

# Use Of The Term "Metaphysics" In Discussing Epicurus

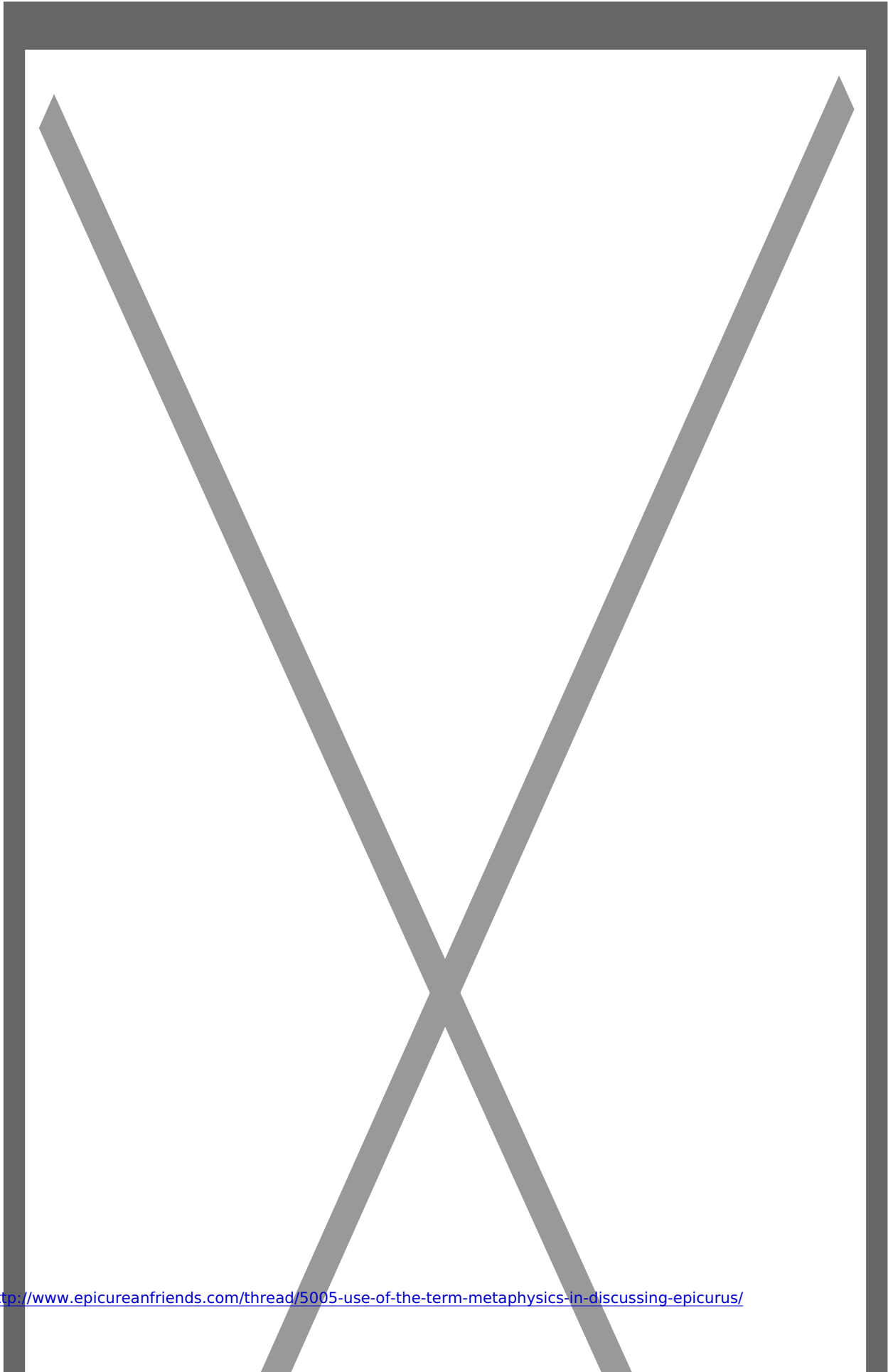
**Post by "Cassius" of March 30, 2026 at 7:37 PM**

In several conversations recently, including with Martin on one of our recent Zooms (if I recall correctly) and others here privately on the forum, the question has arisen as to whether it would be better to refer to Epicurus' study of nature as "Metaphysics" rather than "Physics."

