

How do we know that we only get one life?

Post by “LAMAR_44” of April 7, 2026 at 6:01 AM

Essentially, from what I know about Epicurean physics, is that time extends infinitely into the past and into the future, as well as space extending infinitely in all directions, and there is infinite matter in this universe.

Now, if the soul is just a combination of atoms, and this combination is a finite combination, that I don't see why the combination cannot arise given infinite matter, infinite time, and infinite space. It seems very likely that at some point, matter will be arranged somewhere, at some time in the universe, where it's identical to my brain.

Why then wouldn't this be me living again? Perhaps it's that we wouldn't feel a continuation of existence like we do now, but I don't see why the combination of matter has to be continued. Like if you disassembled my brain and reassembled it 5 minutes in the future, it should just feel like I instantly travelled 5 minutes in the future, since my soul stopped existing once my brain was disassembled, and then it started existing again once it was reassembled, since my soul is just this combination of these atoms, when they exist, my soul should exist, and when they don't, my soul doesn't exist.

Post by “TauPhi” of April 7, 2026 at 6:40 AM

I conducted similar thought experiment some time ago and tried to imagine how Epicureans in antiquity could tackle this problem. I hope you find it interesting:

Post

[Ancient Epicurean worldview \(classes of compounds of atoms\)](#)

A few of the recent conversations got me thinking and as a result a new perspective on ancient Epicurean worldview emerged in my mind. I'm curious how viable you think the perspective is, my dear EpicureanFriends.

Firstly, the required Epicurean foundations:

- 1) The universe is infinite. (both is geometry and duration)
- 2) Atoms and void are infinite (atoms in quantity (but not quality!) and duration, the void in

geometry and duration)

3) Compounds of atoms are finite in quality (there are limits to...



TauPhi

September 2, 2024 at 2:44 PM

Post by “Cassius” of April 7, 2026 at 7:40 AM

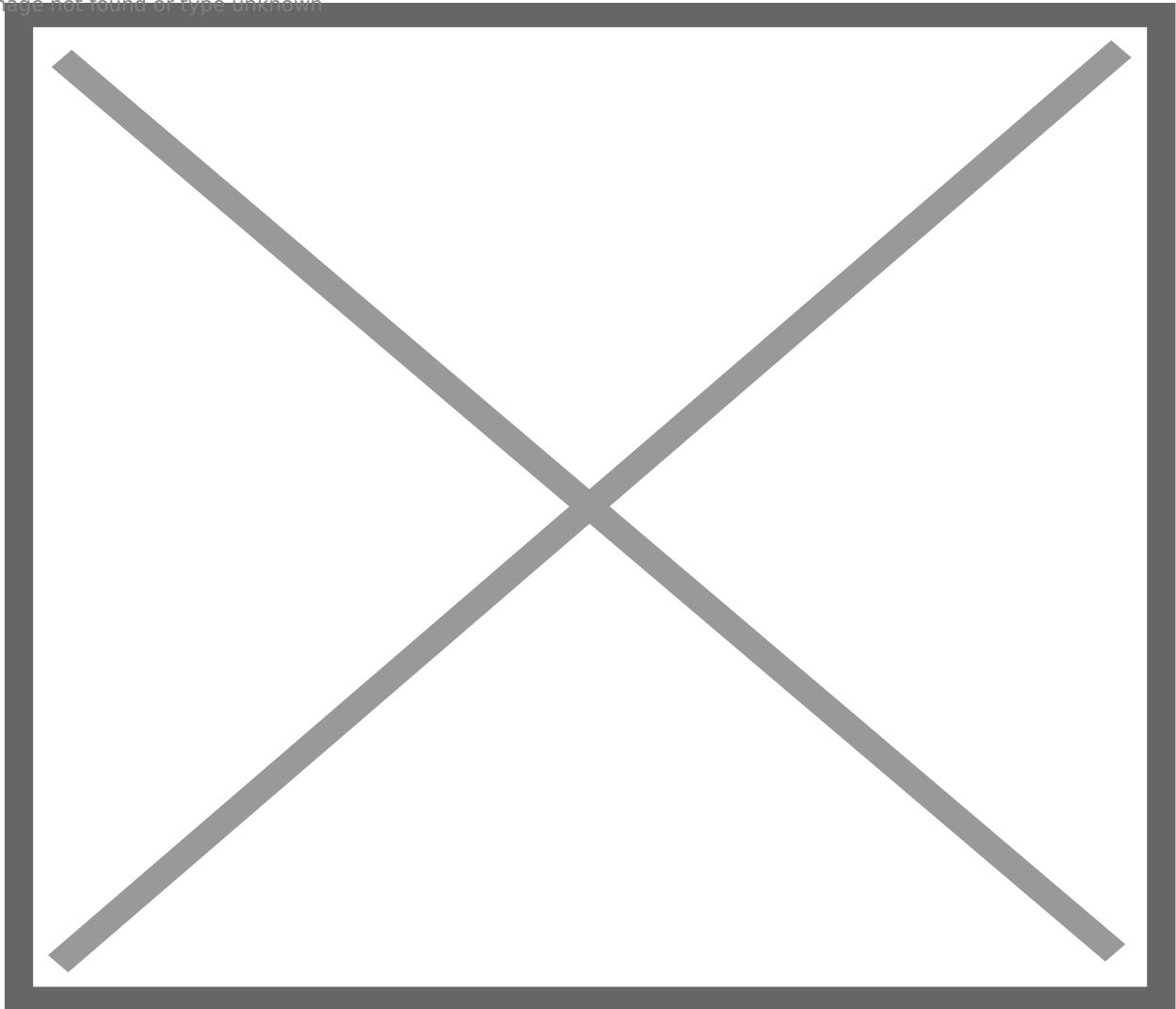
[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

