

# Thoughts on Reverence, Awe, and Epicurean Piety

Post by "Godfrey" of October 28, 2020 at 9:03 PM

I just finished reading [Significance of Worship and Prayer Among the Epicureans](#) on the forum Filebase and it stirred up a flurry of thoughts which I'm putting down here. This is one attempt at distilling and resolving of some of the discussion from [Reverence and Awe in Epicurean Philosophy](#); from the discussion I'm pretty sure several of us are going through a similar process!

Epicurus didn't do away with the gods but felt that he had reasoned out their true nature. Since his reasoning began with the conception of the gods current in his time, and he saw value in religion, he felt no need to reimagine the common worship although he did reinvent the mental content. What follows is me riffing on this idea.... 🤔

To us living today, the gods of Epicurus' time are but interesting historical myths. Our challenge then is to undergo the same process of reasoning as Epicurus, but with respect to the idea of the omnipotent god commonly worshipped today. The same critiques apply, but how can we apply EP to arrive at a useful model of piety?

Similarities between Greek and modern god(s): control the affairs of humans; can be influenced through worship, sacrifice, prayer, etc; control the natural world; know the thoughts of humans(?).

Differences: one omnipotent god today v a group of gods in Greece.

The similarities listed above for god(s) were eliminated by Epicurus, to be distilled down to indestructibility and bliss. But he retained the Greek model of anthropomorphic gods, which has been for the most part discounted by our time. If I was to presume to discover the key idea of the contemporary god, it would be that it is a generative force. I think we would all agree that it isn't anthropomorphic. So to this idea we would then apply the Epicurean canon, reasoning, and current experimentally verified science.

Epicurean, canonic pleasure, which equates to health and growth, is inherent in the generative force of life, and it is to that which we can connect. And furthermore, it's indestructible and blissful. But we mustn't add to it anything that is unverifiable by accepted science. Epicurus wrote of his pleasure in studying natural philosophy; that same pleasure is available to us. Studying, understanding and basking in the pleasure inherent in life's generative force, I think, constitutes in broad terms a modern Epicurean "spiritual practice."

From this point Epicurus decided, in his typically radical fashion and for whatever reason, that attending the festivals, etc, was an appropriate form of worship for his "flock." This is as radical

as are other parts of his philosophy, in fact it's so radical that I can't see myself following this advice. But if you distill the essence of a current religion to the worship of the generative force, it's easy to find the beauty and pleasure inherent in mainstream religious practice. Of course it's not so easy to ignore the corrosive aspects of religion, and perhaps more difficult still to actually attend a service as the early Epicureans did!

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### **Post by “Susan Hill” of October 29, 2020 at 6:22 AM**

I love this, Godfrey. Thank you for your insight!

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### **Post by “Don” of October 29, 2020 at 7:47 AM**

That's an interesting take, [Godfrey](#) , and one I think I'm in agreement with for the most part... with a couple caveats and addenda:

- Unfortunately, I think you'll still find some people imagining their God anthropomorphically. 😞
  - I'd like to read more about the generative force from you. Can you extend those remarks? Are you saying we could call that generative force Venus then like Lucretius?
  - Are you also saying we could adapt other religions' practices to our needs by changing the mental content? Epicurus only had the Greek cultural practices and rituals. We're aware of more cultures now and were maybe born into other religions (not me - mainstream evangelicalism here).
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### **Post by “Don” of October 29, 2020 at 8:07 AM**

Was also just browsing ebooks in library catalog and came across this one. Just checked it out, so no review but seemed relevant:

#### **In Awe: Rediscover Your Childlike Wonder to Unleash Inspiration, Meaning, and Joy**

by John O'Leary

There once was a time when we joyfully raised our hands to answer questions, connected easily with others, believed that anything was possible, and fearlessly jumped into new experiences. A time when we viewed each day not as something to endure, but as a marvelous gift to explore and savor—when we danced through our lives in awe of the ordinary moments and eager for the promise of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, that's far from our experience today. Instead, we feel disconnected and jaded. Social media reminds us that we don't measure up, and the mainstream media barrages us with constant negativity. Many of us find ourselves caught in a life of dogged responsibility and mind-numbing repetition. The daily struggle to earn a living has caused us to lose the sense of wonder with which we once greeted every day.

