to prehistoric times - instinctive processes in our neural networks in the brain displace deliberative logical thought processes in many situations. In critical situations, they ensure our survival through archaic, instinctive decision-making patterns. Unfortunately, our instinctive gut feeling doesn't work when it comes to apocalyptic climate change because, as a singular event, it wasn't part of human evolution and couldn't be mentally trained."

(Google translation of "Das menschliche Gehirn stammt aus prähistorischer Zeit - instinktive Prozesse unserer neuronalen Netze im Gehirn verdrängen in vielen Situationen abwägende logische Denkprozesse. In kritischen Situationen sichern sie unser Überleben durch archaische, instinktive Entscheidungsmuster. Leider funktioniert unser instinktives Bauchgefühl nicht beim apokalyptischen Klimawandel, da es als singuläres Ereignis nicht Teil der menschlichen Evolution war, sich also auch nicht mental trainieren ließ.")

I guess this perspective is quite common among scientists now.

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## Post by "Godfrey" of January 6, 2024 at 1:05 AM

### Quote

That is, do you think "the mind" exists, in part, outside of the skull?

[BrainToBeing](#) to be honest, I'm just beginning to look into the idea of the "extended mind" and am curious as to your thoughts on the matter. I certainly don't put any stock in a mist floating outside of the body, or of a supernatural spirit.

I just listened to the Annie Murphy Paul interview that [Don](#) linked to. She seems to be defining the idea using interoception, in-person social networks, and a variety of tools, both analog (notebooks, calendars) and digital. From what I gather, she's not working with rigorous science but is more interested in practices people can do to increase their personal efficacy. (Correct me if I'm wrong; I was interrupted a few times while listening.)

To answer your question, I think that the mind, being physical, exists in the body. And I'd say that the mind probably exists *in the body* outside of the skull, for example in the nervous

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

system. I'm not prepared at this point to say that the mind extends outside of the body: that seems to me to be more metaphorical. If communication, processing and storage systems are all considered to be "mind", that completely redefines what it means to be a human animal and seems like a major overreach.

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## Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 6, 2024 at 11:29 AM

### [Quote from Martin](#)

I guess this perspective is quite common among scientists now.

[Martin](#) Hi! I don't know how common this idea is. My wife tells me not to talk about it - too challenging for most people. However, the folks here, like you and the others I'm interacting with at EpicureanFriends, are not only smart but also interested in the philosophies of life. So, here I went out on a limb to bring up the idea. It is a challenging idea that most people reject out of either fear or the feeling that "this will just be like another industrial revolution and we will do fine going through it". However, it is not like another industrial revolution.

Anyway. Those of us that can need to think about this issue in order to figure out how H. sapiens will get through this challenging "rough patch" of the evolutionary hike. 😊

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## Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 6, 2024 at 12:17 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I would argue Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans advocated a form of proto-science in their insistence of holding off on rigid opinions of the causes of phenomena until sufficient evidence was acquired

Agree, Don. However, the issue is that the "sages of old" were the top less-than-one-percent of the population. Indeed, they understood the concepts (within the foundations of information available to them). But, now we need to have the whole population understand how to think with science, and be willing to work with "inconvenient science".

### [Quote from Don](#)

I'd be curious what you mean by "preferred belief systems,"

Yes, it is what you said. The desire to see the world according to personal wishes and preferences, rather than with incorporation of what objective information (beyond opinion) would advocate.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus looked at both animals and baby humans to arrive at the idea of pleasure being the supreme good

The pivotal issue here is the interpretation of "pleasure". I do many things that are ethically appropriate but do not derive to my personal pleasure. For example, in my medical career I could have made a boatload more money if I practiced for my "pleasure". But, I didn't. I did what I thought was ethically appropriate for patients, illness, and the healthcare system. Many, many times this made my life harder. And, it also resulted in very unpleasant confrontations with people who wanted me to say or do what was convenient to their desires but not medically reasonable.

For example, I was not one of the guys who handed out opioids to pander to whims or "hidden" addiction during the prescription opioid epidemic. But, I assure you, resistance to these agendas did not derive to my personal pleasure.

If the word "pleasure" is interpreted to mean "consistent with personal ethics, beliefs, values, expectations, attitudes, goals and habits" then I guess doing what I did could be claimed to be consistent with my "pleasure". However, I guarantee you it did not feel like pleasure.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Again, we're just better at gathering information with more sophisticated instruments.

I actually don't agree with this one. Quantum mechanics has been recurrently proven to be consistent with objective tests of predictions. Yet, quantum mechanics changes our views of the way things work in the Universe. The sages of the past were wonderfully insightful, but we do now have concepts and intellectual frameworks that are beyond what they could propose. For example, quantum entanglement works and is actually used in quantum computers; yet, it makes no sense to our Newtonian view of the world.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

He saw the mind as inextricably linked to the physical body and composed of fine atoms.

Yes, Epicurus and Lucretius (among others) were remarkably (even dramatically) insightful. Yet, 1600 years later we still got to Descartes and his "duality" which still infuses thinking at this time.

[Quote from Don](#)

LOL! That remains to be seen! I have certain issues calling cleverly-constructed algorithms "intelligence."

See, this is precisely the problem. You apparently want to grant "intelligence" as something transcendent - something which cannot be explained as the result of our 86 billion neurons interacting or reproduced by adequately sophisticated non-biological systems. However, my entire career clearly demonstrated to my satisfaction that our intelligence does derive from those physical components. I saw all manner of losses of intelligence due to defined physical/structural brain illnesses.

Thus, if our intelligence derives from a highly sophisticated system of interacting components then it is not beyond reason to predict that similar intelligence could be derived from some non-biological system of similar level of complexity.

Even at this very early stage, answers I get from ChatGPT are very commonly better than answers I can get from discussion with anyone (including all my university colleagues). And, this is only the beginning.

We need to be careful that we don't define "intelligence" within some purely anthropocentric construct. So, I define intelligence as the ability to integrate information into useful or potentially useful constructs. This "working definition" allows not only for varying levels of intelligence but also varying kinds of intelligence. And, it excludes simple rote regurgitation of facts or simple "stimulus-response" reactions. If these were not excluded then computers would already be vastly smarter than we are based on fund of information, or the cheetah would be smarter than we are based on reaction pattern capabilities.

Okay, I did want to respond to your thoughts (to keep the discussion a discussion); but, this is becoming greatly too long. So, I'll stop here.

Cheers.

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**Post by "Martin" of January 6, 2024 at 12:29 PM**

Pleasure is not limited to immediate pleasure. More often than not, the Epicurean way means taking action which involves direct pain and results only much later in increased pleasure as

compared to not have taken that action.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2024 at 1:22 PM

### [Quote from Martin](#)

Pleasure is not limited to immediate pleasure. More often than not, the Epicurean way means taking action which involves direct pain and results only much later in increased pleasure as compared to not have taken that action.

Not only is it not limited to "immediate," but time is only one of the factors involved. The much more profound aspect is that when Epicurus says that there are only two feelings, and that what is not pain is pleasure, then he is referring to experiences that most people do not think of as immediate sensory pleasure at all.

Sorry I have not been keeping up recently but this is what I would say in summary after reading the exchanges. Most everything that I see BraintoBeing describing as motivating him does not fit in either of the categories of physical pain or physical pleasure, although those sensations accompany certain aspects of all he is describing. If I read what BTB is saying correctly, he says that he finds "satisfying" and emotionally "the right thing to do" all sorts of things that are not immediate sensory pain or pleasure. Those aspects of awareness which are not perceived as painful Epicurus is considering to be pleasure.

So most of BraintoBeings' issues with "pleasure" as I read them continue to revolve around the limited definition he (and most people) give to the word "pleasure."

That is why it is important to study what the Epicureans actually said and wrote and not rely on the superficial definition of pleasure that the anti-Epicureans argued in the ancient world and that continues to prevail today. If someone is interested in digging into those details then they will find a lot to work with in what Epicurus wrote. If someone isn't interested in digging into that level of detail then they will find Epicurean formulations nothing but frustrating and they will go on hitting their heads against the wall until their heads give way and they go on to something more productive for them.

