

When Epicurus says that death is the end of sensation, does "end of sensation" in and of itself mean that consciousness ends at death?

Post by "Cassius" of January 18, 2026 at 1:49 PM

In our Zoom discussion of January 18 2026 we deviated from Lucretius and examined a question that Raphael raised in a video here. The title of the thread seems to be the best way to summarize the issue, but during the course of the discussion several other ways arose:

1. Can consciousness exist without sensation?
2. Does the end of (new) sensation bring the end of consciousness?
3. Does consciousness continue after sensation ends?
4. When Epicurus says that death is the end of sensation, does "end of sensation" in and of itself mean that consciousness ends at death?
5. What does Epicurus say about consciousness?
6. From the Sorites perspective: When you go down the list and subtract each of the five senses, is anything left of consciousness?
7. How does the Epicurean theory of images relate to this question? Can the mind receive images even when all five bodily senses are inactive?
8. Is "consciousness" a modern idea which the ancients would dismiss as a regression in thought?

In the end a lot revolves around "can consciousness exist without sensation?" but asking the question the other ways helps focus on the subtleties.

In the most practical of terms of immediate interest to the "study and promotion of Epicurean philosophy," however, the issue involves how Epicurus meant to be understood in PD2 and the letter to Menoecus:

[PD02. Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

Letter to Menoecus: *Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation.*

Post by "Cassius" of January 18, 2026 at 2:22 PM

Joshua's list of words relevant to consciousness:

Post

[RE: Sunday January 18 Zoom Meeting - Lucretius Book Review - Book One Line 136](#)

Words relevant to consciousness:

Greek;

[ψυχή](#) (psyche) Life, breath, soul, mind

[νόος](#) (nous) Mind, perception, thought

[διάνοια](#) (dianoia) Intention, purpose, the process of thinking, the capacity for thought

[ἐπιβολή](#) (epibole) The act of direct apprehension, intuition

[αἴσθησις](#) (aisthesis) Perception by the senses or by the intellect, the ability to perceive

Latin;

[animus](#)



Joshua

January 18, 2026 at 1:39 PM

Post by "Cassius" of January 18, 2026 at 3:20 PM

Probably related to this as well would be to consider the relationship between "the five senses" and "the feelings" and "the anticipations." Can or do the "feelings of pain and pleasure" and "the anticipations" function without "the five senses"?

In Dewitt's book he talks about them being dependent upon one another while not being identical.

That probably works, but we also don't want to be sure to steer clear of mystical "three in one" allegories.

In our conversation on the zoom there was considerable talk of consciousness being able to reflect upon "past" sensations without needing "new sensations" for added content. From that perspective, consciousness / awareness might be able to continue for some period of time without new inputs from the five senses.

But that doesn't "seem" to be the way that Epicurus was thinking in his statements, does it?

Post by “kochiekoch” of January 18, 2026 at 8:05 PM

I'd think from an Epicurean perspective, that consciousness and sensation are all generated from the motions of atoms, the collapse of that system at death would make for the end of consciousness. From a modern perspective, consciousness itself is a kind of sensation. Lost at death or even under anesthesia.

They put you out for a coloscopy, and you're out! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2026 at 8:55 PM

You're definitely right that if we presume death is the shutdown of ALL systems then that answers the question. But the statements of Epicurus do not appear to be so sweeping - they focus on the end of "sensation" as sufficient to answer the question.

I think that the most obvious concern arises from the possibility that if Epicurus is focused only on "sensation" then what does that mean. Is the end of sensation sufficient to establish that absolutely no unpleasantness can occur after death? If consciousness exists totally independently from sensation, and can continue independently without any "new sensation" input, then the possibility would exist that consciousness could continue to rehash old experiences (old pains) from old sensations. If so, then someone might argue that death is not necessarily the complete insulation from all future unpleasantness.

There are various ways to deal with this question, but I do think the question is a valid one to ask. At least it will arise in the minds of some people given the way some people look at consciousness today as inexplicable and mysterious.

