

Hidden Brain podcast: Suggested Episodes on the Gods & Religion

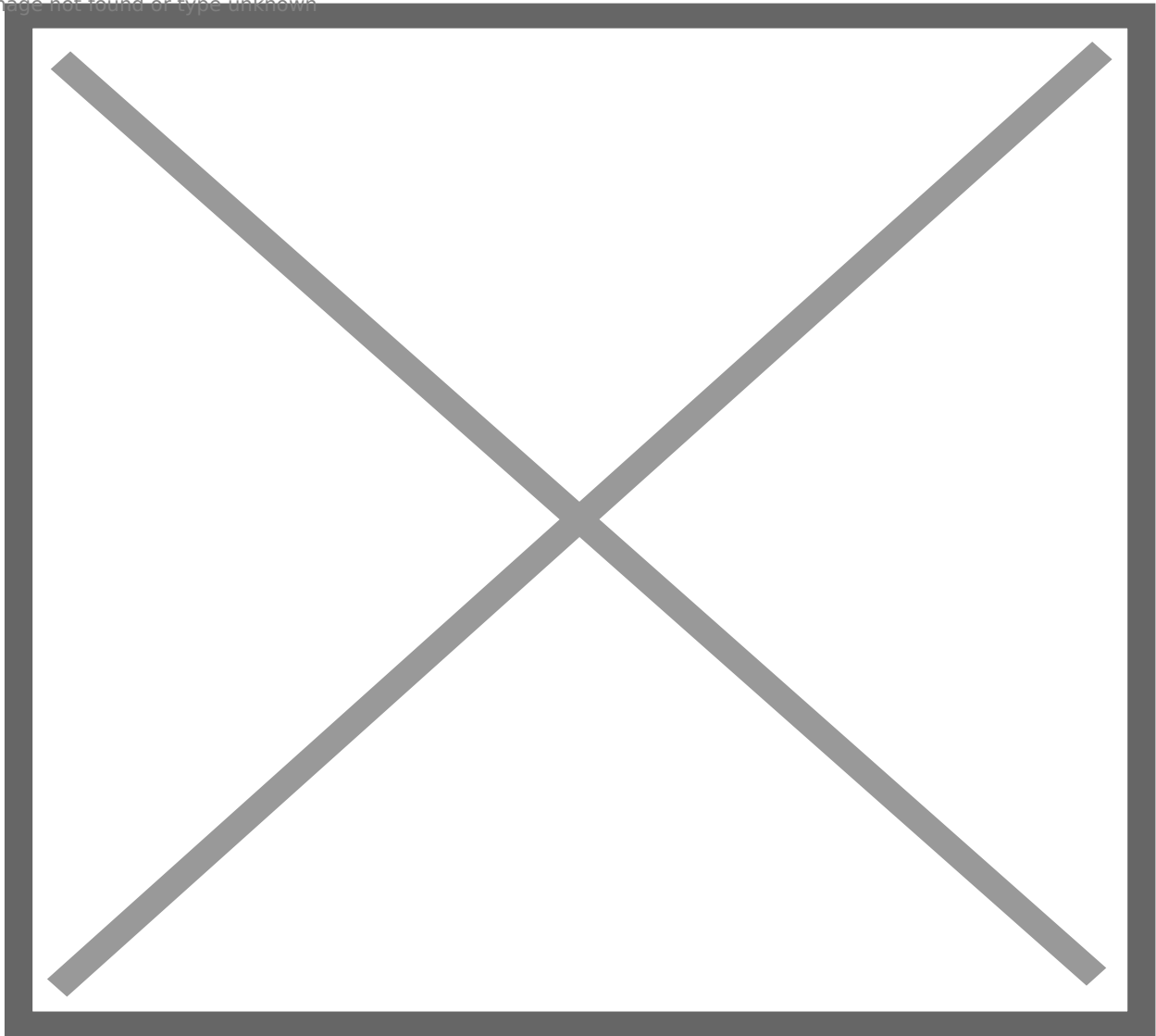
Post by “Don” of June 29, 2024 at 10:22 PM

(NOTE: I'm sure these podcast episodes are also available where you happen to subscribe to podcasts. I'm posting the program's episode pages because they also had some additional resources that might not be in show notes on a podcast-subscription platform.)

I just started listening to the second episode of *Hidden Brain* listed below but felt obligated to share them. I've found them to be instructive and thought-provoking from a cultural evolution of religion perspective.