We see this over and over and over again. People see certain things that they like in Epicurus, but they don't get engaged in the details of what the ancient Epicureans really taught, and they spend their time churning their wheels over why they think Epicurus just really didn't go far enough in limiting his perspective to "pleasure." It's all very frustrating both for them and for those who actually **do** read into the details of Epicurus. And what I'm describing is probably

90% plus of the internet discussion of Epicurus.

This is much like the problem with humanism - they reject a theological basis for morality but then proceed to embrace exactly the same morality with only a few changes around the edges that the theologians embrace. Epicurus went much deeper to challenge the very definitions of good and evil in a very Nietzsche-like "beyond good and evil" way.

So I think this is a productive conversation so far, but to ever bring any kind of resolution to the issues the question of the definition of pleasure has to be addressed, and then after that it has to be made clear whether the "pleasure" being referred to is as Epicurus described it or as the rest of the world insists on describing it.

Not an easy thing to do but otherwise we just talk past each other forever.

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### **Post by "Don" of January 6, 2024 at 1:50 PM**

#### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

If the word "pleasure" is interpreted to mean "consistent with personal ethics, beliefs, values, expectations, attitudes, goals and habits" then I guess doing what I did could be claimed to be consistent with my "pleasure". However, I guarantee you it did not feel like pleasure.

If you got personal satisfaction from doing what you felt was the right thing to do, that would align with Epicurus definition of the spectrum of pleasure.

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### **Post by "Don" of January 6, 2024 at 3:52 PM**

#### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

See, this is precisely the problem. You apparently want to grant "intelligence" as something transcendent - something which cannot be explained as the result of our 86 billion neurons interacting or reproduced by adequately sophisticated non-biological systems.

Nope. Human "intelligence" or "consciousness" is exactly an emergent property of the interaction of our 86 billion neurons and our physical environment and our gut biome and our other physical, chemical, and biological processes. Whether intelligence or consciousness can arise in a complex non-biological system is an open question. I've seen arguments for and against from neuroscientists, biologists, technology experts, philosophers, etc. There is nothing transcendent about the phenomena but there may be something unique about the biology that makes it possible, at least for any foreseeable far future.

#### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Even at this very early stage, answers I get from ChatGPT are very commonly better than answers I can get from discussion with anyone (including all my university colleagues). And, this is only the beginning.

This is only the beginning. ChatGPT and large language model platforms like it give the verisimilitude or veneer of intelligence. But it's all smoke and mirrors put together by clever programmers and the ingestion of innumerable inputs of text and images. It passes the Turing Test in many ways because we're pattern-seeking and agency-seeking beings due to our evolution.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 6, 2024 at 5:52 PM**

Getting back to the title of this thread, "What If Anything Has Changed About Human Nature In the Last 2000 Years?"....

It would seem to me that the best way to address this question, at least in this forum, is to examine it in terms of the Epicurean Canon: sensations, anticipations and feelings. First, are there any new faculties in addition to these three that have arisen in the last 2000 years? Second, have any of the three faculties changed significantly in the last 2000 years?

To my understanding, the answer to the first question is "no".

As to the second question, current science has helped to explain the canonic faculties in more detail but, as far as I know, hasn't discovered anything new that wasn't a part of the faculties 2000 years ago. For example, we now talk of more than just five senses, but these aren't something that didn't exist 2000 years ago: we're just aware of them now even though they were an integral part of how humans have previously functioned.

But, and correct me if I'm wrong [BrainToBeing](#) , this seems to be the central problem that you're concerned with, which is responding to a variety of existential threats:

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

But, now we need to have the whole population understand how to think with science, and be willing to work with "inconvenient science".

Epicurean philosophy is based on "the way things are", as Lucretius famously said. And the ethics, for the most part, arises out of the physics and the canonic. The physics isn't going to change in any way that will meaningfully affect human behavior, precisely due to the problem in the quote. The way that humans acquire knowledge (the canon) isn't going to change meaningfully either.

Of the three faculties of the canon, none to them are, to my mind, something that will change any time soon. Evolution, after all, occurs at a glacial pace.

Any ethical change occurs in the individual; only when the number of individuals changing reaches a critical mass can it be said that institutional or societal ethics has changed. The only way to speed this up, I think, is by exponentially increasing the number of individuals being reached. And they must be reached in a way that directly and repeatedly stimulates each of their canonic faculties if the information is going to take hold. Unfortunately, the majority of those with the ability to do this are promoting the exact opposite of the point of view in the above quote.

So it is largely a political problem, which in order to avoid fracturing the community that we have here, we have agreed not to discuss. However it *is* an urgent problem. From an Epicurean point of view, this is pain and is therefore something that each of us needs to address in some way. This is what is meant by pleasure being the absence of pain: one must be aware of their pain. The feelings are two, pleasure and pain, and the goal of a healthy organism is pleasure. One must examine the pain and determine if it's leading to greater pleasure, or if it's something that needs to be rooted out. Then one can figure out the most effective way to remove the pain, or if the pain is determined to be incurable, to deal with it. Sometimes the solution will be individual and sometimes it will mean actively engaging the public sphere.

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## **Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 6, 2024 at 8:03 PM**

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

I think that the mind, being physical, exists in the body. And I'd say that the mind probably exists in the body outside of the skull

[Godfrey](#) I like your post #21. So, as you alluded, stimulus-response processing does occur throughout the body, via the nervous system that exists throughout the body. However, I have not seen evidence that the mind exists outside of the skull. I've seen an endless variety of illnesses; and, unquestionably, serious illness of the "soma" (physical body) does produce secondary impacts on the brain via a variety of mechanisms (toxins, metabolic abnormalities, infections, reduction in blood flow to the brain, etc). However, those produce changes in cognition via what they deliver to the brain, or don't deliver to it - secondary consequences. Alternatively, in my medical career experience changes in "the mind" has required changes directly in the brain. Stroke, brain trauma, tumors, encephalitis, neurodegenerative disease, genetic neurological disorders, toxins and the rest do change the mind by directly changing the brain.

At a very different level someone could choose to include all of the impacts we have on life outside of ourself as part of our "mind". For example, an author could chose to feel that all of the author's extant writings were part of his/her "mind". This becomes semantics - and, in my opinion, an obfuscation in the discussion of "mind".

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 6, 2024 at 8:23 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Epicurean Canon: sensations, anticipations and feelings. First, are there any new faculties in addition to these three that have arisen in the last 2000 years

[Godfrey](#) In my opinion, yes. Before explaining I admit that people can define these three any way they like. So, these three terms can be defined in such a way that, by definition, they are totally inclusive. Thus, by definition, no cognition is outside of them. However, in the current era we would not define these terms with that obligation.

I would interpret sensations to reference derivatives of the senses and sensory information. I would interpret anticipations to reference expectations derived from experience. And, I would interpret feelings to reference emotions derived from sensations, interpretations and thought.

With those perspectives then I don't think those three cover beliefs or values. Beliefs are, IMO, overarching views of how the world works and how we work within it. Values are, IMO, constraints on perspectives and actions. Values entice certain behaviors within the framework of personal values, and restrict actions that are inconsistent with personal values. Both of these cognitive frameworks are very important guides of behavior. And, I do not see them as included within sensations, anticipations, or values - as framed above. I do note that we use the word

"anticipate" to frame an expectation - a preconceived notion of what might occur. If "anticipations" is broadened to mean "something derived from thought, or even genetics" then the above discussion may not apply.

Please note that I essentially never dive into these philosophical points to this depth in any other conversations. I only do it here because you all are up to the task; and, by your involvement here, you demonstrate that you have interest in such depth of conjecture.

Rebuttal always welcome!

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## Post by "Don" of January 6, 2024 at 9:54 PM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

With those perspectives then I don't think those three cover beliefs or values.

The canon (feelings, anticipations, sensations), the epistemology of Epicurean philosophy, by definition, doesn't include beliefs and values. The canonic faculties, according to Epicurus, provide "pre-rational" data from which beliefs arise. And also according to Epicurean philosophy, there are beliefs built on solid foundations and there are "empty" beliefs such as the belief that the gods care how we conduct our lives.