In his new book, bestselling author John O'Leary invites us to consider that it is possible to once again navigate the world as a child does. Identifying five senses children innately possess and that we've lost touch with as we age, O'Leary shares emotional, humorous, and inspirational stories intertwined with fascinating new research showing how each of us can reclaim our childlike joy, and why doing so will change how we interact with the world.

*In Awe* reveals how we can regain that ability to see fresh insights, reach for new solutions, and live our best lives.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of October 29, 2020 at 4:12 PM

Great questions [Don](#) !

The generative force could easily and incorrectly be renamed the Generative Force (or simply The Force 😊). Obviously I'm still grappling with this, and there's probably a better word or phrase for what I'm trying to describe. It is a purely materialist process. It is how life originally evolved out of inert material, what causes plants to sprout and grow, flowers to bloom and to open and close with the cycle of the sun. It is energy from the sun providing fuel for life. It's whatever it is that takes place when an egg and a sperm develop into a baby. So yes, it has the characteristics of Venus as Lucretius was talking about, but I wouldn't personify it in that way. To a large extent it can be described scientifically, and I wouldn't attribute anything beyond the verifiable to it. "It" isn't even a good word as "it" is, I think more accurately, a series of processes. Where "it" can become an object of piety is exactly where "it" intersects with our individual pleasure, particularly in ways that lead us to experience reverence and awe.

I don't suggest adapting other religions' practices as a rule, for the reasons I mentioned previously. But I have attended Christian services to enjoy the architecture or the music and I can see early Epicureans doing something similar by attending the festivals. So I can understand on some level what was happening historically. But related to what you point out, Greek society was based on city-states and is entirely different from the mega-culture we now

live in. I think we need to focus on "studying, understanding and basking in" pleasure and philosophy in like minded company, frankly I don't know how we could productively adapt contemporary communal religious practice of whatever persuasion to EP.

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### **Post by "Elayne" of October 30, 2020 at 2:14 PM**

Godfrey, this definitely resonates with me-- not a being or a consciousness but the various processes of inorganic matter becoming organic and organic matter developing. It reminds me of "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" [D thomas](#). For myself, I could even make a case for seeing divinity as desire, the drive for pleasure observed in all creatures with sufficient nervous systems to feel.

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of October 30, 2020 at 3:27 PM**

Quote

For myself, I could even make a case for seeing divinity as desire, the drive for pleasure observed in all creatures with sufficient nervous systems to feel.

Elayne I'm with you on this and would enjoy hearing you make the case if you have the time or inclination. Much of my grasp comes intuitively; I always derive benefit from your science based approach.

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### **Post by "Elayne" of October 30, 2020 at 4:46 PM**

Godfrey, well... I was thinking poetically! Thinking about all the creatures in the universe, seeking out pleasure as if in an infinite, eternal dance-- it's so joyful to me to see life that way for all of us.

But yes, it would be interesting to look at actual research on the drive for pleasure in other species! I read a beautiful book on this a few months ago, and IMO the author comes soooo

close to our philosophy but misses clearly naming pleasure as the drive. I considered emailing him and then I forgot... maybe worth doing.

[Biology of wonder](#)

