

Does Epicurean Philosophy Remove the Magic and Mystery of Life?

Post by "Cassius" of April 26, 2026 at 4:22 PM

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No -- and the accusation rests on a confusion between two very different sources of wonder. Epicurean philosophy removes *superstition* and *fear-based awe* -- the kind that sees lightning as divine punishment, or that requires belief in an intervening deity to feel reverence for existence. What it does not remove, and actively encourages, is the genuine astonishment and delight that come from seeing the natural world clearly.

Lucretius addresses this directly in Book Two of *De Rerum Natura*, in a passage that illustrates why understanding nature deepens rather than diminishes wonder. In the Humphries translation:

Quote

"Direct your mind To a true system. Here is something new For ear and eye. Nothing is ever so easy But what, at first, it is difficult to trust. Nothing is great and marvelous, but what All men, a little at a time, begin To mitigate their sense of awe. Look up, Look up at the pure bright color of the sky, The wheeling stars, the moon, the shining sun! If all these, all of a sudden, should arise For the first time before our mortal sight, What could be called more wonderful, more beyond The heights to which aspiring mind might dare? Nothing, I think. And yet, a sight like this, Marvelous as it is, now draws no man To lift his gaze to heaven's bright areas. We are a jaded lot. But even so Don't be too shocked by something new, too scared To use your reasoning sense, to weigh and balance, So that if in the end a thing seems true, You welcome it with open arms; if false, You do your very best to strike it down." -- Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, Book II (Humphries translation)

Lucretius's point is that *familiarity*, not Epicurean philosophy, is the thief of wonder. The heavens are astonishing -- the problem is that most people have grown too accustomed to them to feel it. Epicurean philosophy does not suppress this awe; it recovers and deepens it by teaching us to see what we have stopped noticing. The prescription is not less engagement with the world but more attentive and honest engagement with it.

This connects directly to one of the less well-known teachings about the Epicurean wise man. Diogenes Laertius records (DL 10.117-118) that the Epicurean sage, far from being emotionally flattened by philosophical understanding, is capable of feeling pleasure and gratitude more

intensely than those who have not examined their lives. The wise man, freed from the anxieties of superstition and the constant background fear of death that dull others' experience, is more fully present to the actual goods life offers -- and thus more genuinely and deeply moved by them.

A related point concerns the Epicurean attitude toward poetry. Epicurus's caution about certain poets -- Homer in particular -- is sometimes misread as hostility to the pleasures of literature, or as a general suspicion of imagination, beauty, and emotional engagement with art. This is wrong. The specific Epicurean objection to Homeric poetry was not that it gave pleasure, but that it gave *false representations of the gods*: portraying them as quarreling, vengeful, lustful, and arbitrary -- exactly the kind of divine beings whose existence would justify the fear and servitude that Epicurus spent his career working to dissolve. It was the theological *content*, not the aesthetic *experience*, that Epicurus found damaging. Poetry that does not distort the nature of the divine, or that makes no theological claims at all, falls entirely outside that objection.

In short: Epicurean philosophy does not drain the color from life. It removes the particular fears and confusions that prevent people from seeing and feeling what is actually there. The wonder available to someone who grasps that the cosmos is vast, natural, eternal, and without supernatural masters -- and who meets that cosmos with gratitude for the pleasures of friendship, beauty, conversation, and the sheer fact of being alive -- is, if anything, richer and more firmly grounded than the wonder of someone whose sense of awe is mediated by fear of invisible powers.