

What fears does modern science remove, as Epicurean physics did in antiquity?

Post by “sanantoniogarden” of June 2, 2025 at 3:35 PM

Thinking about this today and how the purpose of Epicurean physics was to help remove irrational and unnecessary fears, and how or has our modern science has contributed to this end? For some I imagine understanding germ theory, pathology, maybe some basic genetics (and other disciplines) would remove the fear of some godly whims, but for others this knowledge might create new fears of some almost deterministic fate. Curious what the forum thinks

Post by “Cassius” of June 2, 2025 at 3:54 PM

Good question and good example. Understanding that germs and viruses and the link are simply unintelligent "robots" and seeing pictures of them makes it even more clear that they are not supernatural agents.

Of course the other side doesn't give up, and every new discovery is used to make the "argument from design" that all this could not have arisen naturally.

In regard to the size of the universe, we see ever more detailed pictures of space, further and further out, and that ought to enhance our appreciation of infinity. However there again the "other side" can still omit the fact that what we are seeing is only observable universe and they can thereby confuse people into thinking that *everything* (the universe as a whole) is expanding, when that is not the only logical deduction that is possible at all.

Overall though I think the advance in science is a huge net positive, mainly due to the availability of information over the internet.

Post by “Robert” of June 4, 2025 at 1:03 PM

Agree, this is an interesting question! Here' my lunch-hour take:

Science has contributed by being able to explain more and more phenomena that, in the past, people might have been inclined to attribute to gods. The more explanatory power science has, the less room there is for supernatural explanations. There is simply less and less for the gods to do.

As an example, in diagnosing certain mental disorders, we can look at the functioning of the amygdala, or whether or not someone has sustained a frontal lobe injury, whereas 500 years ago folks might have claimed possession by spirits (good or evil).

In other words, modern science hasn't changed the basic principles underlying the Epicurean approach, but it has expanded the applicability--and, in so doing, made the competing supernaturalist approaches less plausible.

It might also help prevent relapses of the kind Lucretius mentions in Book 5 of DRM...at least, one can hope so!

Post by “Robert” of June 4, 2025 at 1:15 PM

Also, an addendum regarding determinism: current science does breathe fresh life into the debate over free will; however, scientific determinism differs from the theistic determinism of Stoicism or Calvinism. There's no god, whether providential or wrathful, behind the machine. I think this distinction has implications for the emotion of fear. One has reason to tremble in a deterministic universe ruled by a capricious deity or deities. But if God is either non-existent or non-interventionist, one can instead focus on identifying causal conditions and taking appropriate action.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 4, 2025 at 1:28 PM

On the flip side, you could say that modern science has resulted in germ-warfare and nuclear weapons. Also, modern medicine has the ability to resuscitate an unconscious person and prolong "life" (in a vegetative state). Unless you have a "Do not attempt resuscitation order", CPR will be performed on you (no matter how old you are or your condition - [read about it here](#)) and even though it has a low likelihood of success in certain conditions.

We must remember the Epicurean idea that it isn't the longest life but the most pleasant (whenever discussion of the doomsday clock comes up).

Post by “sanantoniogarden” of June 4, 2025 at 9:14 PM

[Quote from Robert](#)

"scientific determinism differs from the theistic determinism of Stoicism or Calvinism"

Right, it's the implications of this scientific determinism that has my attention. I expect most of us generally accept that the [epicurean gods](#) are material and do not interfere, intervene, inhibit or punish. And most will accept that modern science has continued the Epicurean mission to stamp out superstition. Now that we've done away with with the "supernatural" (a phrase I've always had issues with) we can focus on dispelling the new fears.

It's in these new found fears and anxieties. Genetic predispositions to painful or deadly diseases can make some feel trapped by some biological destiny. Psychology or neuroscience can also make some feel trapped by brain chemistry or childhood experiences (even compound the anxiety of biological destiny). Climate change can be the source of much existential dread. The interesting question is how does the Epicurean respond to these new problems?