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Beliefs are, IMO, overarching views of how the world works and how we work within it.

I see no problem with that definition.

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Values are, IMO, constraints on perspectives and actions. Values entice certain behaviors within the framework of personal values, and restrict actions that are inconsistent with personal values. Both of these cognitive frameworks are very important guides of behavior.

What are "values" other than those honorable, just, and noble acts an individual does that also give them pleasure (ie, satisfaction to echo a previous post). The "guides of behavior" in Epicurean philosophy are pleasure and pain.

## Post by “Don” of January 7, 2024 at 12:24 AM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I would interpret sensations to reference derivatives of the senses and sensory information.

I would interpret anticipations to reference expectations derived from experience.

And, I would interpret feelings to reference emotions derived from sensations, interpretations and thought.

Since this is an Epicurean philosophy forum, I thought it might be helpful look at whether your interpretations of those words line up with Epicurus's interpretation of those words. Here one the relevant passage from Diogenes Laertius, *The Live of the Eminent Philosophers*, Book 10.31-34:

### Quote

Now in *The Canon* Epicurus affirms that our **sensations and preconceptions and our feelings are the standards of truth** ; the Epicureans generally make perceptions of mental presentations to be also standards. His own statements are also to be found in the Summary addressed to Herodotus and in the Sovran Maxims. Every **sensation**, he says, is devoid of reason and incapable of memory ; for neither is it self-caused nor, regarded as having an external cause, can it add anything thereto or take anything therefrom. Nor is there anything which can refute sensations or convict them of error : [32] one sensation cannot convict another and kindred sensation, for they are equally valid ; nor can one sensation refute another which is not kindred but heterogeneous, for the objects which the two senses judge are not the same<sup>45</sup>; nor again can reason refute them, for reason is wholly dependent on sensation ; nor can one sense refute another, since we pay equal heed to all. And the reality of separate perceptions guarantees<sup>46</sup> the truth of our senses. But seeing and hearing are just as real as feeling pain. Hence it is from plain facts that we must start when we draw inferences about the unknown. For all our notions are derived from perceptions, either by actual contact or by analogy, or resemblance, or composition, with some slight aid from reasoning. And the objects presented to madmen and to people in dreams are true, for they produce effects--i.e. movements in the mind--which that which is unreal never does.

[33] By **preconception** (i.e., *anticipation*) they mean a sort of apprehension or a right opinion or notion, or universal idea stored in the mind ; that is, a recollection of an

external object often presented, e.g. Such and such a thing is a man : for no sooner is the word "man" uttered than we think of his shape by an act of preconception, in which the senses take the lead. Thus the object primarily denoted by every term is then plain and clear. And we should never have started an investigation, unless we had known what it was that we were in search of. For example : The object standing yonder is a horse or a cow. Before making this judgement, we must at some time or other have known by preconception the shape of a horse or a cow. We should not have given anything a name, if we had not first learnt its form by way of preconception. It follows, then, that preconceptions are clear. The object of a judgement is derived from something previously clear, by reference to which we frame the proposition, e.g. "How do we know that this is a man?" [34] Opinion they also call conception or assumption, and declare it to be true and false<sup>50</sup>; for it is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence, and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by evidence. Hence the introduction of the phrase, "that which awaits" confirmation, e.g. to wait and get close to the tower and then learn what it looks like at close quarters.

They affirm that **there are two states of feeling, pleasure and pain**, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined; and that there are two kinds of inquiry, the one concerned with things, the other with nothing but words. So much, then, for his division and criterion in their main outline.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of January 7, 2024 at 1:31 AM

Re the Epicurean conception of pleasure vs values:

Principal Doctrine 5: *"It is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously; and whoever lacks this cannot live joyously."* (From [here](#))

Compare that with this:

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I do many things that are ethically appropriate but do not derive to my personal pleasure. For example, in my medical career I could have made a boatload more money if I practiced for my "pleasure". But, I didn't. I did what I thought was ethically

appropriate for patients, illness, and the healthcare system. Many, many times this made my life harder.

In Epicurean terms, one would weigh the potential pleasures of a boatload of money vs the pleasure of knowing that you did no harm, and/or the future pleasure (which is what you would be/are experiencing now) of living guilt free, knowing that you did the right thing. Additionally, one would measure the pains involved, such as you describe, in addition to the future pain (again, now) of guilt and regrets for the harm you may have caused. In this way and others, one finds that the Epicurean way of life is one based on personal responsibility. I would suggest that you actually acted in alignment with [PD05](#) without being aware of the doctrine. Because this how Epicurus basically saw biology as working. This reality is far different from the picture painted by Cicero and others throughout the ages who refuse to accept a definition of pleasure as other than titillation.

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 7, 2024 at 1:02 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Since this is an Epicurean philosophy forum, I thought it might be helpful look at whether your interpretations of those words line up with Epicurus's interpretation of those words. Here one the relevant passage from Diogenes Laertius, The Live of the Eminent Philosophers, Book 10.31-34:

What a wonderful group you are! Thanks [Don](#) for the perspective. While there are interesting discussions derived, perhaps it is best to just appreciate how very insightful those elders were! (At least for the moment.)

Once again, it is certainly not my intent to detour any of the agendas extant in this wonderful and scholarly group. So, rather than directly respond to the wonderful quote, let me just ask a question: given that the wisdom of the sages has been known for 2000+ years, and that in spite of this we still find ourselves in this era of rancorous divisions, rampant drug addiction, and philosophical dissolution, what do you scholars think is the path forward?

Perhaps because of my background treating serious illness, I am very interested in practical responses to difficult situations. I make a diagnosis. I understand the patient with the diagnosis. Then the patient and I seek to determine an appropriate course of therapy. So, how would you, [Don](#) or any others, diagnose the current situation? How would you understand "the patient"? How would you determine an appropriate course of treatment that the patient can accept and manage?

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## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 7, 2024 at 1:25 PM

[Godfrey](#) Yes, I do get the satisfaction that I did the right thing; yet, it feels incomplete. The dilemmas of psychosocial "hidden" agendas in medicine drove me to leave neurology. I then decided I would try to approach the topic with - hopefully - the "cards on the table". So, I went on to get board certification in addiction. Then I found other problems. The surprising one was the difficulty of getting on to insurance panels as a doctor board certified in neurology and addiction. The insurance companies couldn't understand it. They could understand a psychiatrist or family practitioner practicing addiction treatment, but they couldn't understand that addiction is run by the brain. So, I entered a prolonged thrash trying to get onto insurance company panels. Further, the addiction treatment arena was afraid of the neurological mindset. They were afraid of a focus on gathering truly objective data of function and illness. They wanted to wash around in the bathwater of opinion and symptoms. They seemed to be satisfied saying "we did great" in treatment even when the patient immediately relapsed after a month of inpatient treatment. To me, as a neurologist, such immediate relapse may have been an understandable derivative of the nature of the illness; but, it doesn't translate to "we did great", in my opinion.

The relevance of this "venting" in EpicureanFriends is the commentary on objectivity, particularly in reference to [Don](#) "*The Canon* Epicurus affirms that our **sensations and preconceptions and our feelings are the standards of truth**". Are they really? 2000 years ago it made perfect sense to argue as Epicurus did on this point. There was no other objective tool for assessment. Yet, is that still true? Are these still to be presumed as the standards of truth? At least in my experience I don't think so. They may be a method of assessment for a personal view of truth. However, I hold that as different from "Truth" (with a capital "T", a universal truth). And the reason for that disparity is information processing in the human brain - which is not evolved to discover Truth, but rather to discover a personalized response for future actions. At least, this is how I see it (and how objective neurobiology sees it).

Yet, the discussion can go on with other views!

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## Post by “Godfrey” of January 7, 2024 at 4:55 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

They may be a method of assessment for a personal view of truth. However, I hold that as different from "Truth" (with a capital "T", a universal truth).