Perhaps it's that we wouldn't feel a continuation of existence like we do now,

Perhaps Tau Phi's post mentions this (haven't read it yet) but your specific question is addressed by Lucretius. His answer is as you indicate, that our exact atoms could reassemble in the future, but that we would have no memory of it so it would not be us in actuality.

I think your question of why the memory would not reassemble is also a good one, but as I understand Lucretius his answer is that we would not expect that because human experience is indeed that we now have no memory of past lives, so we would not expect that past experience to change. That's an issue that bleeds over into Epicurean canonic in general and Philodemus' On Signs in particular, as a question of when we have enough information to infer that we are confident of the answer. I would expect this to be one of those times.

Image not found or type unknown



[EpicureanFriends Side-By-Side Lucretius](#)

Multi-column side-by-side Lucretius text comparison tool featuring Munro, Bailey, Dunster, and Condensed editions.

handbook.epicureanfriends.com

3-843

And even if the nature of mind and the power of soul has feeling, after it has been rent asunder from our body, yet it is naught to us, who are made one by the mating and marriage of body and soul. Nor, if time should gather together our substance after our decease and bring it back again as it is now placed, if once more the light of life should be vouchsafed to us, yet, even were that done, it would not concern us at all, when once the remembrance of our former selves were snapped in twain. And even now we care not at all for the selves that we once were, not at all are we touched by any torturing pain for them. For when you look back over all the lapse of immeasurable time that now is gone, and think how manifold are the motions of matter, you could easily believe this too, that these same seeds, whereof we now are made,

have often been placed in the same order as they are now; and yet we cannot recall that in our mind's memory; for in between lies a break in life, and all the motions have wandered everywhere far astray from sense.

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 7, 2026 at 11:25 AM

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

Why then wouldn't this be me living again?

The future animal that looks like you will have different friends.

To be the same, you'd also need the same context, the same culture, the same language, the same fashion, the same laws, the same relationships, the same experience that guarantees an identical existence. As animals, we're defined by our development, not a permanent prototype.

I'm thinkin' ... maybe, like, *Toy Story*? Sure, millions of toy cowboys named Woody were produced, but Andy only loves one Woody, and there's only one Woody who loves Andy. In the words of the great Randy Newman, "*Some other folks might be a little bit smarter than I am, maybe stronger to. But none of them will ever love you the way I do. Just me and you, boy. And as the years go by, **our friendship will never die.** You've gotta see it's our destiny. You've got a friend in me.*"

Hmm ... maybe that's it. *Love*. (Of course, "friend" and "love" are the same word in Greek.) Friendship doesn't die with friends, so your memories are another crucial piece of *you*.