Post by “sanantoniogarden” of June 4, 2025 at 9:17 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"On the flip side, you could say that modern science has resulted in germ-warfare and nuclear weapons"

Fritz Haber is an interesting personification of this. He helped develop the Haber process, which is still feeding billions (absolutely good) but also contributed the creation of zyklon b (absolutely evil)

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 4, 2025 at 9:46 PM

We need to balance it all with the fact that before modern medicine the infant/mother mortality rate and the mortality rate in general was much higher. Also in modern times, more safety for

more people (much less warfare, although depending on when/where you are living).

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 4, 2025 at 10:17 PM

[Quote from sanantoniogarden](#)

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I am trying to remember what Epicurean philosophy says about length of life/a complete life.

The need to deal with the fear of death would be the antidote here. Also the need to understand free will and the ability to employ wise choice and avoidance. And to deal with fear of pain itself. All these are dealt with in Epicurean philosophy.

I'll try to find and link to previous discussions on these topics tomorrow (unless anyone else wants to post here).

Post by “Cassius” of June 5, 2025 at 9:04 AM

[Quote from sanantoniogarden](#)

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First and foremost I'd say that Epicurus would say to take heart in looking at the truth without sugar-coating it, and that we can be grateful for the good things that we do have. Then he'd say that the way things are are the result of specific combinations of atoms and void, which are not

required to be the way they are by any force of divinity or necessity or fate, and which -- if we try hard enough and long enough -- can often be changed. No doubt lots of things can't be changed, at least within our own lifetimes, but the pleasure of thinking that you have faced down the truth and fought it with everything you have is not something that we should think of as belonging to the Stoics. After all, they think that every external thing that happens to them is a grim matter of divine will / necessity / fate anyway.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 5, 2025 at 9:07 AM

Further thoughts on the original question: "What fears does modern science remove?"

Modern science can usually diagnose diseases so that you can know if you have a terminal illness or something curable...and so in that way can sometimes reduce anxiety.

Modern science hasn't produced definitive answers for everything, so then fears will remain. We then need to go back to the Epicurean philosophy and work with our basic existential issues, in order to manage fears. I am adding in these links for anyone who happens to be reading this thread (there are of course many other threads on the forum dealing with these issues):

--Fear of dying - see this section of the forum:

[Dealing With Death, Dying, And Old Age](#)

--Fear of pain - see this thread:

Thread

[What is terrible is easy to endure](#)

What is terrible is easy to endure. (fourth point of the [Tetrapharmakos](#)) and also:

PD 4 - Pain does not last continuously in the flesh; instead, the sharpest pain lasts the shortest time, a pain that exceeds bodily pleasure lasts only a few days, and diseases that last a long time involve delights that exceed their pains.

We've talked about this in many other threads, and maybe could use this thread to post links to previous discussions.