Ah, therein lies the rub! A fundamental view of Epicureans is that there is no universal Truth. Or to put it another way, the universal truth is that we live in a material universe with no supernatural god(s) and no afterlife. Much of Epicurus' thinking was in response to, and a refutation of, Platonic forms and ideals. Since he posited that there is nothing other than atoms and void, an idea floating around in their midst would be tantamount to the mind being located in a mist floating around outside of the body.

The Stoics believed in a universal logos: an intelligent universe. That was one of the fundamental differences between them and the Epicureans. You can find Marcus Aurelius pondering this in his Meditations. Interestingly, the modern Stoics seem to have largely stepped away from this idea. An interesting treatment of the conflict is in Cicero's On the Nature of the Gods, a book which introduced me to the Epicurean position and convinced me of the fallacy of the logos (which result would have been much to Cicero's horror).

For some reason this brings to mind the book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, in which the author and protagonist gradually goes mad in a search for a universal Quality. He was vainly trying to define something that doesn't exist. The admittedly difficult issue that must be dealt with on a personal level is whether one believes that there is no Truth out there, or whether there is one that we as yet are unable to fathom.

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## Post by "Don" of January 7, 2024 at 5:12 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Interestingly, the modern Stoics seem to have largely stepped away from this idea.

[Are the Modern Stoics Really Epicureans? | History News Network](#)

History News Network puts current events into historical perspective.  
historynewsnetwork.org

Here's Dr. Austin's essay on that very topic.

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## Post by "Don" of January 7, 2024 at 5:24 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

"Truth" (with a capital "T", a universal truth)

What do you mean by capital-T Truth? What would a "Universal Truth" be? And what would your authority for asserting the particular Universal Truth be?

PS. [Godfrey](#) was spot on in his description of the Epicurean position in "universal Truth."

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### **Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 7, 2024 at 8:27 PM**

In my view, Truth (with a capital T) is that which exists independent of our perspective of it. We are not the authors of truth, only at best its revealers and/or messengers. For example, the laws of physics existed long before we attempted to discover them. They existed independent of our perspectives.

So, I do think there is Truth, though we certainly may not know what it is. For example, the universe in its entirety either exists or it doesn't. It does not matter what we think about it. One of those is true, the other is not (again, "the whole enchalada" being taken as a whole). All of the great scientists have pursued discovering parts of the perspectives of Truth. We now run this planet based upon the elements of Truth they discovered. For example, the machine I now use to have this fun conversation with you was not invented by a religion, a philosophy, or anyone's personal opinion. It was invented by the discovery of parts of the big "T" Truth.

At least, this is how I see it.

Again, none of this is of any disrespect to the great sages of the past, nor to any of you intelligent folks who can so easily quote their texts. This website and these threads are in pursuit of philosophy for living. It is useful to conjecture about many things in the interests of forming our own personal philosophies, just as those greats did so many years ago. And, we must never forget that brilliant voices derived different fundamental conclusions at these philosophical levels. So, certainly these topics allow room for varying perspectives, and always have.

The fun part is in the journey to our philosophies, for certainly truth will exist regardless of our perspectives of it.

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### **Post by “Don” of January 7, 2024 at 10:53 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

In my view, Truth (with a capital T) is that which exists independent of our perspective of it. We are not the authors of truth, only at best its revealers and/or messengers. For example, the laws of physics existed long before we attempted to discover them. They existed independent of our perspectives.

You're simply describing "the way things are," as Lucretius' takes the title of his work. If that's what you're calling "Truth with a Capital T" that's like a physicist saying the sum total of all laws of physics can be called "God." Epicureans accept that the material universe exists "independent of our perspective on it." In fact, the universe existed before we were born and will exist after we cease to exist. That aspect of what you're calling "Truth" doesn't seem to be that big of a deal from my perspective.

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

So, I do think there is Truth, though we certainly may not know what it is.

Okay, but that doesn't address my question. If you're going to assert that there's some kind of ultimate "Truth," you need to at least say how you arrive at that conclusion. Is there a god that provides the source of the ultimate Truth? Is there some supernatural revelation that provides knowledge of this ultimate "Truth"? Conversely, if you're merely asserting that we find "Truth" - i.e., the way things are - by investigating nature via science and other means of measurement and observation and then apply those in technology (i.e., "the machine I'm now using"), that seems to me to be rather a banal "truth."

I mean no disrespect by saying this, but, I beg you..Please... Please stop using the phrase "great sages of the past." We're not concerned on this forum with the "great sages of the past." If this was a general philosophy forum, then that would be fine. This particular forum, however, is dedicated to exploring the philosophy of Epicurus, the interaction between the Epicureans and their rivals, the works of the early Epicureans, and the continuing influence of Epicurean philosophy up to our time. Again, this is sincerely not meant to be any disrespect to you or your individual interests and pursuits. But we need stay focused. If you have reactions to the individual Epicurean doctrines or Epicurean ideas, I believe we would all be interested to hear them.

And while "brilliant voices derived different fundamental conclusions at these philosophical levels," I would say not all conclusions are created equal. If, for example, one's "personal philosophy" relies on supernatural revelation, not verifiable or observable, I would see that as a red flag.

## Post by “Godfrey” of January 8, 2024 at 2:01 AM

*‘Truth is a pathless land. There is no guide, no law, no tradition which will lead you to it but your own constant and intelligent awareness.’ J. Krishnamurti*

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## Post by “Martin” of January 8, 2024 at 4:49 AM

There are other scientists (e.g. physicist and nobel prize winner Weinberger) who think that science is progressing toward Truth. I am not among them. Even if that Truth existed, we would not know whether we have found it. Older theories of physics have rather been abandoned than refuted in all possible variants. E.g., the theories around "phlogiston" and the "ether" appear to be wrong but only from the perspective of the more fruitful theories which have replaced them. It appears unlikely, but further advanced theories might revive one of them.

The only criticism of Cicero in "On Ends" which was substantial at his time and not just a strawman argument was:

"Epicurus says the atoms swerve without a cause, — yet this is the capital offence in a natural philosopher, to speak of something taking place uncaused."

This objection was shattered when physicists came up with quantum indeterminacy. There is a strong analogy between Epicurus' swerve and quantum indeterminacy. The swerve is the most spectacular anticipation of modern physics by Epicurus. However, if in another twist, the hard determinists among today's physicists find a way the measure their pilot waves or other means of saving determinism, this would again take a dramatic turn. At no point along this line of development could we be sure that we found the "Truth".

The maybe most spectacular example of multiple twists in the development of physical theories is the cosmological constant: Epicurus and Einstein both assumed that the universe is essentially static. When Einstein applied his general theory of relativity to cosmology, he needed to arbitrarily introduce the cosmological constant into the equation to obtain a static universe. A few years later, the expansion of the universe was discovered. As a consequence, Einstein himself declared the introduction of that constant as his biggest stupidity ("Eselei"). Subsequent models of cosmology typically did not use the cosmological constant, i.e. set it to 0. A few decades ago, the accelerated expansion of the universe was discovered. As a consequence, the cosmological constant reappeared as a necessary ingredient but with the opposite sign expected by Einstein.

However, there is Milgrom's theory, which does away with the apparent expansion, big bang, dark matter and dark energy and returns to the static universe. The catch is that it is only an ad-hoc theory. However, if eventually experiments confirm that the law of gravity is actually of

the form assumed by Milgrom, his theory would become fashionable.

Again, at no point along this line of development could we be sure that we found the "Truth".

Anything more on Truth than "the way things are" according to our best models requires a considerable leap of faith and has an unknown date of expiry.

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## Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 8, 2024 at 9:31 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Epicureans accept that the material universe exists "independent of our perspective on it." In fact, the universe existed before we were born and will exist after we cease to exist. That aspect of what you're calling "Truth" doesn't seem to be that big of a deal from my perspective.

[Don](#) Thanks Don. It might be that our use of the word "truth" is different. For example, it might be that you use the word "truth" to mean "accurate perspective". In that case we could take the view that "Truth" ("T") is "fully accurate or unassailable perspective". If that is the way Epicurus and you use the word that is fine with me. This is then just semantic differences in our use of the word truth.