I'm also thinking of *Annihilation* with Natalie Portman in it. I'm not going to spoil if any readers haven't seen it (go see it!), but, in a nutshell ... a thing that looks like you in every way is not you. Or ... at least so my personal viewership gathered from that eery narrative.

Also, quick thought experiment. I'm thinking *Rick & Morty* here (adult cartoon). So, we have a mad scientist. He wants to trick your family. He makes a bunch of indistinguishable robot clones that (to others) are like you in every way. It lives with your family for years, and begins evolving functional relationships that allow for improvisation and development. The mad scientist, hoping not to alert your family, switches you in the night, and induces selective amnesia in you. You awaken. Your family notices that you have gestures, habits, and a vocabulary that reflects you at a younger age, not the version of you that has developed and grown with them. So ... who are you? I have to think that you are the victim of the mad scientist, not the form of you that can be reproduced. Even if everyone externally recognizes the robot clone as you, the robot clone is *other* than the scientist's victim.

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 7, 2026 at 11:26 AM

Also, my bad (upon reflection) for demonstrating my point with mythic narratives. 😬

Read the citation [Cassius](#) shared for a proper, Epicurean defense.

Post by “Patrikios” of April 7, 2026 at 3:17 PM

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

Now, if the soul is just a combination of atoms, and this combination is a finite combination, that I don't see why the combination cannot arise given infinite matter, infinite time, and infinite space. It seems very likely that at some point, matter will be arranged somewhere, at some time in the universe, where it's identical to my brain

[LAMAR 44](#)

Interesting question of how would we know. To “know” something requires a brain with memory. Our brains contain volatile memory, with neuron cells. But when the blood flow stops, the brain's power supply (oxygen, glucose) are cut off. Neurons begin dying within 4-6 minutes. Once that occurs, the memories are gone, and the underlying substrate is destroyed, never to be re-built again with exactly the same physical neuron cells, which will never have the same set of lifelong experiences to reproduce the same memories.

So, those are the natural facts which Epicurus taught us to study. If a few human atoms from a dead body re-formed to make a “soul”, I see no way that it could fulfill the same function as the original, with no memory.

How would you explain a new person with the same soul AND memory?

Post by “Cassius” of April 7, 2026 at 4:05 PM

Patrikios I wonder if "emergence" is not part of this answer too. I think it's reasonable to say that if we were taking an atomic reductionist point of view that the "atoms" of our current forms could in fact be reunited in exactly their same positions over the course of infinite time and space. In fact I think some here (including Martin and me perhaps) think that that is logically compelled by the infinite universe/eternal time thesis.

And probably that goes far enough to say that that can/will happen, and since we've had an eternity of time and infinity of space already, it already HAS happened an infinite number of times, and yet we don't remember any past lives, and so that settles the question.

But probably as we work on describing what "emergence" really entails, which is more than just identical atoms "arranged" in identical ways, we might be able to add an additional layer of description to the discussion of it. Maybe just additional explanation of what "combination" or 'arrangement" might imply, but still something additional that would give a greater explanatory power to the discussion and explain why simple "rearrangement" through motion might not be enough to reconstitute the memory that you are referring to.

Post by “Patrikios” of April 7, 2026 at 4:47 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

that the "atoms" of our current forms could in fact be reunited in exactly their same positions over the course of infinite time and space.

[Cassius](#)

I don't see how 'emergence' plays out in recreating the same exact experience when it is a different time or place. I also don't see it as a question of "past lives" from a previous time.

Those reunited "atoms" never caught the same fish in the same river as I did in my youth. I still do not see how that recombination of exactly the same types of molecules and compounds could occur in the exact same physical place at the exact same "time" with the exact same cosmic positioning of every star!

Since our human bodies are built & filled through our senses with terabytes of such complex environmental data every day of our life, and influenced by unique gravitational and electromagnetic fields, as well as the positions of other cosmic bodies; I have a very hard time conceiving of the possibility of such exact recreation of any animal with all of the same time-place experiences.

That is how I KNOW that I will only live one life, in answer to the title question.