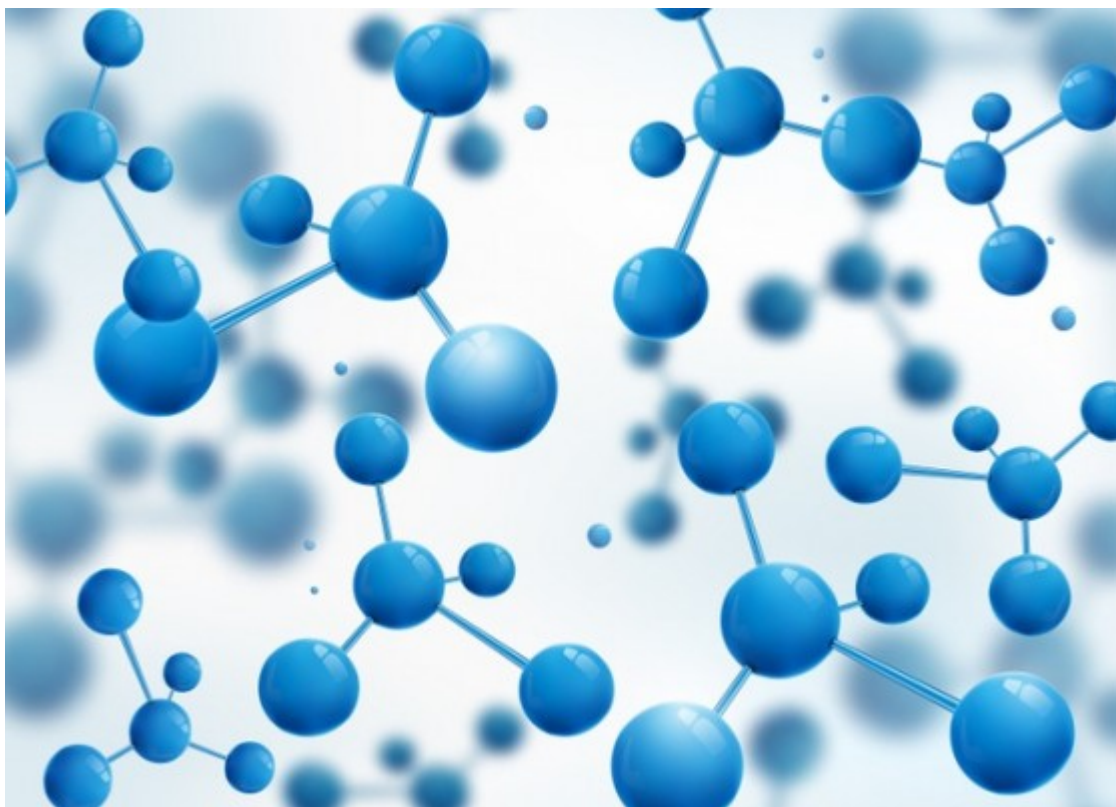


Kalosyni

October 17, 2024 at 3:00 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4480-what-fears-does-modern-science-remove-as-epicurean-physics-did-in-antiquity/>

--What can I control? ...Choices and avoidances, but some things still happen by chance. For free will read this article:



Article

["Free Will In Epicurean Philosophy" - by Dimitris Liarmakopoulos](#)

Elli Pensa has translated for us the following article by a Greek student of Epicurus, Dimitris Liarmakopoulos.



Elli

May 17, 2019 at 6:40 PM

Post by "Cassius" of June 5, 2025 at 9:35 AM

Very relevant to this are those parts of the Letter to Herodotus and Lucretius that point out that those who learn a little, but don't fully understand the nature of things, can be worse off than those who didn't even start - meaning that you need the full Epicurean worldview picture to

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4480-what-fears-does-modern-science-remove-as-epicurean-physics-did-in-antiquity/>

have confidence in facing those scientific questions where you do not yet have all the facts you would like.

Herodotus 79

But what falls within the investigation of risings and settings and turnings and eclipses, and all that is akin to this, is no longer of any value for the happiness which knowledge brings, but persons who have perceived all this, but yet do not know what are the natures of these things and what are the essential causes, are still in fear, just as if they did not know these things at all: indeed, their fear may be even greater, since the wonder which arises out of the observation of these things cannot discover any solution or realize the regulation of the essentials.

Lucretius 5-65

... For those who have learnt aright that the gods lead a life free from care, yet if from time to time they wonder by what means all things can be carried on, above all among those things which are descried above our heads in the coasts of heaven, are borne back again into the old beliefs of religion, and adopt stern overlords, whom in their misery they believe have all power, knowing not what can be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deep-set boundary-stone.

Post by “Patrikios” of June 5, 2025 at 2:53 PM

[Quote from Robert](#)

In other words, modern science hasn't changed the basic principles underlying the Epicurean approach, but it has expanded the applicability--and, in so doing, made the competing supernaturalist approaches less plausible.

[Robert](#)

Modern science now has tools to better examine and correlate mental states with our feelings, using enhanced bio-feedback tools.

There is an interesting organization that is conducting rigorous research into the sphere of noetics. The Institute of Noetic Science (IONS) conducts scientific research into understanding the power of the human mind. They are also testing theories of how the human mind can gain extraordinary knowledge through 'natural' means (e.g. clairvoyance, esp), using scientific methods.

The term "Noetic" comes from the Greek word *noēsis/noētikos* that means **inner wisdom, direct knowing, intuition, or implicit understanding**.

"At the [Institute of Noetic Sciences](#) (IONS), we are inspired by the power of science to explain phenomena not previously understood, harnessing the best of the rational mind to make advances that further our knowledge and enhance our human experience.

