Mistakes of cognitive perception and Epicurean prudence

Christos Yapijakis

Founding Member
Garden of Athens

Assistant Professor of Neurogenetics
School of Medicine, N.K. University of Athens

Advisory Committee Member
Research Laboratory of Applied Philosophy
School of Philosophy, N.K. University of Athens
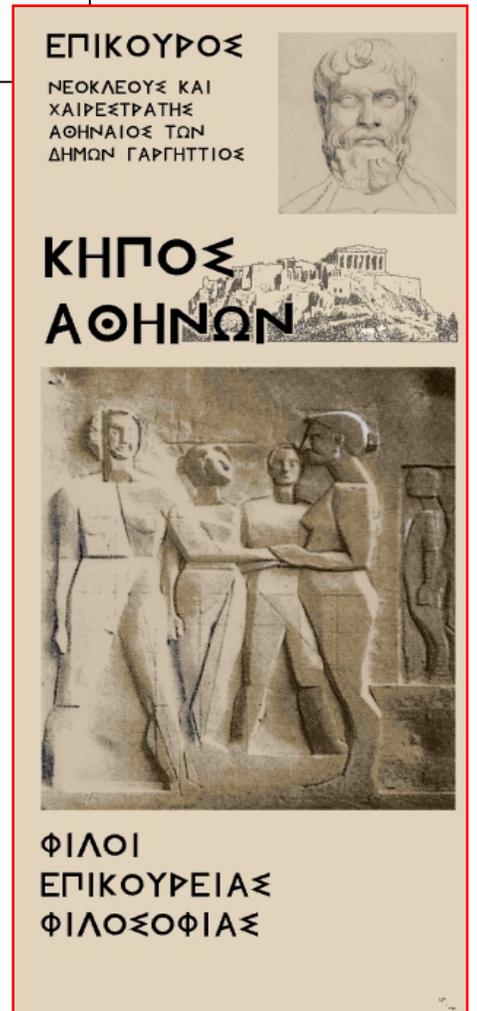
Mistakes of cognitive perception and Epicurean prudence

Epicurean Approach
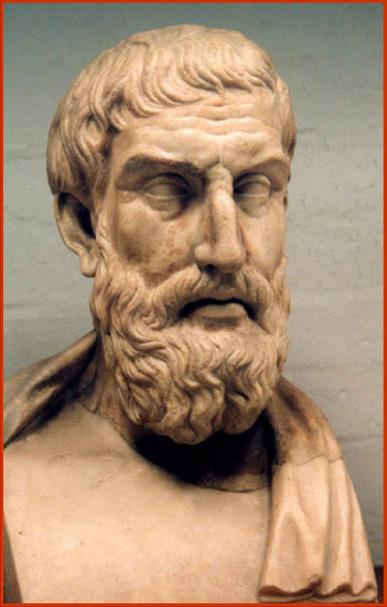
- Biology of human brain due to Evolution

- Common misconceptions

- Philosophical concept of nonsense ("bullshit")