No doubt we'll continue to use "Physics" as the generic term to organize most of our discussions here, but there are definite differences between "Metaphysics" and "Physics" that would probably be useful to discuss. For example, in some conversations I get the impression that some people (sometimes even me) consider "metaphysics" to imply something of lesser importance, or to be more suspicious of, than "physics." As I read it that attitude might arise from a modern tendency to consider "science" as the trump card for all matters for which we can claim knowledge (at least of a sort) while "metaphysics" is necessary speculative and impossible to be confident about.

Here's the opening from Wikipedia on "metaphysics":

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[Quote from Wikiedia - Metaphysics](#)

**Metaphysics** is the branch of [philosophy](#) that examines the basic structure of [reality](#). It is traditionally seen as the study of mind-independent features of the world, but some theorists view it as an inquiry into the conceptual framework of human understanding. Some philosophers, including [Aristotle](#), designate metaphysics as **first philosophy** to suggest that it is more fundamental than other forms of philosophical inquiry.

Metaphysics encompasses a wide range of general and abstract topics. It investigates the nature of [existence](#), the features all entities have in common, and their division into [categories of being](#). An influential division is between [particulars](#) and [universals](#). Particulars are unique individual entities, like a specific apple. Universals are general features that different particulars have in common, like the color *red*. [Modal metaphysics](#) examines what it means for something to be possible or necessary. Metaphysicians also explore the [concepts of space, time, and change](#), and their connection to [causality](#) and the [laws of nature](#). Other topics include how [mind and matter are related](#), whether everything in the world is [predetermined](#), and whether there is [free will](#).

Maybe a concrete question might help:

Is the letter to Herodotus best described as "Physics," "Metaphysics," or both?

Is the poem of Lucretius "Physics," "Metaphysics," or both?

Is the conclusion that the universe is eternal in time and infinite in space Physics, Metaphysics, both, neither, or what?

Is the conclusion that there is no immortal soul that survives (for very long anyway) after death Physics, Metaphysics, or what?

I'd like to know what others here think so I can consider if I want to alter my own usage of these terms.

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**Post by “Eikadistes” of March 31, 2026 at 12:13 AM**

It's slippery, and I avoid using it altogether.

I've heard pretentious scientists use "metaphysics" as a slur to belittle the discipline of philosophy, and I've heard academics use "metaphysics" as a badge of honor to belittle physical science. Barnes & Noble uses the word to advertise something closer to "magic" or "alchemy".

Within an Epicurean context, the idea of anything "*after-physics*" seems unhelpful. After all, the Garden "supposes the study of nature provides the proper space for the voices of the facts."

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### Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2026 at 12:25 AM

#### [Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Barnes & Noble uses the word to advertise something closer to "magic" or "alchemy".

Thanks for that reminder. Now that you say it, I think over the years that's where I sense a strongly negative vibe from the word. It seems to be usable in philosophy in a more neutral way, but I'm concerned about how "normal people" interpret it. In many cases it probably doesn't evoke any reaction at all and it's mainly just an unfamiliar word, but the intelligent "middle class" that might have heard of it from bookstores might well attach it to "alchemy" or even "witchcraft."

This might be an American take and not have the same effect in Europe.

[Joshua](#) this is something for us to keep in mind for the podcast.

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### Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2026 at 12:26 AM

#### [Quote from Eikadistes](#)

After all, the Garden "supposes the study of nature provides the proper space for the voices of the facts."

Sounds like you have a particular reference in mind there Eikadistes?

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## Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2026 at 12:39 AM

This search of "metaphysics" at B&N does bring up what seems to be a majority of technical philosophy books, such as by Heidegger, but also some religion, and I see one on "Tarot." Glancing over the titles reminds me that to the extent I would have been in this section of B&N in the past I would have found the titles to give off a very "bad vibe." I would likely have lumped it all in as abstract nonsense that always in the past kept me from spending more time with philosophy.

So Eikadistes I'm not sure that statistically speaking the aura of being labeled like alchemy is justified, but practically speaking I sense you are correct (again, at least in the USA and among "normal people.")

[https://www.barnesandnoble.com/s/metaphysics?Nrpp=20&Ns=P\\_Sales\\_Rank%7C0&page=8](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/s/metaphysics?Nrpp=20&Ns=P_Sales_Rank%7C0&page=8)

Edit: the results at [Amazon](#) are more clearly weighted toward the alchemy side of things.

Edit2: thinking further about the book titles, i suspect the term "metaphysics" might also evoke in the mind of many people the very negative "obsolete/ancient/medieval physics."