The mission of the Institute of Noetic Sciences is to reveal the interconnected nature of reality through scientific exploration and personal discovery."

I found some of their research articles helped understand what Epicurus taught to have mental focus (ebole).

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 5, 2025 at 5:53 PM

When ever talking about "science" consider the following, as a tool against pseudo-science (and to spot when science is done "poorly"):

The Baloney Detection Kit, by Carl Sagan:

Post

[Carl Sagan's Baloney Detection Kit](#)

Thanks to @Philia for this link! <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/03/bal...kit-carl-sagan/>

Probably the most important part - two lists:

Nine Tools of Baloney Detection

1. Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the “facts.”
2. Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.
3. Arguments from authority carry little weight — “authorities” have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better

...



Cassius

September 21, 2021 at 11:15 AM

It's from a very good book, by Carl Sagan: "[The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark](#)"

Post by “Rolf” of June 5, 2025 at 7:10 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

Institute of Noetic Science

Perhaps I’m missing something, but this organisation seems to be the antithesis of the Epicurean worldview: belief in the supernatural. After reading up on them a little, they seem to be widely regarded as pseudoscientific. I’ll also note that despite over a century of research into things like telekinesis, not one person has been able to demonstrate such abilities under controlled, repeatable condition.

Post by “Rolf” of June 5, 2025 at 7:18 PM

Another thing that rubs me the wrong way with these sorts of parapsychology investigation groups is that they start with a theory and then try to prove that it’s true - not how science should be carried out. In their minds, telepathy or whatever else exists, and they just have to prove that it’s true. In other words, they’re attached to their hypothesis. No matter how many experiments fail to show any concrete evidence, they stick with the same hypothesis.

That said, I’m no expert on this and I would love to hear your thoughts Patrikios!

Post by “Robert” of June 5, 2025 at 8:59 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

[Robert](#)

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Hi, Patrikios,

Your post raises for me the question of whether we might find in Epicureanism something analogous to samadhi in the Indian traditions, perhaps with ἐπιβολή playing a role. Mental focus is central part of vipassana, for instance. And those traditions report all manner of unusual states--whole catalogues of them. I notice that the Wikipedia article on the Institute of Noetic

Sciences explicitly references samadhi.

A difficulty would lie in connecting non-materialist/dualist religious-philosophical systems with Epicurean materialism, but "difficult" doesn't mean "impossible." If deities can be composed of atoms, then presumably paranormal states with material explanations are possible as well.

Just speculating, for the fun of it!

E

Post by "Robert" of June 6, 2025 at 12:20 AM

[Quote from sanantoniogarden](#)

[Quote from Robert](#)

"scientific determinism differs from the theistic determinism of Stoicism or Calvinism"

Right, it's the implications of this scientific determinism that has my attention. I expect most of us generally accept that the [epicurean gods](#) are material and do not interfere, intervene, inhibit or punish. And most will accept that modern science has continued the Epicurean mission to stamp out superstition. Now that we've done away with with the "supernatural" (a phrase I've always had issues with) we can focus on dispelling the new fears.

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Are these fears actually newfound, though? Or are they just modern variations on age-old themes: illness, disadvantage, mortality, the long-term fate of the universe?

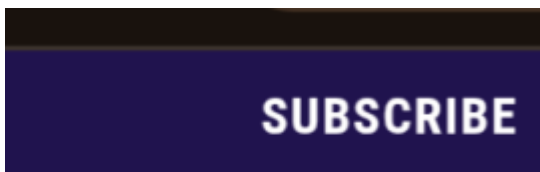
Epicurus acknowledges the causal nexus, aka "necessity." Lucretius startles his readers in DRN 5 with the news that the world will end, though hopefully not just yet. Things like genetic

predispositions and brain chemistry--seem to fall into the bucket of "necessity;" that is, they are causally determined, though we may make various choices in response to them.

That might suggest that the Epicurean prescription for dealing with them would be more or less the same as in his time, at least in terms of general principle.

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2025 at 5:40 AM

Oh, man! Take a look at the [Noetic Institute](#)'s logo!!! 😞



That's disappointing!! Looks like I'll have to change my avatar again.