- Difference between a political approach and a scientific approach

- Conclusions for the Friends of Epicurean Philosophy

Mistakes of cognitive perception and Epicurean prudence

The human brain is a product of Evolution
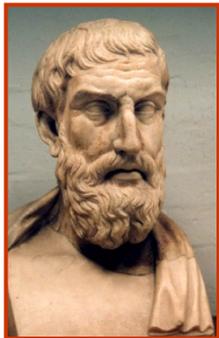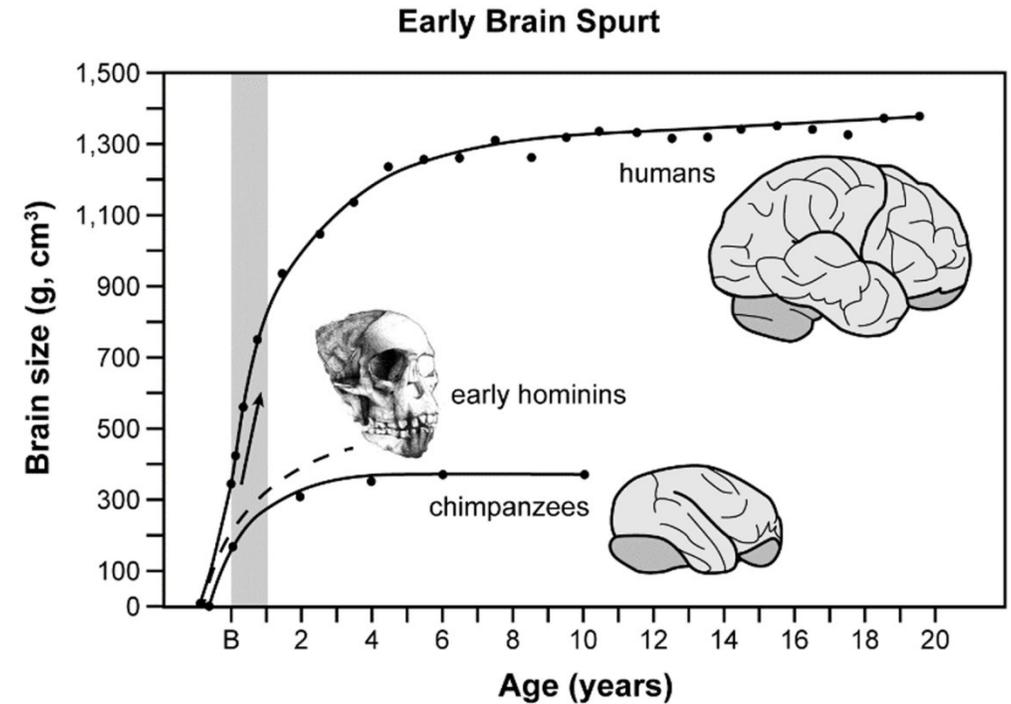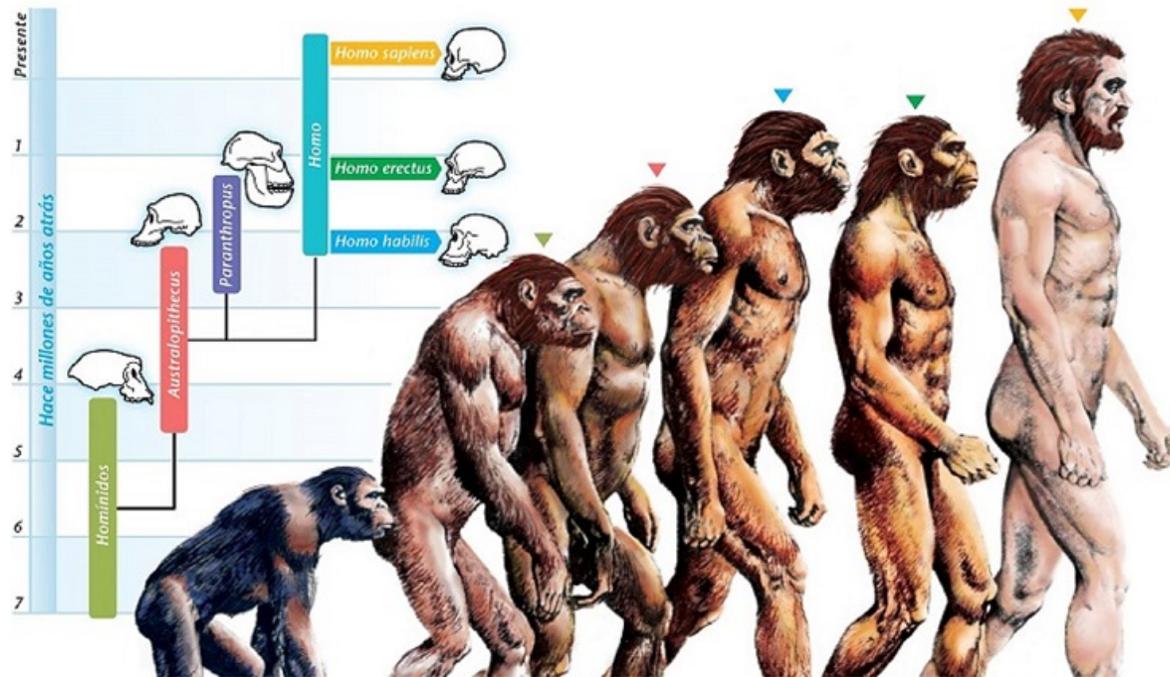
Epicurean approach – Evolution with natural selection Lucretius, On the Nature of Things
«With the passing of time, the nature of the whole world necessarily changes and nothing stays the same. Everything evolves, nature changes all things and makes them transformed» (V828-830). «Numerous species of animals must have been extinct, since they were not able to strengthen their kind with proliferation. Because whatever creatures you see now to breathe the life-giving air, they on their own assured their survival by cunning, by bravery, or their speed» (V855-859).