In the life I have lived in medicine there was a different problem: opinion versus objective accuracy. For example, during the opioid epidemic I would have people come to me claiming 10/10 pain and "needing" opioids while they would sit in the waiting room chatting with family, eating munchies, and watching television. The claim did not match the objective data. In many examples of medicine there was marked differences between claims and what objectively might be called truth. In another kind of example I would see people claiming complete disability from back pain while fraud investigators had videos of them out playing golf with friends, moving in a perfectly normal fashion. And, we can't forget the doctors who were handing out opioids like candy claiming their patients needed them. So, in the journey of healthcare it became clear there was opinion or claim and there was objective truth. Where they were consonant that was wonderful and gave opportunity for classical professional care to proceed. Where there were marked disparities then decisions needed to be made: do we respond to opinion and claim, or do we respond to what is objective? In the "opioid epidemic" between about 1999 and 2010 half a million people died of opioid overdoses, a significant portion from prescribed opioids. So, you can decide what criteria should be used in such circumstances.

I found it useful to think of "Truth" ("T") as objective and independent of opinion.

### [Quote from Don](#)

You're simply describing "the way things are," as Lucretius' takes the title of his work. If that's what you're calling "Truth with a Capital T" that's like a physicist saying the sum total of all laws of physics can be called "God."

This is, of course, unfair at a number of levels. The concept of "God" (whether true or not) is based on the hypothesis of a supernatural sentience that controls the happenings of the planet. The laws of physics are not supernatural nor are they a sentience. Rather, as far as science and objectivity can tell, they are fact.

Anticipating your possible question (prolepsis) "Does a supernatural 'God' exist?" I don't know. I operate under the presumption that there is no God because I see no evidence of same - at least not one that I can affirm taking an active role in shaping our lives. However, cosmologists now advocate for the majority of the universe consisting of dark matter and dark energy - based on objective facts. So, there seems to be plenty of place to put other sentience. Therefore, I'm smart enough to know I don't know everything and cannot exclude the possibility of God. In my journey I simply leave the issue as undecided.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2024 at 9:50 AM**

BrainToBeing I apologize for not being able to follow this thread more closely - I have been traveling on business and extremely short of time. Here's a place where I will hop back in:

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Therefore, I'm smart enough to know I don't know everything and cannot exclude the possibility of God. In my journey I simply leave the issue as undecided.

...And if that position works for you, and you feel no stress or strain in your life by "leaving the issue as undecided," then I say more power to you!

And while I expect that Epicurus would likely tell you something similar (that what doesn't bother you is of no concern), the project Epicurus was on as a philosophical and moral reformer was that of developing a full "worldview" that could be of help to those people Lucretius described as "hearts in darkness" or Diogenes of Oinoanda described as "lost sheep." I would wager that you as a science professional have developed knowledge and capabilities that only a very small fraction of the world has ever or will ever duplicate, and Epicurus was addressing his philosophy to those ordinary people for whom these questions of life after death and

supernatural gods are of great immediate concern. Epicurus' position, with which I would agree, is that it is necessary to deal forthrightly with those critical issues and not remain in "doubt" (which is itself a pain) on these subjects. There has been and probably will always be a continuing tension between a philosophical approach to questions of epistemology vs a "clinical" approach where someone is comfortable taking the position "this is all I know" and stopping. Observation alone is not going to get someone past that question of how to deal with what cannot be observed. There's lots of good material out there on the debates between philosophers and scientists, and in the end the bigger questions of life that people must act upon are in the realm of philosophy, which (when you are a part of the Epicurean school) leads to the rejection of radical skepticism as a tenable position.

I haven't been able to read this thread closely enough to tell where you are on those issues other than to observe that you are dedicated scientist, and in the end "science" is not the same as "philosophy." I'm not sure I can adequately define the difference, but maybe that is something that needs to be addressed in this conversation.

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## Post by “Don” of January 8, 2024 at 11:25 AM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

This is, of course, unfair at a number of levels.

[BrainToBeing](#) : First, I sincerely didn't mean any offense. My only purpose for that simile was to compare what you seemed to be doing in taking one word ("capital-T Truth") and equating it with something at a much more basic level. Likewise, I see some scientists who want to thread the needle, so to speak, wanting to be able to use the word God while referring to a more basic level of knowledge and/or practice.

On the other points, your using "objective truth" and "opinion versus objective accuracy" and "objective data" and so on is entirely consistent with an Epicurean approach. It is possible for there to be all of those things without there being some kind of transcendent, capital-T, universal Truth...unless you want to assign, semantically, the capital-T Truth word to "the way things are" in an effort to find out what is "objectively" true in a given situation. Epicurus, and even more so Lucretius and Philodemus, advocate for acquiring observation and evidence and not taking things at face value or assigning some supernatural cause to them. This seems to align with your wanting to diagnose your patients true needs against their profession of 10/10 pain in an effort to acquire opiates.

And, let me state explicitly, that the opioid epidemic was and continues to be a tragedy, especially in some rural communities from which I came and where I grew up. But a search for some universal Truth isn't going to make that better. The tragedy has to be addressed on a myriad of levels: personal, familial, societal, and governmental. As such, that topic probably falls outside the purview of this forum; however, as others have said, Epicurus's philosophy is a philosophy of personal responsibility, deep friendship, the support of a social contract that should have participants doing no harm and not being harmed, and the rejection of supernatural causes and the inefficacy of prayer for divine intercession (although Epicurus did say that "it is better to follow the stories of the gods" than to be fraught with the anxiety of hard determinism). You can apply those aspects of Epicurean philosophy as seems appropriate to that real-world situation.

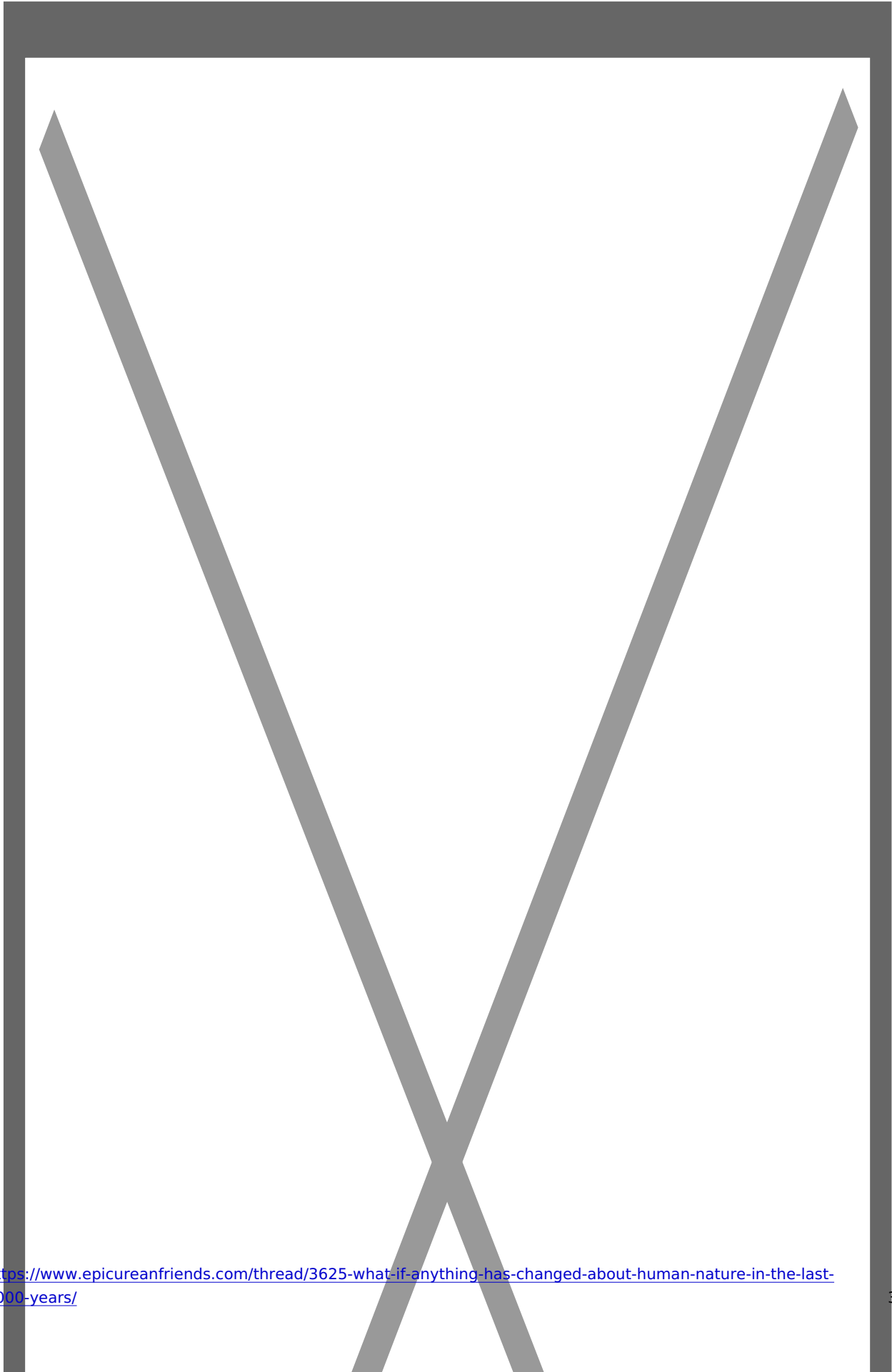
#### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Anticipating your possible question (prolepsis)