Post by “Cassius” of April 7, 2026 at 5:17 PM

I think what I am considering is whether it is the best we can do to say that -for example - memory is simply a very precise arrangement of atoms.

Again not implying that it is anything non-natural, but there are many things which clearly CAN be that. I am not sure about memory

Post by “Cassius” of April 7, 2026 at 5:33 PM

Of course "arrangement of atoms" is clearly just a shorthand, and calling something "emergence" is just slapping another label on it. But I am wondering if there are others ways to describe the process that help distinguish it from "randomness"

Post by “DaveT” of April 11, 2026 at 7:03 AM

Related to this thread, I listened to an interview of David J. Linden a Johns Hopkins neuroscientist on Big Think. He was facing his own cancer death and realized he had difficulty in accepting a world without him in it. After 40 years of his career studying the brain, it is built to constantly predict what happens next; minute by minute, hour by hour and so on. For instance, our brain constantly tries to predict what will happen in the next seconds as I walk along this sidewalk, as I approach a cross street, as I approach the restaurant to meet a friend for lunch etc. Therefore since biologically the brain is constantly trying to predict what will happen next (for my continued existence), it has a problem seeing the world after death. He speculates that this is why an afterlife of some type is an element of almost every religious beliefs system.

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 11, 2026 at 8:44 AM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

Therefore since biologically the brain is constantly trying to predict what will happen next (for my continued existence), it has a problem seeing the world after death. He speculates that this is why an afterlife of some type is an element of almost every religious beliefs system.

And the internal experience of being alive is as if we "feel" immortal (and yet we are not).

Also, it is much more appealing to think that there is something good coming (such as heaven) rather than nothingness.

But just because we "feel" immortal doesn't actually make us immortal. And just because we can imagine a heavenly place after death, doesn't make it so.

I think that the Epicurean needs to spend time contemplating the truth of the cessation of the senses and the mind. And, also needs to focus intently on living life to the fullest by making good and joyful choices - and in a way "make heaven on earth".

Post by “Cassius” of April 11, 2026 at 10:49 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think that the Epicurean needs to spend time contemplating the truth of the cessation of the senses and the mind. And, also needs to focus intently on living life to the fullest by making good and joyful choices - and in a way "make heaven on earth".

And the best way to do that is through regular teamwork with people who already agree or are close to agreeing with you, and not continuing to imagine that maybe the rest of the world will one day wake up and everything will be different.

If someone studying Epicurus is stuck doing so by themselves, and making no further changes with the people they associate with, then they might as well just put the book back on the shelf for all the good it will do them.

And sitting around waiting for an Epicurean "commune" to open up across town is equally unrealistic and unproductive.

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 11, 2026 at 11:49 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And the best way to do that is through regular teamwork with people who already agree

Maybe we need an Epicurean "Death Cafe"?

[What is Death Cafe](#)

At a Death Cafe people gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death. Our objective is 'to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the...
deathcafe.com

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 11, 2026 at 12:25 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And the best way to do that is through regular teamwork with people who already agree

Maybe we need an Epicurean "Death Cafe"?

<https://deathcafe.com/what/>

Except an "Epicurean death discussion" would end up being different than the objectives of a Death Cafe, because we would be exploring why "[death is nothing to us](#)".

According to the Death Cafe website, theirs is very open-ended:

Quote

A Death Cafe is a group directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes. It is a discussion group rather than a grief support or counselling session.

Post by “Patrikios” of April 11, 2026 at 1:20 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think that the Epicurean needs to spend time contemplating the truth of the cessation of the senses and the mind. And, also needs to focus intently on living life to the fullest by making good and joyful choices - and in a way "make heaven on earth".

[Kalosyni](#) ,

I just love the way you add the soft touch reminder that this Epicurean work comes down to living a life of wellbeing as fully as possible within the environment and circumstances we find ourselves!♥

Maybe we can discuss on a future Eikas Zoom, or Sunday session.

Post by “DaveT” of April 11, 2026 at 2:37 PM

Wellllll! I think facing the consequences of death is so personal, I'm good doing it alone. Of course when facing imminent or approaching death, I'd imagine having support during the process would be helpful if I'm fortunate to have close loved ones around.