Mistakes of cognitive perception and Epicurean prudence

Rapid cognitive perception was favored by Evolution:
Our ancestors survived because of inference with few sensory data
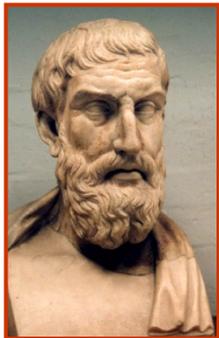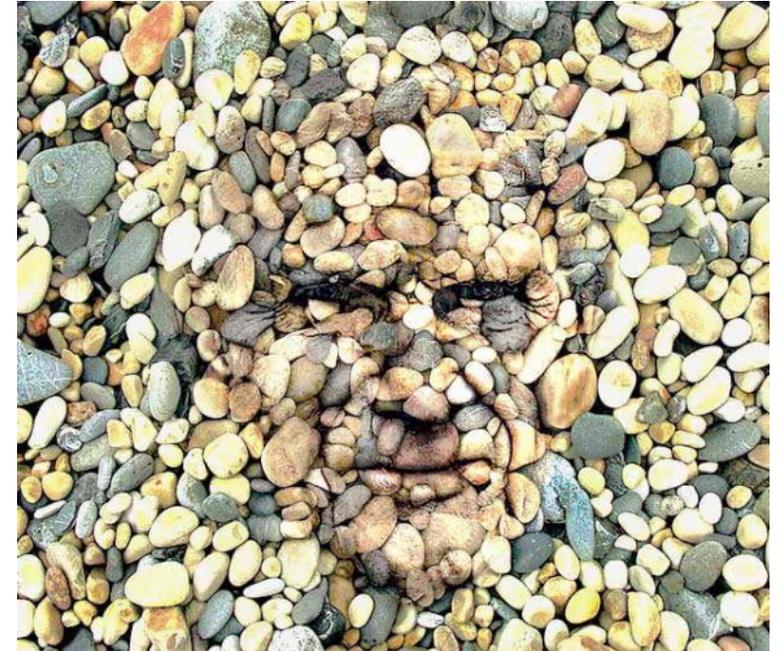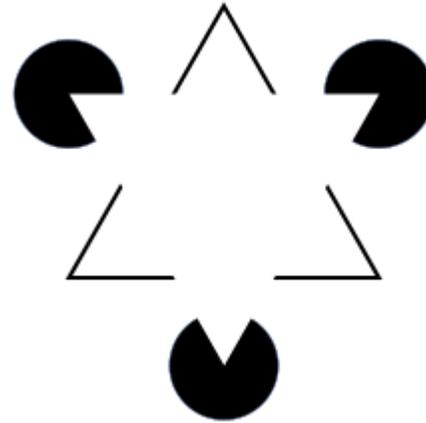
Epicurean approach – Canon – Criteria of Truth <u>Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus</u>
«The impression imposed on the mind or on the sensory organs of either form or properties is always the form of the solid object. The error and the delusion are always in the opinion that we form for the object when an event waits for confirmation or no refutation, but then it is not confirmed and is refuted» (DL X50).

Two Systems of Thinking

1st System: Relativistic
**fast, easy**

Based on personal habits, beliefs, preferences
Precise for everyday decisions, but vulnerable
- *to various cognitive prejudices*
- *to systematic errors caused by psychological factors*

2nd System: Analytical
slow, requires effort

Based on science, observation and reasoning
Extremely Accurate because it is objective

'A lifetime's worth of wisdom'
Steven D. Levitt, co-author of Freakonomics

The International Bestseller

Thinking, Fast and Slow

Daniel Kahneman
Winner of the Nobel Prize

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Epicurean approach – Canon – Criteria of Truth <u>Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus</u>
«The error would not have existed unless another kind of motion was created inside us, closely related to the mental perception of images but differs from it. And this [associated with mental perception, but differing from it], if it is not confirmed or it is refuted, creates the delusion, but if it is confirmed or not refuted, it is true» (DL X51).