Actually, that's not how the word prolepsis or, in English, "anticipation" is used in the Epicurean philosophical sense unless you were using it in a humorous way. Prolepsis is somewhat of an enigmatic word and the texts are woefully few in explaining how Epicurus and the early Epicureans used the term. Speaking for myself, the canonic faculty of the prolepseis (plural of prolepsis), seems to be a faculty of pattern recognition that sorts through all the sensory data flooding into us and is able to pick out meaningful patterns. That faculty can then apply those patterns to sense data in the future, and, over time, then builds up a "library" of patterns against which to make sense of the world. That's one reason I find the work of Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett and others in seeing the brain as a prediction machine intriguing, as it seems to align (imperfectly but pretty well) with this idea of the Epicurean prolepseis.

As far as the gods, Epicurus famously asserted "Gods exist," but what he actually meant by that statement continues to be argued among those of us on the forum 😊 and in academic circles. What is without question is that Epicurus did not think the gods - in whatever way he meant that word - took no notice of us and did not grant favors or inflict punishment. That said, the Epicureans - especially Lucretius - had no problem whatsoever in imagining other life forms, mortal like us, inhabiting other worlds. Lucian of Samosata, who was at the very least sympathetic to Epicureanism, wrote arguably the first sci-fi story, *A True Story*, where there is space travel, life on other planets, etc. The use of the word "true" in light of the other topics on this thread is interesting in that Lucian says his is the only "true" story because he tells everyone at the outset that he's making it up, unlike the old myths that attempt to say what they're writing actually happened.

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

## Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 8, 2024 at 2:05 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

BrainToBeing I apologize for not being able to follow this thread more closely - I have been traveling on business and extremely short of time. Here's a place where I will hop back in:

[Cassius](#) Missed you. Glad you are back! More fun with you here.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

...And if that position works for you, and you feel no stress or strain in your life by "leaving the issue as undecided," then I say more power to you!

Yeah, maybe again because of medicine or just my "brain wiring", I have no problem leaving the issue undecided. When practicing it was typical (not unusual) to have fragmentary information requiring an acceptance - "at this time there is not enough information, and we don't know". So, I got used to it.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

in the end "science" is not the same as "philosophy." I'm not sure I can adequately define the difference, but maybe that is something that needs to be addressed in this conversation.

I'm really enjoying the conversation with you all and it is not my intent to be a gadfly/iconoclast. So, I'm happy to leave this issue alone. (And, the difference can be defined.)

### [Quote from Don](#)

But a search for some universal Truth isn't going to make that better.

[Don](#) Your comments in the section relating to this quote are all quite welcome. You are absolutely right, healthcare is about human beings and being human. During that practice I did not intend to use science to devalue the human experience or individual preference. However, I

did seek to rely on something that was reliable. It would be extremely easy for healthcare, and doctors, to be nothing more than a skill for economic benefit and hidden agendas. In fact that is the path to easiest medicine and highest "reward" from practice. Yet, I didn't think that was the agenda.

[Don](#) In regard to prolepsis you and your colleagues here are certainly much more the experts on that subject than I am. However, to use the word as I did I reference the following definitions:

"the [anticipation](#) and answering of possible [objections](#) in [rhetorical](#) speech." (Oxford Languages dictionary)

"**Prolepsis** (rhetoric), a figure of speech in which the speaker raises an objection and then immediately answers it." (Wikipedia)

**Prolepsis**, a figure of speech in which a future act or development is represented as if already accomplished or existing. (Britannica)

If that is not how the word is used here in EpicureanFriends then I'm happy to hear an alternative definition.

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## Post by "Don" of January 8, 2024 at 2:35 PM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

If that is not how the word is used here in EpicureanFriends then I'm happy to hear an alternative definition.

Ah! Thanks for that clarification. That helps to show where you're coming from on using that. So, yes, there is an English word "prolepsis" as defined by Merriam-Webster as

: *ANTICIPATION: such as*

*a: the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished*

*b: the application of an adjective to a noun in anticipation of the result of the action of the verb (as in "while yon slow oxen turn the furrowed plain")*

And the English word's etymology is from Greek prolēpsis, "from prolambanein to take beforehand, from pro- before + lambanein to take.

However, Prolēpsis *within Epicurean philosophy* is used to refer to a specific faculty of the mind/body. Epicurus chose it to refer to this epistemological faculty from the words available to him and gave it a *specific* connotation within his philosophy. It's been variously translated into

English as anticipation, preconception, and some other terms. Using it with its modern English definition within English vocabulary is going to cause a little confusion in an Epicurean philosophy forum, hence my going off on the prolepsis tangent in that prior post. It appears there may have been confusion on both our parts on the use of that word. Mea culpa.

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### **Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 8, 2024 at 4:54 PM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

It appears there may have been confusion on both our parts on the use of that word.

Yes, I see the difference. And, I like the way you all use the word here.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

It's been variously translated into English as anticipation, preconception, and some other terms.

So, it sounds to me like prolepsis in the concept you use here is more akin to a deep form of recognition. I don't mean that like just recognizing a restaurant you've been to before. More like recognizing that restaurant for what it is in the culinary world. As if to say, "I know what they serve there, and the good dishes, and the kind waitress who helped us when illness made us leave early, and the busy days".

Does that sound right? If so, I really like and respect that use of the word: a deep form of recognition that implies intimate knowledge of a thing.

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### **Post by “Don” of January 8, 2024 at 4:56 PM**

#### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Does that sound right? If so, I really like and respect that use of the word: a deep form of recognition that implies intimate knowledge of a thing.

I suppose that could work. I've never heard it put quite that way, but that's the general idea. Thoughts from others on this point are encouraged!

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### Post by “Bryan” of January 8, 2024 at 7:48 PM

Just as 'epibole' (ἡ ἐπιβολή) is 'focus,' the meaning of 'prolepsis' (ἡ πρόληψις) is simply 'a mental image.' It is the image that comes to mind when you think of something. Similar to external objects, the level of detail depends on your focus and the extent of your exposure / repeated viewings.

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### Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 8, 2024 at 9:38 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

I believe 'prolepsis' (ἡ πρόληψις) is simply a 'mental image.'

[Bryan](#) Another good perspective. Indeed, it seems this word is complex. Let me ask: if I have a mental image of a pencil is that a form of prolepsis? Or does it require that I've used a pencil and have "feelings" about it and about the use of it?

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### Post by “Bryan” of January 8, 2024 at 10:03 PM

Yes a mental image of a pencil is a prolepsis. You will not have a prolepsis of a pencil unless you have had some contact with it (even if it is just a description or a simple drawing), but the clarity increases with increased exposure. I think we can wave away Cicero's description as "innate or inborn 'thoughts'" *insitae vel potius inatae 'cogitiones'*. Even the Latin could mean that the 'thoughts' were "implanted in or grew up" with the mind (as Bailey points out).