"Creating God"

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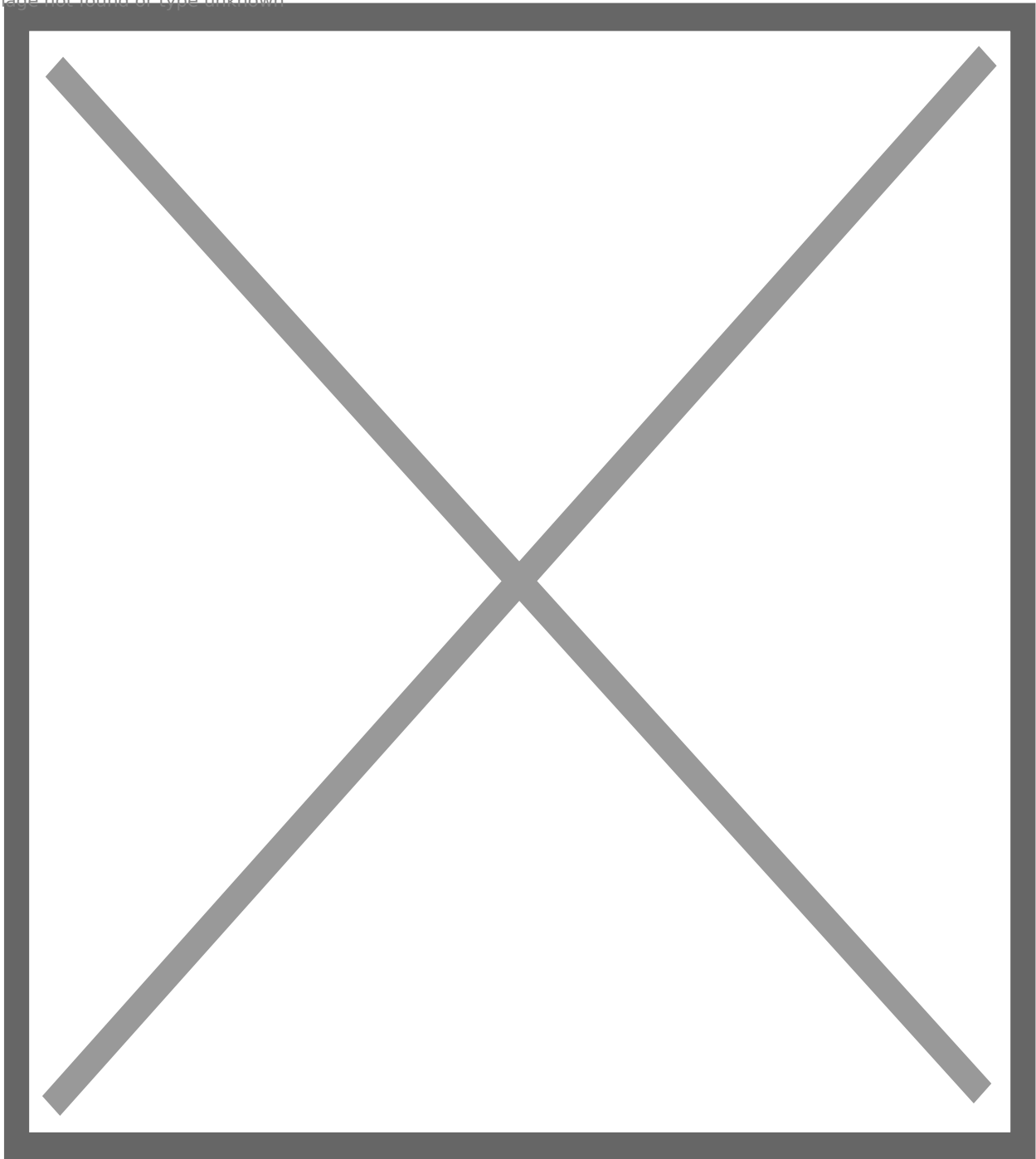
[Creating God | Hidden Brain Media](#)

If you've taken part in a religious service, have you ever stopped to think about how it all came to be? How did people become believers? Where did the rituals...

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"Our God-Shaped Brains"

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[Our God-Shaped Brains | Hidden Brain Media](#)

Some think of religious faith as just that: a leap of faith. But psychologists are increasingly filling in the gaps in our understanding of how beliefs shape —...