# Relativistic Thinking Model - Common types of bias

- **Attribution bias** people place too much emphasis on one's intention rather than on exogenous factors, explaining the behavior of other people (but not themselves!)
- **Partiality of faith** the evaluation of an argument biased by faith in the truth or the lie of the conclusion
- **Confirmation bias** the tendency to search or interpret information in a way that confirms the prejudice
- **Self-serving bias** the tendency to evaluate ambiguous information in a way that benefits one's interest
- **Framing** use of a very narrow approach to a subject

(and several other types of bias...)
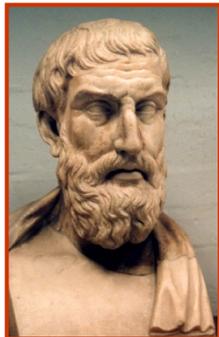
Epicurean Approach - Refusal of Populism and Common Prejudices – Objectivity
«I never wanted to be liked by most people. For what they liked I did not care to learn, while those that gave pleasure to me they could not understand».
Epicurus (Gnomologion K.P. 1168f, 115r)

The example of J. Kepler (same man with two different methods)

FRAMING - Non-existent Model (Idealistic-Platonic Method)
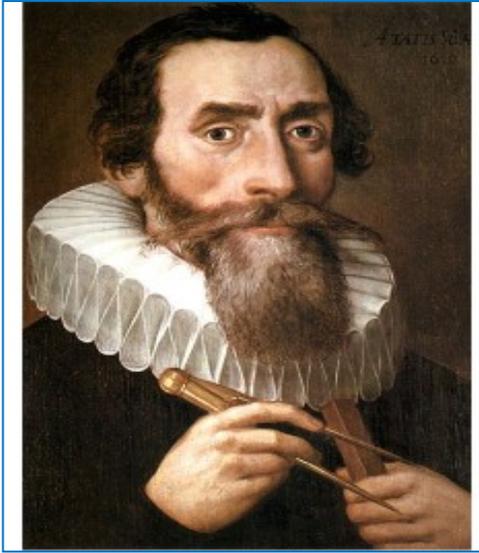
The imaginary model of the solar system according to Plato's geometrical theories (*"Mysterium Cosmographicum"* 1596)
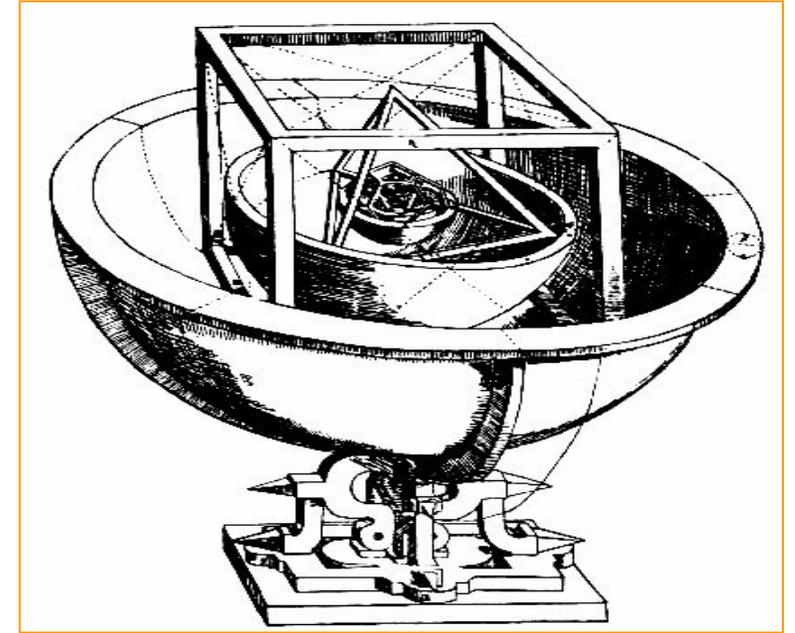
Scientific Model accepted till today (Science-Based Method)