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## Post by "Joshua" of March 31, 2026 at 2:22 AM

The thing is, even Aristotle's *Physics* could be described as a text on metaphysics according to the modern meaning of that term. Both words, physics and metaphysics, had each of them one meaning in antiquity, and have both of them quite another meaning now. In antiquity, both branches were viewed predominately through the lens of logic, and neither of them were subjected to the method of rigorous experimentation against the standards of reproducibility and falsifiability. In modern usage, that method has come to mark out the shifting boundaries between the scientific study of nature and the non-scientific, the latter of which includes both common pseudoscience (the claims of which are usually falsifiable and generally have been falsified) and what we call the philosophical branches of metaphysics, theology, eschatology, etc.--the claims of which are often not falsifiable.

I say '*usually* falsifiable' and '*often* not falsifiable' because most systems of thought straddle the boundary, the opinions of Stephen J. Gould notwithstanding. For example, the claim in alchemy

that lead can be transmuted into gold through basic chemistry (rather than high-energy particle physics) can be tested, has been tested, and has not produced the desired result; however, the corresponding claim in Hermeticism that the divinely-natured human soul can make an analogous spiritual ascent cannot even be tested. This latter claim falls outside of what we would now call physics, but it did not necessarily fall outside of what the Greek philosophers called physics.

All of that is to say that I do not favor a change in nomenclature. Both Aristotle and Epicurus discussed whether motion was possible, and whether anything can come from nothing, and whether atoms and void or love and strife or the four classical elements were the building blocks of nature, and both Aristotle and Epicurus referred to their studies of these questions as *physics*. We should focus our attention instead on clarifying, when necessary, the distinction between the ancient and the modern meanings of that word.

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## Post by “Julia” of March 31, 2026 at 4:26 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

After all, the Garden "supposes the study of nature provides the proper space for the voices of the facts."

Sounds like you have a particular reference in mind there Eikadistes?

If I may?

"Nevertheless, she [Epíkouros' school] has withdrawn the *Dialectic* [and] rejects it for want of qualification; for they suppose the [study of] natural [phenomena] provides [the proper] space for the voices of the facts." from [Eikadistes' own translation](#) of Diogenes Laertios (10.31).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This might be an American take and not have the same effect in Europe.

Same in Europe, I'd say, except less witchcraft, more esoteric (in case that matters...).

[Quote from Joshua](#)

For example, the claim in alchemy that lead can be transmuted into gold through basic chemistry (rather than high-energy particle physics) can be tested, has been tested, and has not produced the desired result



[Quote from Joshua](#)

Both words, physics and metaphysics, had each of them one meaning in antiquity, and have both of them quite another meaning now. In antiquity, both branches were viewed predominately through the lens of logic, and neither of them were subjected to the method of rigorous experimentation against the standards of reproducibility and falsifiability. In modern usage, that method has come to mark out the shifting boundaries between the scientific study of nature and the non-scientific, the latter of which includes both common pseudoscience (the claims of which are usually falsifiable and generally have been falsified) and what we call the philosophical branches of metaphysics, theology, eschatology, etc.--the claims of which are often not falsifiable.

[...]

Both Aristotle and Epicurus discussed whether motion was possible, and whether anything can come from nothing, and whether atoms and void or love and strife or the four classical elements were the building blocks of nature, and both Aristotle and Epicurus referred to their studies of these questions as physics. We should focus our attention instead on clarifying, when necessary, the distinction between the ancient and the modern meanings of that word.

I agree 👍😊

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## Post by “Cassius” of March 31, 2026 at 7:24 AM

I presume that the terms physics and metaphysics were available in both Greek and Latin, and the original Epicureans and then later the Romans could have established patterns of when to use each in discussing Epicurean philosophy.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

All of that is to say that I do not favor a change in nomenclature.

If anyone has an opinion or summary of what they think actually was the case (i.e., how often did Epicurus refer to one word or the other, or how often does Cicero or Seneca or Plutarch use them) that would be interesting to know.

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### **Post by “Julia” of March 31, 2026 at 8:22 AM**

The introduction of Warren's Cambridge Companion On Epicureanism says its chapters entitled "Epicurean atomism", "Cosmology and meteorology", "Psychology", and "Action and responsibility" are the ones which discuss "the major subject areas" of "physics and metaphysics".

I suppose "metaphysics" really does need an obligate qualifier, such as "esoteric metaphysics", "Platonic metaphysics", ... in the same way as one wouldn't write in a vacation postcard "Dear friends, we landed safely. There is weather." Instead, weather is one of those words, which always need further qualification, too.