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These two have also made me question whether we really do have a prolepsis of "blessed and incorruptible" characteristics of gods.... or whether the ubiquitous nature of gods across

cultures is really (as talked about in "Our God-Shaped Brains") due to our innate proclivity (prolepsis) for assigning agency even where it doesn't exist, to anthropomorphize, and to engage in "teleological thinking" (seeing purpose where none really exists). The episode talks about these innate evolution-adapted proclivities giving rise to gods/spirits/divinities across cultures. Not some innate "preconception" of "blessed and incorruptible" beings existing somewhere. It seems to me that that is worth considering... although *I'm fully aware this goes against Epicurean orthodoxy!* There are still prolepses involved in there being ubiquitous gods, just not the prolepses that Epicurus posited. And if a "modern" Epicurean wants to imagine gods as admirable archetypes to emulate, I don't see a problem with that (at the moment I'm typing this at least). However, if these podcast episodes are correct, in a manner of speaking, the hoi polloi can be "forgiven" for holding the beliefs they do about the gods... in a way, evolution made them do it.

I'll have to cogitate on this for awhile, but I'm posting here for consideration by forum members. I look forward to any and all thoughts.

Post by "Godfrey" of June 29, 2024 at 11:46 PM

Personally, I'm chewing on the idea that the prolepsis comes from the infant-caregiver relationship, in addition to what you've stated. Blessed and incorruptible comes from reasoning out maximums in an infinite universe. But as I understand it, this isn't how Epicurus presented it.

Post by "Cassius" of June 30, 2024 at 7:00 AM

At the moment I would tend to think the way Godfrey is going is most likely. It seems likely that prolepsis is, like the eyes or other senses, a pre-conceptual / pre-opinion faculty that is neither right nor wrong. In contrast, even the assertions that "gods are blessed" or "gods are incorruptible" are chock full of conceptual right/wrong content.

So at this point it seems to me that those statements, which are "right" from Epicurus' point of view as stated by Epicurus to Menoeceus and by Velleius to Cicero, are better thought as "based in part on proleptic input" (which probably goes for all 'statements' of any kind that are recognizable to us) rather than "are prolepsis" or "being proleptic" themselves.

More likely than saying that our brains are stamped at birth "gods exist and are incorruptible and blessed," he's saying that our brains are stamped at birth with an operating system that, when exposed to certain experiences, are disposed to "anthropomorphize and to engage in teleological thinking." The results of that process are deemed to be true and consistent with all evidence only when we conclude that gods are blessed and imperishable, which means that they don't have anything to do with us or earth (that would indicate weakness). To reason otherwise contradicts our physics and all other repeatable and verifiable sensory observations.

However in my view there is no conflict at all with concluding that the evidence we do have (including infinite and eternal universe, isonomia, nature never makes only a single thing of a kind) we should expect to exist beings which do have physical reality and are totally happy and deathless. Reasoning in that way provides at least one plausible "explanation" of the phenomena that allows us to dismiss fears of supernatural causation.

Reasoning in that way I see no reason to be concerned that such theories as Don mentions above would "violate Epicurean orthodoxy." The only way they would do so would be if "orthodoxy" required us to jump directly from "human ideas of divinity stem from mental phenomena" to "no superior forms of life exist elsewhere in the universe."

To me such a conclusion is a total *non sequitur* and goes against all scientific observations about life being natural and not supernatural. To reason that way seems to me to be a very basic error that Epicurus would and did reject. The fact that a huge number of people otherwise favorable to Epicurus seem inclined to reason in exactly that way (and conclude that Epicurean style gods do not in fact exist) is to me a defect in the reasoning of those making that assertion, not in the reasoning of Epicurus.

Post by "Don" of June 30, 2024 at 8:36 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I'm chewing on the idea that the prolepsis comes from the infant-caregiver relationship

I think you're onto something thinking along those links, [Godfrey](#) . Part of it comes down on answering the questions:

- "What is a prolepsis?"
- What are the prolepses (as a group of phenomena)?
- Can we translate (literally and/or metaphorically) Epicurus's ancient Greek concept of mental/sensory functioning into a modern framework and still have it make sense?

[There's the rub.](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

At the moment I would tend to think the way Godfrey is going is most likely. It seems likely that prolepsis is, like the eyes or other senses, a pre-conceptual / pre-opinion faculty that is neither right nor wrong. In contrast, even the assertions that "gods are blessed" or "gods are incorruptible" are chock full of conceptual right/wrong content.

So... it reads to me there, [Cassius](#) , that you don't think "gods are blessed and incorruptible" cannot be the content (so to speak) of a "a pre-conceptual / pre-opinion faculty"? IF (and *please* correct me right out of the box!) that's your point, I'm tending to agree.