The descriptive model of the solar system according to astronomical observations (*"Astronomia nova"* 1609)
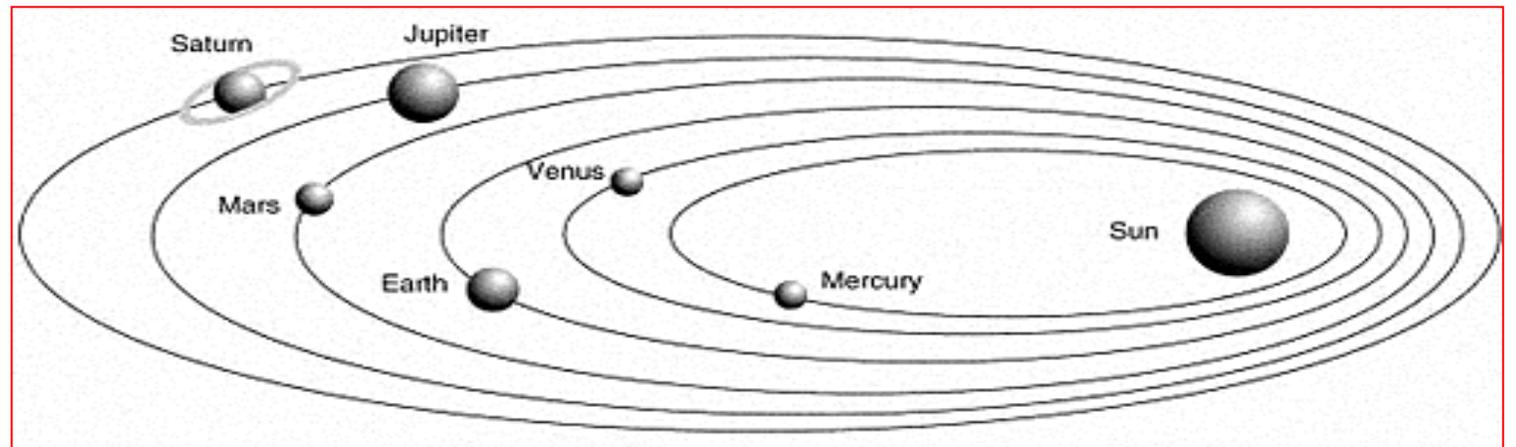
Relativistic Thinking Model - Common types of bias

- **Comformism** copying the behavior of most people

- **Modernism** tendency to consider as better anything that is new
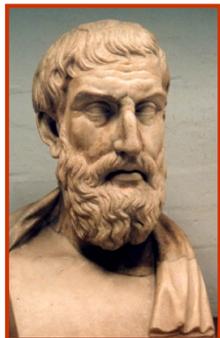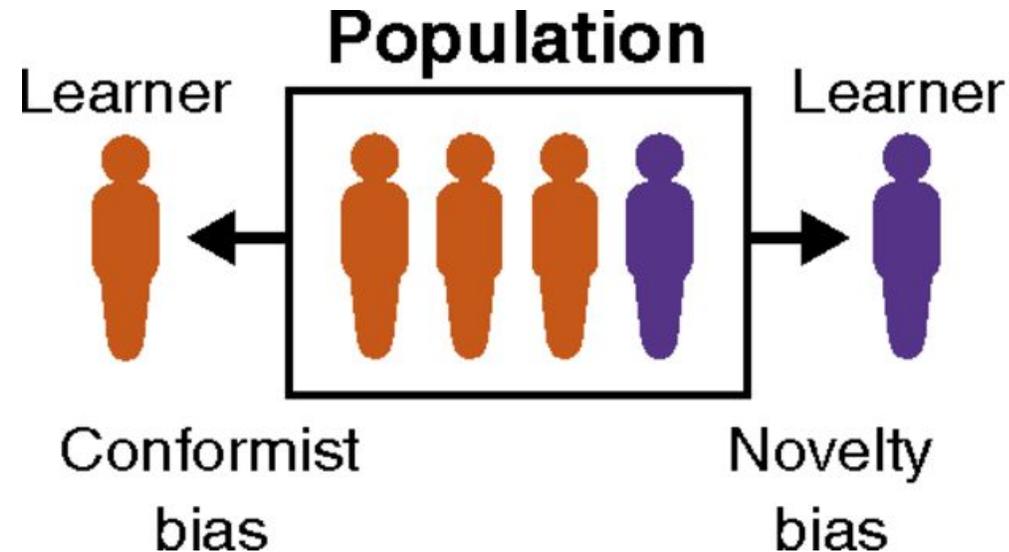
Epicurean Approach - Refusal of Comformism and Modernism – Utility
«For I, of course, would prefer by studying Nature to boldly announce what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than reconcile myself to the trivial beliefs and listen to the frequent praise of the many».
Epicurus (Vatican Saying 29).

Nonsense ("Bullshit") – Philosophically it signifies indifference for the truth

- Indifference for the truth
- Aiming to create impressions (political choice)

Examples of nonsense from texts in two books of two Greeks that are self declared "friends of Epicurean philosophy":
- "For Utilitarianism, happiness is defined by pleasure and absence of pain. While misery is pain and deprivation of pleasure. **The opposite of Epicurean Philosophy**"
- "For Epicurus, yes, there are gods but they are not composite solid bodies" (reference)

The reference refers to the composite solid bodies but not to the material nature of gods described in Principal Doctrine 1