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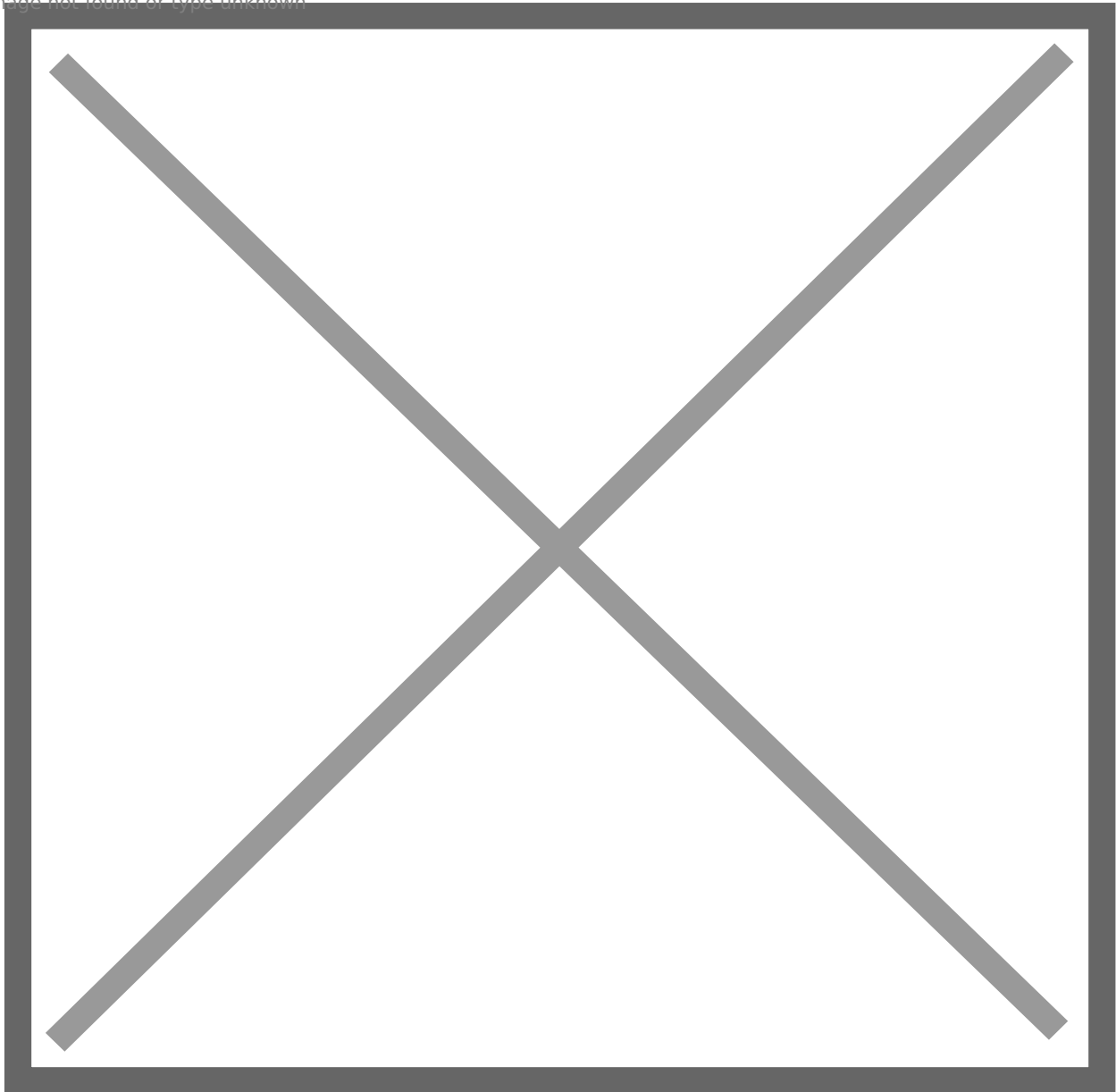
**Post by “Godfrey” of October 30, 2020 at 7:57 PM**

Elayne, nothing wrong with thinking poetically LOL! I think I'll read this book, it looks right on point.

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**Post by “Don” of October 4, 2021 at 7:52 AM**

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[The wonder stuff: what I learned about happiness from a month of 'awe walks'](#)

Feeling down? You need to experience more awe, psychologists say. So I set off every day to explore my local area, leaving my phone behind  
[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

I realize this is an old thread, but this opinion piece on Keltner's research was intriguing enough to share. This seemed an appropriate place to put it.

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**Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2021 at 8:20 AM**

Yes I agree - an appropriate place!