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### Post by “Don” of January 8, 2024 at 10:48 PM

[Bryan](#) 's comments are spot on.

Even more complexity comes in when one considers that Epicurus said that we have a prolepsis of justice and a prolepsis of the gods. I reconcile this with the idea that humans appear to have an innate faculty or propensity for fairness and an innate sense of awe or wonder. Both these come from research done with very young infants and toddlers, and, in the case of fairness, non-human species. Those may not have been what Epicurus necessarily had in mind, but for me it reconciles Epicurus's intuition and modern scientific research.

That, along with the idea of an innate faculty of pattern recognition to create those "mental images" that [Bryan](#) mentions, is how I reconcile Cicero's "insitae vel potius inatae cogitiones." To me the Lewis & Short definition of "implanted by nature, inborn, innate, natural" can be reconciled with an inborn faculty or propensity, but I would agree that the mental images are reinforced and strengthened by subsequent exposure to them. In some ways, it's like a child calling every animal a "dog" until they realize "dog" refers to a specific kind of animal after repeated experiences of "dog" in their environment.

The concept of the prolepsis is still very much a work-in-progress for me.

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## Post by “Don” of January 9, 2024 at 7:13 AM

This is my dilemma and something I'm still working through. When you say:

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

It is the image that comes to mind when you think of something

Which comes first? Did the "image" arise in the mind after you "think" of something, or did you think of something and then the image arises in the mind? Or is it simultaneous? It seems there had to be a sequence, even if almost unimaginably rapid.

I fully agree that we are not born with innate images of dogs, pencils, towers, cows, etc. But it seems to me we are born with some natural ability to make sense of the world by detecting patterns in the world, at first rudimentary patterns, especially faces. Even an innate sense of what constitutes fairness or awe. The youngest of infants seem to be able to have their fascination captured by some phenomena. They'll stare at novel stimuli longer than ones they're accustomed to. Repeated exposure refines and expands those rudimentary inborn and evolutionarily developed abilities and "prolepseis." One's native language begins to label those patterns, but the patterns exist independently of language.

This is where I find the thesis of the mind as a prediction engine so fascinating. According to research, we couldn't survive if we only reacted to stimuli after receiving sense data. The snake

would have already bitten us if we waited for it to strike before jumping away. We would already have fallen off the cliff if we waited until our foot felt nothing under it. Our minds - our brains inside our skulls - are constantly constructing the external world from previous sensory data and predicting the next most likely scenario. It fine tunes as data flows in, correcting the prediction, keeping us alive. The more accurate the prediction, the more accurate our prolepsis if you will, the better flow we have through the world.

This is just one of the ways I find the intersection of Epicurus's philosophy and modern science so intriguing and fascinating. The fact that I can even compare modern research with two-millennia-old theories of mind blows my mind.

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### Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 9, 2024 at 7:55 AM

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Even the Latin could mean that the 'thoughts' were "implanted in or grew up" with the mind (as Bailey points out).

[Bryan](#) [Don](#) Kudos to both of you in these last entries. It is a lot of fun for me to discover you both and how much you know about the writings of the classical sages.

And, this gets us into the very fascinating arena of genetics and epigenetics. So, we come to the questions: 1) how much do we "know" genetically from our lineage, and 2) how much does this explain prolepsis (as classically conceived and represented here in EpicureanFriends)?

Your most recent entries suggests that Epicurus and his colleagues did have a sense of this, though they did not know the mechanics of it. And, if we accept that then we come - perhaps with hesitation - to creationist philosophies and the question whether there is some hidden "knowledge" of creation in us.

I've long thought that religions are largely adult extended metaphors derived of the parent-child relationship (the need of the baby to look for support in a parental figure). This is not a big jump. It easily explains such things as "God the Father". However, what if all of it is a form of prolepsis.

Okay, your turn, "run with the ball" as they say.

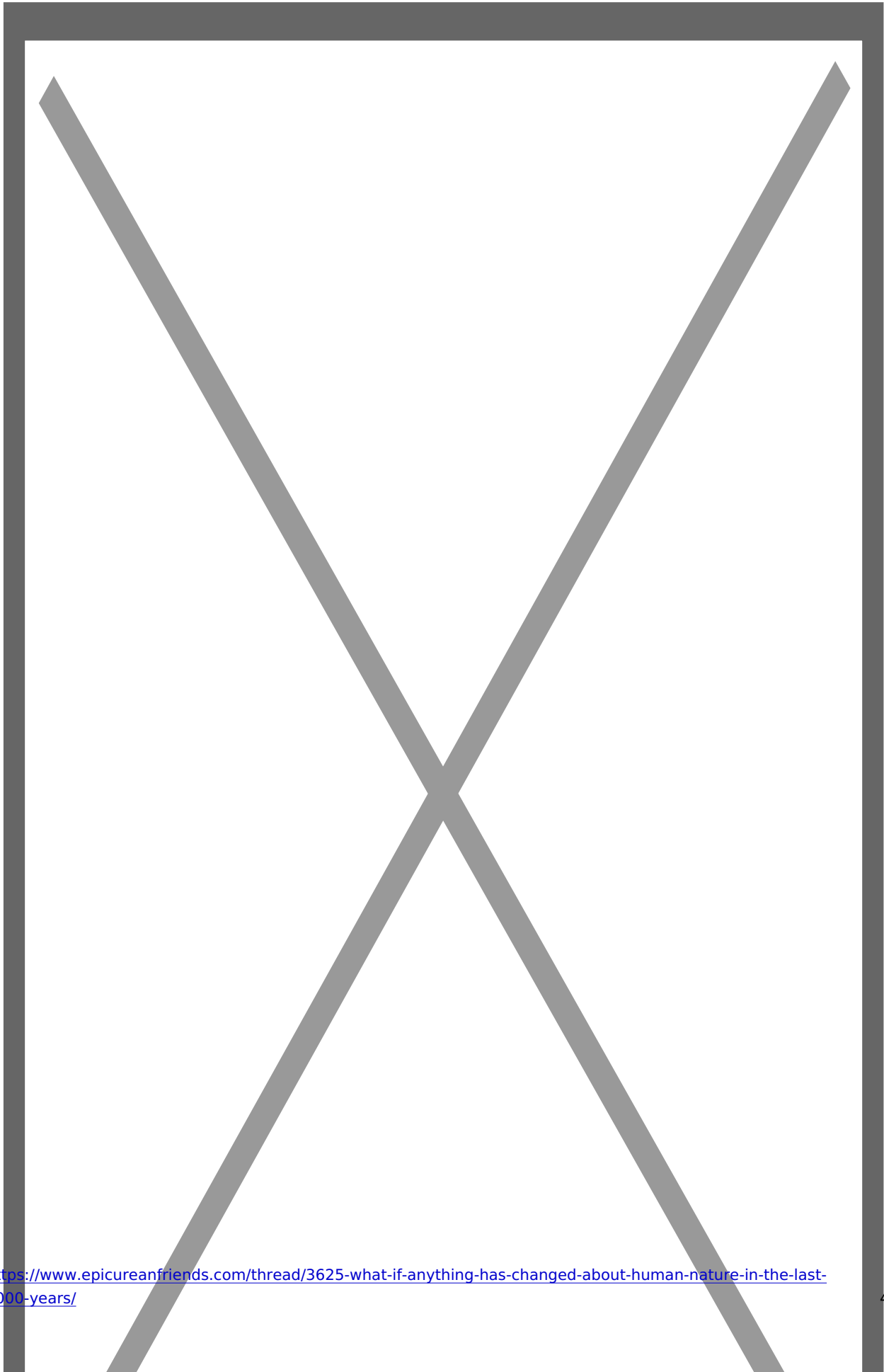
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### Post by “Don” of January 9, 2024 at 8:03 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

I'll just add for now that our pattern recognition can be overactive:

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

[Pareidolia - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

This can also extend to seeing agency in purely physical phenomena, such as assigning divine agency to storms or earthquakes... And the "creation" of the universe.