ON BULLSHIT
Harry G. Frankfurt
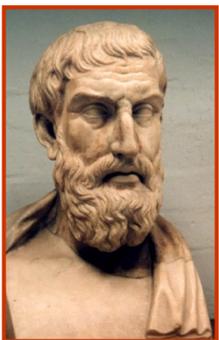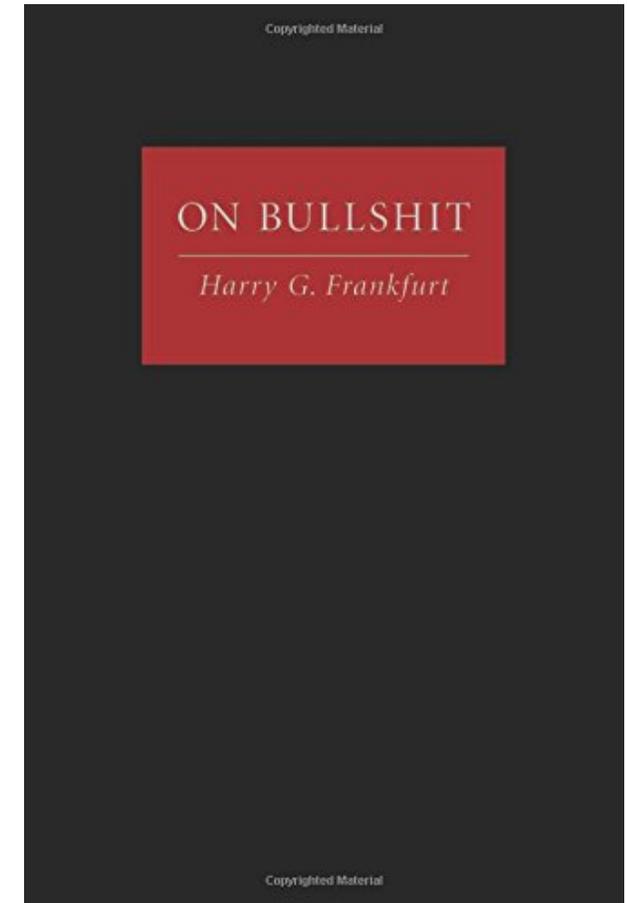
Epicurean Approach - Refusal of Prejudice and Bias
«We should not study Nature with empty axioms and arbitrary laws, but as required by the phenomena. Because our life does not need absurdity and stupid opinions, but serenity».
Epicurus (Letter to Pythocles, DL X87).

The "political-type" approach
The "friendly-type" approach

Scientific American, February 2018
"The Tribalism of Truth". Fisher M, Knobe J, Strickland B, Keil F.

The article describes:

α) the "political-type" discussion

β) the "friendly-type" discussion
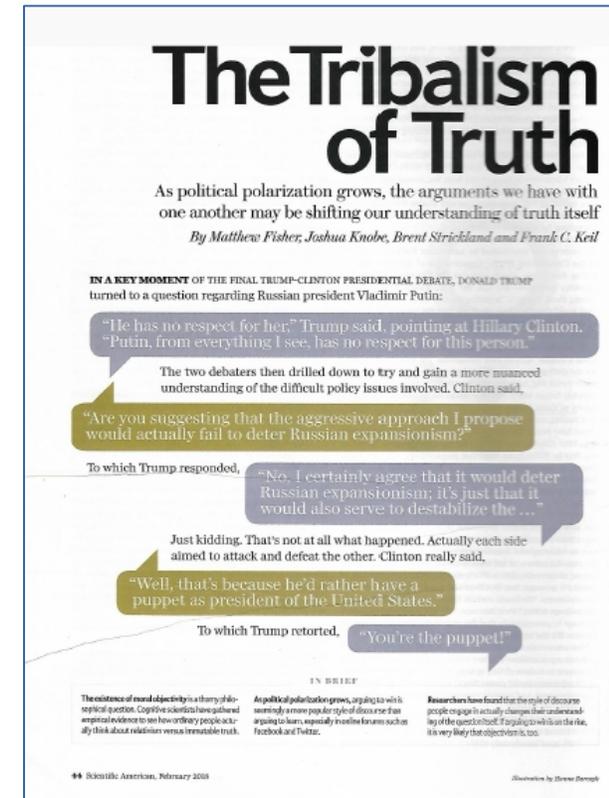
The "political-type" approach

The Tribalism of Truth

As political polarization grows, the arguments we have with one another may be shifting our understanding of truth itself

By Matthew Fisher, Joshua Knobe, Brent Strickland and Frank C. Keil

IN A KEY MOMENT OF THE FINAL TRUMP-CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE, DONALD TRUMP turned to a question regarding Russian president Vladimir Putin.

