

Use Of The Term "Metaphysics" In Discussing Epicurus

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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.