Post by “kochiekoch” of January 18, 2026 at 10:13 PM

I think Epicurus is saying death is the shutdown off all a person's systems. The fine soul atoms, responsible for sensations dissipate and all sensations ends. Even the sensation of consciousness. In the modern sense, the brain cells die and lose their ability to process information.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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If that were to be the case, in this scenario where consciousness exists without new sensations, isn't the mind still experiencing sensations, even if they're old? That's not a shutdown of all sensations, as is the case with death.

Also, you'd have to figure the person is still experiencing pain with no pain center in his brain as he is dead. Neat trick. You'd need a supernatural soul to do that of which there is no evidence.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

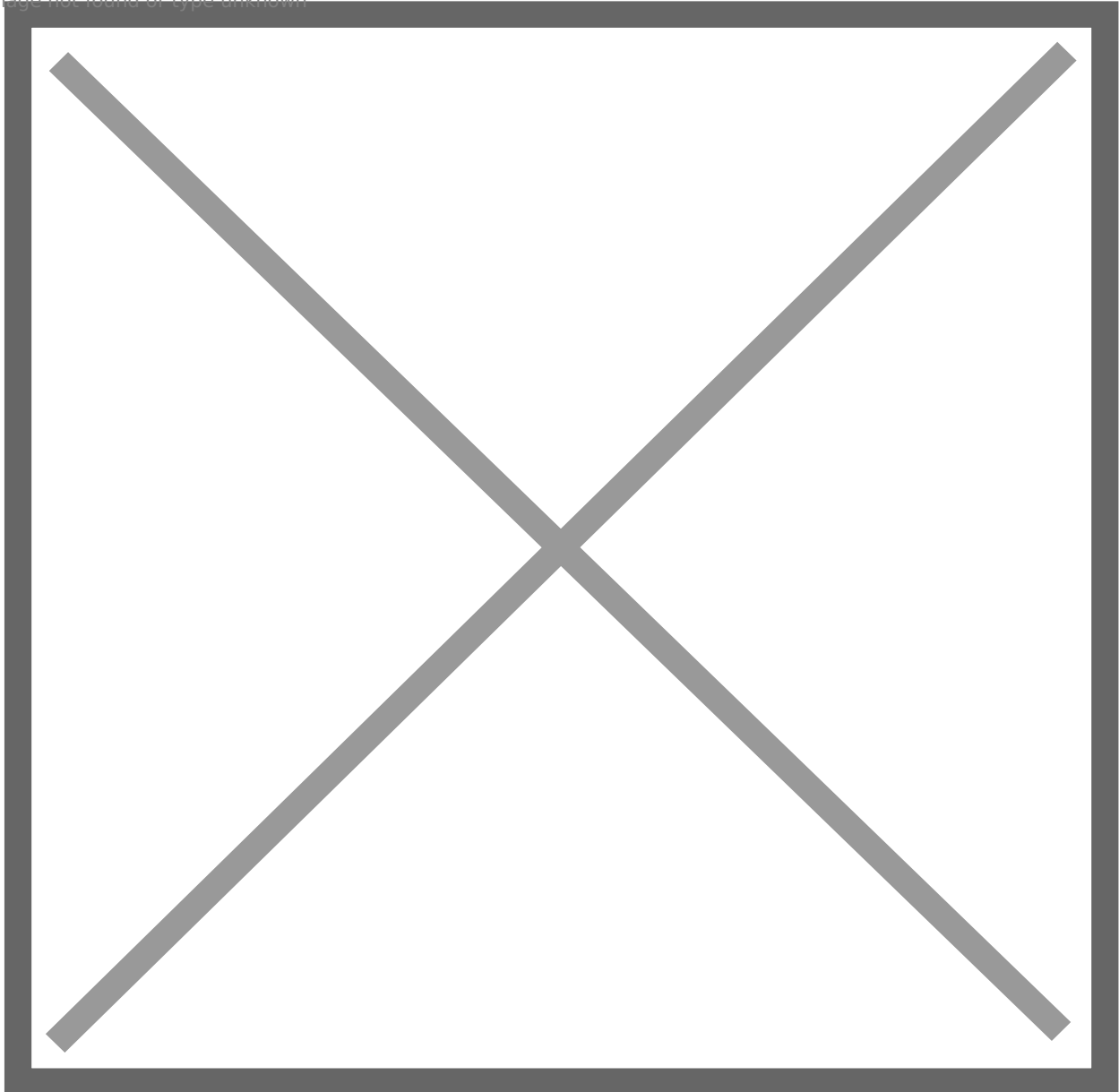
There are various ways to deal with this question, but I do think the question is a valid one to ask. At least it will arise in the minds of some people given the way some people look at consciousness today as inexplicable and mysterious.