As an aside, when topics like psychic abilities come up, I think of the Amazing Randi and the One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge.

[One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge - Wikipedia](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 6, 2025 at 8:39 AM

Confirmation bias is a big reason why people retain superstitious or unscientific beliefs.

I did a further Google search and here are the results:

People hold unscientific beliefs, even in the absence of evidence, due to a combination of psychological, social, and cultural factors

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4480-what-fears-does-modern-science-remove-as-epicurean-physics-did-in-antiquity/>

Here are some reasons:

1. Psychological Factors:

- People tend to stick to their initial beliefs and favor information that confirms them, which makes it hard to accept contradictory evidence.
- There is a tendency to overestimate our understanding of complex issues and prefer simple explanations, even if inaccurate.
- Holding strong beliefs can reduce anxiety caused by uncertainty.
- People may rationalize information to align with their identities, accepting what supports their views and rejecting what doesn't.

2. Social and Cultural Influences:

- Beliefs are often based on intuition, trust, personal experience, or trust in others, which can lead to false beliefs if trust is misplaced.
- Social environment, including family and culture, shapes beliefs, and people may adopt beliefs to fit in.
- Exposure to false information, both intentional and unintentional, contributes to unscientific beliefs.
- Information that evokes strong emotions is more likely to be believed and shared.

3. Lack of Critical Thinking Skills:

- Difficulty in evaluating information and comparing it with existing knowledge makes people susceptible to plausible misinformation.
- Low analytical reasoning and numeracy skills can also increase susceptibility to misinformation.

4. Pseudoscience and Misinformation:

- Pseudoscience, which presents itself as scientific but lacks a scientific basis, can deceive individuals.
- Social media can facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation and pseudoscience.

Ultimately, human cognitive tendencies towards narratives, emotions, and social connection can sometimes override the ability to objectively evaluate information and evidence.

Post by “Rolf” of June 6, 2025 at 9:52 AM

To be honest I think a big reason why people believe in telepathy and the like is because it sounds cool 😊

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2025 at 9:56 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

To be honest I think a big reason why people believe in telepathy and the like is 🤔



Post by “Kalosyni” of June 6, 2025 at 12:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Rolf](#)

To be honest I think a big reason why people believe in telepathy and the like is because it sounds cool 😊

I blame Star Wars 😂

Star Trek... the Vulcan mind-meld 😊

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2025 at 12:40 PM

The Star Wars/Trek mentions made me think of how prominent supernatural or pseudoscience is ingrained into pop culture. Just off the top of my head...

- Ghost (w Demi Moore)
- The Sixth Sense
- Touched by an Angel (TV)
- Long Island Medium (reality tv)
- The Exorcist
- The Shining
- Poltergeist

And so on and so on ...

It makes a good story.

Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2025 at 12:54 PM

Quote

[...] The ultimate, most glorious restoration would be to the golden age of King Arthur.

We get most of our sense of King Arthur from Geoffrey of Monmouth, who completed his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) in 1138, and from Sir Thomas Malory, whose fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur) was, in 1485, one of the first books to be printed in England. That gave the Arthur myth wider circulation. There's now been so much talk about King Arthur over the centuries that many people feel, like they do with ghosts, that 'there must be something in it'. There is: it just happens to be deep-seated psychological need rather

than historical reality.

The story of Arthur reflects our longing, as a species, for the ancient, concealed and magical. Towards the end of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory suggests the title is not the spoiler it seems: 'Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had gone by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and ... many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus' (Here lies Arthur, the once and future king).

-David Mitchell, *Unruly*

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Post by "Kalosyni" of June 6, 2025 at 1:11 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

how prominent supernatural or pseudoscience is ingrained into pop culture...

...And so on and so on ...

And [Don](#) your list didn't even include Dune, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, etc.