Epicurus tells Menoikeus:

- "First and foremost, believe that the god is a blessed and imperishable thing/being as is *the common, general understanding* of the god."
 - πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη
 - The verb, νομίζων, comes last in that first phrase and means "believe, hold, consider." At this point, he's not bringing in the prolepses.
 - I still say there is significance in that ζῶον can mean "living being, animal" OR "in art: figure, image" To me, it seems Epicurus hedges his bets in that one word.
 - ἡ κοινὴ (κοινῆ) τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις "the common or general understanding of the god" has been ὑπεγράφη (hypegraphe) "traced, outlined" on our minds. I think this refers to Epicurus's proposed prolepsis of divinity. I consider ὑπεγράφη as laying in a rough, light outline of a drawing to later fill in the details with pen and ink and paint, covering up the original outline. It seems to me that Epicurus is encouraging us to stick to the outline and not cover it up with unnecessary decoration. That seems to be why he's insisting on the "blessed and incorruptible." BUT that seems to be more of an intellectual distillation process arrived at from sorting through all the religious ideas of the hoi polloi than what is *really* outlined in our minds (if I understand those Hidden Brain episodes and other research + [Godfrey's](#) caregiver hypothesis (See, I've raised your idea to a hypothesis now 😊)).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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gods are blessed and imperishable, which means that they don't have anything to do with us or earth (that would indicate weakness). To reason otherwise contradicts our physics and all other repeatable and verifiable sensory observations.

Hmmm.... I'm not sure I completely follow your train of thought there.... but I **think** I agree with where I think you're going? 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurean style gods

And *there's another rub!* With the popular and scholarly debates about what an "Epicurean style god" **is**... this discussion continues to have interesting side quests and interesting digressions!

Post by “Cassius” of June 30, 2024 at 8:54 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

that you don't think "gods are blessed and incorruptible" cannot be the content (so to speak) of a "a pre-conceptual / pre-opinion faculty"

Right - I don't think that **any** "preconceptual - preopinion faculty" can have "content" of any kind -- the absence of "content" is exactly the point of it being pre-conceptual.

I think a lot of the problem we have is that centuries of conventional commentators have been trying to force Epicurus' statements into boxes that are not appropriate. And on the prolepsis, I think the main error is equating prolepsis with "concepts" in the first place. In fairness to them, I think what Diogenes Laertius is talking about is the conceptual reasoning process, that does in fact occur and is in fact very important, but that "prolepsis" is a process that precedes that stage.

By forcing the conversation to be about conceptual reasoning, which I would say is another process entirely, taking the input FROM the faculties and processing it, the commentators are going astray and not focusing on the "mechanism" of prolepsis, which should be treated just like eyes and ears and the rest.

As for what Epicurean style gods are, I think we are in the same multiple explanations boat we are in in regard to the stars and other phenomena that are too far away to be certain about. I

don't gather that Epicurus obsessed about getting more detail about stars after he developed his non-supernatural explanations of them, and I doubt he obsessed about the details of the gods either.

I don't think we are too far apart at all. If on anything, only possibly in the question of how firmly we should expect to find very smart beings in other parts of the universe. I see that as so firm as to a virtual certainty, only waiting on confirmation through space travel and more advanced technology.

Post by "Cassius" of June 30, 2024 at 9:04 AM

I would say our best lead on all this is from Velleius, and I do not see in these Latin words the necessity to conclude that nature has implanted any "ideas" of the gods at all. Seems to me this can be read with connotations of "notions" that are not ideas at all, and that people are forcing an "idea" or concept template onto this because of their own expectation to find it.

There's another excerpt below that one where the Latin needs to be parsed ...

Post by "Don" of June 30, 2024 at 10:59 AM

I agree that we're not far off from each other, [Cassius](#) ; although let me attempt to widen the gulf 😊

I don't think/know if you're saying it, but I want to say explicitly that I don't believe prolepses can be equated with sensations. They're both pre-rational and things upon which reason works, but they're not the same.

To me, sensations register all incoming images/stimuli/whatever generated from the external world - sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, mental activity (bad terms, but there's a mental sensation per the ancient Greek theories). To me, the faculty of the prolepses identify patterns within those incoming stimuli - without assigning meaning or content! Simply identify "This pattern was detected before... This appears to be similar to another pattern identified earlier... etc." and THEN reason steps in and starts assigning meaning to those patterns... those patterns become more refined... the concepts assigned to them become more refined. It is the patterns

within the field of sensations that are important to pay attention to.

That's my take. Running out the door to work this afternoon... Checking back in later.

Post by “Cassius” of June 30, 2024 at 11:09 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

They're both pre-rational and things upon which reason works, but they're not the same.

If they were exactly the same and did exactly the same thing, they wouldn't be separate things! 😊