---

### **Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 9, 2024 at 10:07 AM**

[Don](#) A cool word. So then we have the problem of deciding when it is "over" active. Yet, no question it does occur, and frequently. Human brain evolution made pattern-deciphering a primary goal. We are able to see the lion hiding in the grasses, the spatula only by its handle hidden in a drawer of kitchen tools, and such. We are programmed to look for "partial match" situations and then to invoke what might be their whole. Most of the time this serves us well, and we use it every day, and basically all day long. Yet, it can be over-zealous, as you point out.

So, is "Creation!" an over-zealous attempt to look for a pattern where there is none? Hmmm.

When I was in high school, I remember learning basics of organic biology and wondering: why do the atoms bother? Why bother to gather energy, form complex organic molecules and propagate organic life? What's "in it" for the atoms? I have never found an answer to that question.

In the 1950s the famous experiments of Miller and Urey tried diligently to start life in a test tube. And, the experiment has been repeated in varying forms many times. Yes, we can make amino acids. But, we cannot make them "come alive" (gather energy, create creatures, reproduce). Further, as far as we can determine, life only began one time on this planet (maybe twice if we accept the extremophile archea as separate forms of life). This isolated event(s) is in spite of incalculable seeming opportunities for it to happen again on a planet full of self-propagating life.

So, does this argue for "Creation!?" No. As I said, I currently consider that question unanswered (and I leave it at that). But, it does raise the question why the atoms bother, as I wondered in high school.

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### **Post by “Bryan” of January 9, 2024 at 11:54 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

### [Quote from Don](#)

Which comes first? Did the "image" arise in the mind after you "think" of something, or did you think of something and then the image arises in the mind?

I should not have said 'think' but maintained the use of 'focus.' Thank you for the correction! It seems that this is the very reason Epicurus used 'focus' (ἡ ἐπιβολή) instead of a word for thinking (ὁ λογισμός, ὁ λόγος, ἡ νόησις, ἡ γνώσις, ἡ δόξα, etc).

Epicurus was pointing to the pre-rational image that strikes us. If we choose to 'think' of something, we must first mentally 'focus' on it.

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

"God the Father" However, what if all of it is a form of prolepsis.

People have a natural mental image of the gods, but this natural sense can be quickly obfuscated by culture/opinion. Epicurus lived in a world where depictions of gods were as common as seeing a statue of Mickey Mouse at Disneyland. The gods in ancient Greece were extremely reified by the culture.

We now have the opposite problem. We come from many generations of people who suffered under the idea (from Judaism, and present in Protestantism) that god cannot be pictured and should not be imagined.

If images of friendship and thinking about 'the characteristics of friendship' were considered for thousands years to be a serious mental transgression, we would eventually expect some people to come to the conclusion that friendship is not real.

Just because, from one viewpoint, some clouds are obfuscating a distant tower does not mean the tower does not exist.

A pencil is worthy to be called a pencil if its fundamental characteristics (συμβεβηκότα) are of a pencil. Just like 'justice,' we cannot deny the existence of the word or category of 'god' so then we must take that label, look around the universe, and put the label on something that exists and is worthy of the label.

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**Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 9, 2024 at 1:31 PM**

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

If images of friendship and thinking about 'the characteristics of friendship' were considered for thousands years to be a serious mental transgression, we would eventually expect some people to come to the conclusion that friendship is not real.

[Bryan](#) Good thoughts in #58; however, I disagree on this point. And the issue is rather pivotal. Friendship can be observed, and with psychological tests could even be measured (paper and soon/now fMRI). Whereas gods are always ethereal (well...okay...Mickey the exception 😊). Seriously, the objective would always refute the claim to the contrary. On the other hand, gods, have always been presumptions without objective proof.

It can even be amusing. I live in Utah. The Mormons claim that Joseph Smith found gold tablets with God's inscriptions on them. Then, he lost those. Yeah, "Oh darn, where did I put those gold tablets??? I've looked in all my closets!" (I know, if you lived in Utah you would not say "Oh, darn", you would say "Oh, my heck". Just needed to clarify that.)

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Just because, from one viewpoint, some clouds are obfuscating a distant tower does not mean the tower does not exist.

That's true. However, if the tower is never visible....

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## Post by “Bryan” of January 9, 2024 at 2:51 PM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

However, if the tower is never visible....

Similarly, a small percentage of people argue that 'justice' is non-existent, often because they expect to observe some ethereal, immutable concept they can label as 'justice.' Their search for a transcendent, all-encompassing form of justice is futile, as it simply does not exist. In seeking such an unrealistic ideal, they inadvertently set an impossible standard for what justice should be, leading them to erroneously conclude that justice itself is a fallacy. However, most people reject the notion that justice does not exist, because they have a reflexive image of justice in their minds.

Nevertheless, the ability to recognize justice is contingent on our willingness to look for it. Also, if we seek a form of justice that exists without reference to specific physical interactions, we are doomed to never find it. Justice, in reality, must be grounded in specific, physical contexts.

Thank you for the conversation.

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### Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 9, 2024 at 9:45 PM

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Thank you for the conversation.

[Bryan](#) And truly, thank you Bryan. This is much fun to discuss these things with people like you and your colleagues here.

I certainly agree with you that "justice" is a difficult one to encapsulate. It seems very much "in the eye of the beholder" or at least based on some vague sense of equivalence.

If justice is a particular interest of yours I'd be delighted to learn more about how you consider it.

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### Post by “Bryan” of January 11, 2024 at 8:02 PM

Today I came across a related quote from Hermarchus about our pre-rational sense of justice. The topic is legislation prohibiting murder:

"...some people have come to the consideration of the utility, **previously perceiving it irrationally** and often forgetting, but others were terrified by the magnitude of the punishments."

καὶ τοὺς μὲν εἰς ἐπιλογισμὸν τοῦ χρησίμου καταστήσαντες, **ἀλόγως αὐτοῦ πρότερον αἰσθανομένους** καὶ πολλάκις ἐπιλανθανομένους, τοὺς δὲ τῷ μεγέθει τῶν ἐπιτιμίων καταπλήξαντες. (Porphyry, De Abstinencia 1.8)

ἀλόγως αὐτοῦ πρότερον αἰσθανομένους = Sensing it without reason in advance, Having a pre-rational perception of it beforehand.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2024 at 9:34 AM

This thread then took a strong turn into a discussion of very important questions about "meaning" and "meaningfulness" (with a dash of "skepticism vs. dogmatism" thrown in) so it is branched off for easier reference here:

Thread

### [What Would Epicurus Say About Searching For "Meaning?"](#)

Perhaps this belongs in this column. It is from the excellent article referenced by @Don in #37 above: "In fact, Marcus [Aurelius] admits that if Epicurean natural science were right, he would fall into despair. Without providence, he asks, 'Why care about anything?'" So, is this a pivotal issue: caring? That is, vis a vis Victor Frankl and the search for meaning. If we seek to avoid pain and find pleasure are we thereby finding meaning? Or, do we need to look further? Thoughts?



BrainToBeing

January 12, 2024 at 9:46 AM

This will eventually be referenced in the FAQ under meaningfulness.

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## Post by “DavidN” of January 27, 2024 at 3:32 AM

### [Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

AI will push the issue. If we allow it to go forward then it will demonstrate what science would advocate. Then humans will either destroy it (go to war with it, which is our penchant), or many humans will be made obsolete by it (creating huge social upheaval).

The only graceful way forward is to hope the human brain will be capable of adapting to now. That, unfortunately, remains a pertinent question.

I can put you at ease on this one, being that my first degree was in AI. Specifically a major in computer science with a minor in philosophy with a focus on learning. True AI isn't possible with the current technologies we have deployed. On a hardware level you need to either redevelop

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3625-what-if-anything-has-changed-about-human-nature-in-the-last-2000-years/>

analog computing, or quantum computing and then on a software level you would need to get away from the limitations of binary code. Much like fusion power it could be decades or more before a real breakthrough in true AI. But if you read the news it's always right around the corner.