"He has no respect for her," Trump said, pointing at Hillary Clinton. "Putin, from everything I see, has no respect for this person."

The two debaters then drilled down to try and gain a more nuanced understanding of the difficult policy issues involved. Clinton said,

"Are you suggesting that the aggressive approach I propose would actually fail to deter Russian expansionism?"

To which Trump responded,

"No, I certainly agree that it would deter Russian expansionism; it's just that it would also serve to destabilize the …"

Just kidding. That's not at all what happened. Actually each side aimed to attack and defeat the other. Clinton really said,

"Well, that's because he'd rather have a puppet as president of the United States."

To which Trump retorted,

"You're the puppet!"

- Example:
A: I think abortion is 100% a woman's choice.
B: I believe abortion must be banned because
   it terminates a life.
A: Abortion is permitted by the law of our country.
B: The heart of the fetus beats in 3 weeks, so it is murder.
A: You are a misogynist!
B: You are an immoral assassin!

- Its aim is **winning**

- It is based on:
  - initial belief
  - subjectivity
  - rhetorical arguments
  - unfriendly aggression
(very common nowadays)

The "friendly-type" approach

The Tribalism of Truth

As political polarization grows, the arguments we have with one another may be shifting our understanding of truth itself

By Matthew Fisher, Joshua Knobe, Brent Strickland and Frank C. Keil

- Example:

  A: Where do you want us to go for dinner?

  B: Let's try the new Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood.

  A: I have read bad reviews about it. How about going to eat Italian?

  B: It is fortunate you knew about the Chinese restaurant. Let's go for Italian.

- Its aim is **learning**

- It is based on:
  - critical thinking
  - objective observation
  - jointly investigating a subject
  - pleasure of knowledge and friendship

The "political-type" (rhetorical) discussion	The "friendly-type" (scientific) discussion
• Its aim is **winning**	• Its aim is **learning**
• It is based on:	• It is based on:
• initial belief	• critical thinking
• subjectivity	• objective observation
• rhetorical arguments	• jointly investigating a subject
• unfriendly aggression (very common nowadays)	• pleasure of knowledge and friendship
• *(Idealistic approach)*	• *(Epicurean approach)*

The "political-type" (rhetorical) discussion	The "friendly-type" (scientific) discussion

The "political-type" (rhetorical) discussion

- Its aim is **winning**
- It is based on:
  - initial belief
  - subjectivity
  - rhetorical arguments
  - unfriendly aggression

  (very common nowadays)

(Idealistic approach)
  - *Examples of nonsense personal choices which distort the texts:*

*Epicurus as **"atheist", "anarchist", "hedonist like Aristippus"** etc.*

*Anti-Christian attacks on **Gassendi**,*

*Anti-American attacks on **Jefferson** etc.*

The "friendly-type" (scientific) discussion

- Its aim is **learning**
- It is based on:
  - critical thinking
  - objective observation
  - jointly investigating a subject
  - pleasure of knowledge and friendship

(Epicurean approach)
  - *Reading and understanding the texts is pleasurable:*

"In high-level discussions, the losers win more as they learn more".
Vatican Saying 74

Epicurean approach with prudence
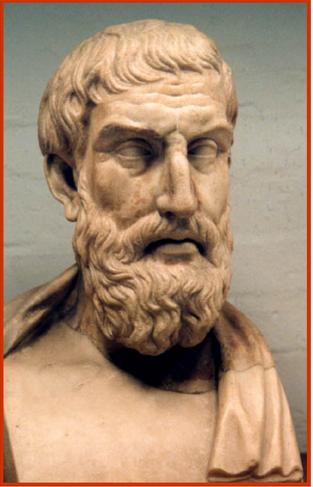
"As far as other activities are concerned, the result comes as soon as they are completed, while for philosophy the pleasure is simultaneous with knowledge. Because pleasure does not come after learning, but at the same time with learning there is enjoyment".
                    Vatican Saying 27

"Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them".
                    Thomas Jefferson
Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786)