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 6, 2025 at 1:19 PM

Since we live in the material world in which "telepathy" equals guessing...the usual method, although much slower and basically requiring consent (in comparison), to find out what someone is thinking is to ask them to share their thoughts (lol). 😊

Here's another Google search (take it or leave it, whether or not these tips will work):

Google said:

To gently guide someone towards sharing their true thoughts, ask open-ended questions that invite a more detailed response and encourage them to share their feelings and perspectives.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4480-what-fears-does-modern-science-remove-as-epicurean-physics-did-in-antiquity/>

Consider using phrases like "What's been on your mind lately?" or "What's your perspective on this?" Offer a safe space for them to share, showing respect and understanding.

Here's a more detailed breakdown:

1. Open-Ended Questions:

- **"What's been on your mind?":** This is a general way to invite someone to share their thoughts.
- **"How are you feeling?":** This focuses on emotional state and can help them articulate their feelings.
- **"What's your perspective on this?":** This encourages them to share their opinion and insights.
- **"What are your thoughts on...":** This invites them to share their opinions on a specific topic.
- **"How do you see things?":** This encourages them to share their point of view.

2. Showing Respect and Understanding:

- **Active listening:**

Pay attention to their words and body language, and show that you're engaged in the conversation.

- **Non-judgmental approach:**

Create a safe space where they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, even if they are different from your own.

- **Empathy:**

Try to understand their perspective and feelings, even if you don't agree with them.

- **Validation:**

Acknowledge their feelings and experiences, even if they are difficult to hear.

3. Guiding the Conversation:

- **Reflect their statements:** Paraphrase what they've said to show you're listening and understanding.
- **Ask follow-up questions:** If they're hesitant to share, you can gently ask more specific questions to guide them towards sharing their thoughts.

- **Use "why" questions:** "Why do you feel that way?" or "Why do you think that's important?" can help them explore their reasoning.

By combining open-ended questions, a respectful approach, and active listening, you can create a safe space for someone to share their true thoughts and feelings.

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2025 at 1:20 PM

On a slightly more serious note, inspired by [Joshua](#) 's post, I would offer that the paranormal and pseudoscience feed an answer to the question many seem to ask: *Is this all there is?*

That question presupposes there's something "less than" about our physical, natural, material universe. It's somehow "not enough". There has to be more than just this or nothing has any meaning.

For me, Epicurus (and I would offer, even the general secular and scientific perspective writ large) has an answer to that longing that "something more" in that it's not needed. The magnificence and multifarious nature of the universe is enough to feel awe and wonder.

It brings to mind: "since such a course is of service to *all who take up natural science*, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and *reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this*, have prepared for you just such an epitome and manual of the doctrines as a whole."

Gaze on Yosemite Valley, stare up at the stars at night, breathe in the air deep in the woods or the salt-spray off the ocean while standing on a cliff. Try telling me than that "Is this all there is?" Yes, this is it -- and *it* is magnificent!

Post by “Robert” of June 6, 2025 at 1:25 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

how prominent supernatural or pseudoscience is ingrained into pop culture...

...And so on and so on ...

And [Don](#) your list didn't even include Dune, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, etc.

Dating myself now, but can't resist mentioning "Escape to Witch Mountain"--much loved at age 7.

Also: Close Encounters of the Third Kind...fun mix of science and pseudo.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 6, 2025 at 1:29 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

On a slightly more serious note, inspired by Joshua 's post, I would offer that the paranormal and pseudoscience feed an answer to the question many seem to ask: Is this all there is?

That question presupposes there's something "less than" about our physical, natural, material universe. It's somehow "not enough". There has to be more than just this or nothing has any meaning.

I think this question happens because of religion, which focuses on heaven, and it makes the world and the earth as something less than heaven/God...so "Is this all there is?" is a remnant left by religious thinking.

Also, the "something less than" is that there are certain elements of true reality that are cumbersome and slow - but magic and a magical world (which would include telepathy) gives you powers and speeds things up, makes things possible that you couldn't do otherwise. While in reality (as I wrote in post 27 above) without telepathy you have to go the slow and difficult way to find out what someone is thinking.

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2025 at 1:42 PM

[Quote from Robert](#)

Dating myself now, but can't resist mentioning "Escape to Witch Mountain"--much loved at age 7.

Yes!! I still remember the Winnebago they were riding in! That was aliens, if I remember, too.

PS. I was 11. 😊

Post by "Don" of June 6, 2025 at 2:05 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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