Well, some do, but you still need a physical brain for consciousness and sensation. Otherwise, you're off in the realm of the supernatural or ideas like we all exist as computer programs in some fantastical computer. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 19, 2026 at 8:51 AM

Here is a fascinating article:

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[The new science of death: 'There's something happening in the brain that makes no sense'](#)

The long read: New research into the dying brain suggests the line between life and death may be less distinct than previously thought

www.theguardian.com

Quote

At the very least, Patient One's brain activity – and the activity in the dying brain of another patient Borjigin studied, a 77-year-old woman known as Patient Three – seems

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4907-when-epicurus-says-that-death-is-the-end-of-sensation-does-end-of-sensation-in-a/>

to close the door on the argument that the brain always and nearly immediately ceases to function in a coherent manner in the moments after clinical death. "The brain, contrary to everybody's belief, is actually super active during cardiac arrest," Borjigin said. Death may be far more alive than we ever thought possible.

Post by "Don" of January 19, 2026 at 11:40 AM

Fascinating article! Thanks for posting. Still working through it. But this jumped out at me:

Quote

Perhaps the story to be written about near-death experiences is not that they prove consciousness is radically different from what we thought it was. Instead, it is that the process of dying is far stranger than scientists ever suspected. The spiritualists and parapsychologists are right to insist that something deeply weird is happening to people when they die, but they are wrong to assume it is happening in the next life rather than this one.

Post by "Cassius" of January 20, 2026 at 7:12 AM

OK I read it. I won't echo "fascinating" but I'll certainly give it credit for "well-written" and "holds interest."

That said, I don't see why the whole issue isn't pretty much the same question as something like "what is the physical nature of thought or dreams?" or "does the brain work electrically, and if so, how long can the electrical function continue after the heart stops pumping?"

The article stays largely neutral, but even entertaining certain questions about the supernatural gives some of the positions a credence I don't think they deserve.

The field of studying the physical nature of thoughts and dreams is certainly valid and fascinating, and could lead to identifying consciousness as something in the brain that could lead to all sorts of "brain transplants to vats" and "vats to robots" and all sorts of possibilities that has in the past been explored in science fiction.

There's a section in the article about brain activity being stimulated by waves or something coming from outside, and I can see that possibility as being involved at least in part

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analogously to a form of magnetism or other radiation that is being received and processed by the brain:

That is a key tenet of the parapsychologists' arguments: ~~if there is consciousness without brain activity, then consciousness must dwell somewhere beyond the brain.~~ Some of the parapsychologists speculate that it is a "non-local" force that pervades the universe, like electromagnetism. This force is received by the brain, but is not generated by it, the way a television receives a broadcast.

The brain being stimulated by something outside the brain like the eyes are by light or ears by sound seems to me to be reasonable. In fact being influenced from the outside seems not only reasonable but likely, and that seems to me to be pretty much what Epicurus was saying about the brain receiving "images" directly. I gather there is already a lot of reproducible science about the brain being affected by cell phone radiation and other "electrical" influences.

But to take that outside stimulation and jump to the conclusion that "consciousness must dwell somewhere beyond the brain" seems to me to be going way too far and to be a non-starter.