The subjective "political-type" discussion aiming at **winning**

is not an Epicurean approach!
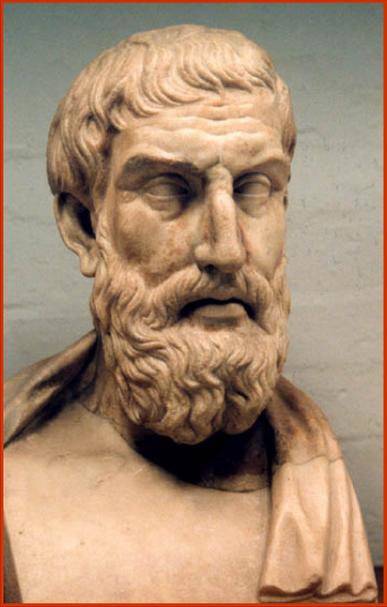
«I never wanted to be liked by most people. For what they liked I did not care to learn, while those that gave pleasure to me they could not understand».
Epicurus (Gnomologion K.P. 1168f, 115r)

«For I, of course, would prefer by studying Nature to boldly announce what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than reconcile myself to the trivial beliefs and listen to the frequent praise of the many».
Epicurus (Vatican Saying 29)

"It is possible to distinguish the nature of one who speaks boldly because of a kind character from someone with a bad character. Polite is anyone who always has good intention, philosophizes wisely and constantly, and is magnanimous, indifferent to glory, not a demagogue, free of envy, only refers to the subject of discussion and does not escape from it to offend or to humiliate or to despise or to hurt other, nor uses vulgar expressions or flateries". *Philodemus of Gadara (On Frank Criticism, Φ.Π. Ia,Ib)*

"Many people I could point out to you, who, I do not know how, have been affected by this illness and have become friends of lies, so that I regret that such "impeccable" people are delighted to deceive themselves and those who associate with them... For such lying, we have the observed truth as powerful medicine and applicable everywhere the sound reason, so if we use it none of those empty and vain lies will agitate us". *Lucian of Samosata (Friend of Lies 40)*

The choice is ours:
Epicurean/scientific/friendly approach or
Platonic/political subjectivity/nonsense?

YOU ARE UNACCEPTABLE! YOU NEVER ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR OWN ERRORS AND YOU NEVER ACCEPT YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES!

YOU ARE RIGHT, BUT IT IS NOT OUR FAULT!

The Epicurean scientific approach with prudence Conclusions

The **"political-type"** behaviors
- **derive from the relativistic way of thinking**
- **are characterized by prejudice - bias (idealistic approach)**
- **are characterized by indifference for truth (nonsense)**
- **cause agitation, lead to discord, to unfriendly distancing and to conflicts**

Closed society with uneducated citizens

Prudent people and real friends of Epicurean philosophy prefer the pleasure that coexists with

- **the scientific/analytical way of thinking**
- **the "friendly discussion"**
- **jointly learning and improvement**

Open society with educated citizens
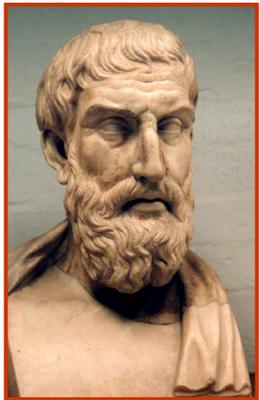
«If one looks for what is more hostile to friendship and what is more productive to hatred, one will find politics, because it gives rise to jealousy and generates its comrade the competitive vanity, disagreements and conflicts».
Philodemus

The Epicurean scientific approach with prudence
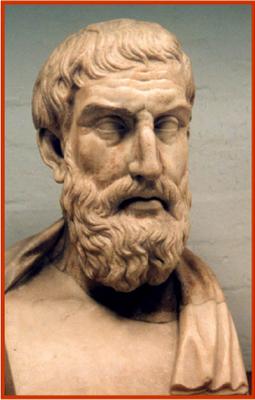
Intention of the Friends of Epicurean Philosophy

We adher to the view that the Epicurean philosophy is characterized by bold expression of opinion and friendly disposition for discussion. Attacks with abusive offenses are not associated with Epicureans. The Epicureans discuss in a friendly manner, they neither revile nor slander. Different views are respected, but they must be discussed with sobriety and evidence. The Friends of Epicurean philosophy are not prepared to follow the nonsense and fragmentation that characterizes the political or theological groups. Those who claim to respect Epicurus, but who do not respect his principle of friendship, may have to think again if they possibly find themselves in the wrong place. The unity of the Friends of Epicurean teachings is based -and we indeed mean to base it- on the Epicurean friendship.

**Agreed by the Friends of Epicurean Philosophy
from the Gardens of Athens and Salonica - October 2010**

Thank you for your attention!

(Clarification: the tombstone relief does not contain ...an ancient laptop!)