

UNITED WISDOM

Epicurus: Nature Without a Cosmic Threat

World and Consciousness

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The world can be dangerous without being directed against us.

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Epigraph

> *“A happy and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being.”*
>
> *Epicurus, Principal Doctrines, I, opening. English translation by R. D. Hicks; the Russian article translates this passage from Hicks.*

What This Article Is About

After several setbacks, it is easy to start reading events as messages addressed to us. First an agreement fell through, then the car broke down, and in the evening some unwelcome news arrived. A story emerges between the separate incidents: as though everything happening had a single author, and that author was displeased with something. Such a story can be expressive, but expressiveness does not yet make it an explanation.

Epicurus proposed a picture of nature in which thunderstorms, the movements of celestial bodies, and human death require no cosmic accuser. His philosophical move deserves attention even where his physical explanations have long ceased to be acceptable. It lets us ask a precise question: what in an event actually threatens a person, and what does our interpretation add? Yet this liberation has a price. If nature passes no judgments, it also provides no guarantees of justice. If life is finite, its value must be sought within it. Neither conclusion requires us to despise religion or declare suffering imaginary. They require us to distinguish cause, intention, and meaning more carefully.

I. When an Event Becomes a Message

Imagine an ordinary evening. Someone returns home after a conversation in which they could not say something important. A storm gathers over the houses. A flash lights up the room, and for a few seconds a thought arises: everything today is going against me. In this hypothetical scene, different levels of what is happening easily come together.

There is an unsuccessful conversation. There is the weather. There is fatigue. Over them comes a general explanation that turns the day into a verdict. It connects events faster than we can check whether they are connected at all. The storm acquires a relationship to what happened at the dinner table; the breakdown acquires a relationship to a decision made a week earlier. The world seems to begin speaking the language of punishment.

Such an interpretation need not be religious. A person may not believe in gods and still imagine life arranged as a moral examination. Good fortune then confirms that a choice was right; misfortune exposes a hidden failing. Accidents become an examiner's comments, although no one has seen the examiner.

Of course, events can be addressed to a person. A letter really was written by a sender; a refusal sometimes expresses an intention; an action can have moral significance. The mistake begins when a feature of human communication is extended to everything that happens without further grounds. Water and air no longer suffice to explain rain: it is assigned an opinion about us.

Here it helps to separate two questions. First: what circumstances led to the event? Second: what does it mean for my life? The second question can be profound and necessary. But personal significance does not prove that there is a personal sender. Someone is entitled to see a forced stop as a reason to reconsider their pace. It does not follow that an unknown force deliberately broke the car to teach a lesson.

This distinction does not impoverish experience. It leaves us free to make sense of what happened without turning our interpretation into someone else's secret design. The storm may become an important part of the evening. It need not be a statement about a person's worth.

II. Why a Philosopher Needed Physics

Epicurus lived from 341 to 270 BCE. In Athens he established a school known as the Garden. His teaching linked an understanding of nature with the question of a tranquil and pleasant life; information about him survives, among other places, in Diogenes Laertius. David Konstan, “Epicurus,” sections 1–2.

In the Letter to Herodotus, §§39–45 and 76–82, Epicurus describes bodies and void, the movement of atoms, and a plurality of worlds. He separates celestial phenomena from the concerns and anger of a blessed deity. To explain nature, we are invited to seek its structure rather than the intention of a superhuman ruler.

Let us assess this move independently of any willingness to accept the entire system. It changes the very kind of question being asked. If an angry being stands behind the flash, the main task is to guess what has displeased it. If we face a natural phenomenon, the main task is

to understand the conditions under which it occurs. In the first case we investigate another's will. In the second, circumstances and connections.

What action becomes possible depends on this as well. Having found a wet floor, we can ask why life is testing us again. We can also inspect the pipe. The second action does not forbid reflection on the first question, but it helps us keep different tasks apart. A conversation about meaning should not take the place of checking a cause where the cause is accessible.

A causal explanation, however, is not the same as complete knowledge. We may discover a fault without knowing why it occurred today in particular; understand part of a process without understanding the rest. Giving up an accusing will does not require us to fill every gap immediately. It merely removes the automatic leap from uncertainty to presumed persecution.

Such physics can be described as a change in the scale of attention. A person stops treating themselves as the necessary centre of every event. This does not mean they are insignificant. Their importance to loved ones, responsibility for their actions, and capacity to feel do not depend on whether the weather is organised around their biography.

The possibility of existing without a constant cosmic commentary opens a particular freedom: not everything that happens owes us a justification, and we do not owe a justification to everything that happens. Inquiry into the world acquires its own subject; human life acquires a space that need not be continually defended against imagined accusation.

III. Not Knowing Exactly Does Not Mean Believing Anything

A liberating explanation brings a temptation: to choose the first convenient account and stop asking questions. If a story reduces anxiety, why check it further? This is precisely where tranquillity risks becoming a way of overlooking inconvenient facts.

The Letter to Pythocles, §§85–88 and 100–104, allows several explanations of distant natural phenomena that agree with what is observed. Different possible causes of thunder and lightning are listed. This approach concerns the limits of available knowledge: one should not arbitrarily declare a single account the only one if observation does not distinguish it from the others.

This is an ancient way of reasoning about nature, rather than a ready-made instruction for modern science. Nevertheless, we can discern a useful distinction in it between limited knowledge and unlimited invention. Several explanations are admissible for a reason other than every story being equally good. They are bound by the requirement to agree with what can be observed.

Take another hypothetical example. An acquaintance has not replied to a message. They may have been busy, may not have seen it, or may not have wanted to talk. While there is little

evidence, several accounts remain open. But the assumption that the entire world is acting against us gains no support from one unread message. A sweeping story does not become more likely simply because it expresses our state of mind well.

Here the modern application departs from the ancient subject of celestial phenomena, and it needs to be named as an application, rather than as Epicurus's teaching about correspondence. We borrow the form of the question: which accounts are compatible with what is known, what might distinguish them, and where does what we have added begin? This is reasoning about how to judge, rather than a claim about what is hidden in the acquaintance's mind.

A tension remains in this approach. Sometimes a decision must be made before all the information arrives. We can act cautiously with an incomplete picture and honestly call the decision provisional. Waiting for absolute clarity can leave us as immobile as certainty without grounds.

The value of limited knowledge, therefore, does not lie in refusing to choose. It lies in being able to avoid presenting a choice as a final verdict on reality. One evening permits us to say: there is no reply yet. It does not yet permit us to say: I have been rejected forever. The open space between these sentences is a place for further observation.

IV. Gods Who Do Not Require Our Anxiety

It would be convenient to portray Epicurus as the first person simply to do away with the gods. But that would make him more convenient at the expense of accuracy. In the Letter to Menoeceus, §123, he affirms the existence of gods while challenging familiar ideas about them. The precise nature of Epicurean gods remains a matter of scholarly debate. Konstan, “Epicurus,” section 5.

The first of the Principal Doctrines connects a blessed and immortal being with freedom from its own trouble and from causing trouble to others; anger and favouritism are associated with weakness. This is a theological proposition within a philosophical system, rather than an experimentally established property of the divine.

The proposition contains a sharp internal question: why would a perfect being need continually to defend itself against insufficient human attention? If it depends on praise, takes offence at a missed ceremony, and answers a human error with catastrophe, what exactly is perfect about it? Here the image of blessedness collides with that of a ruler who continually needs confirmation of authority.

We can reject the Epicurean answer and still recognise the force of the question. Fear is not in itself proof of reverence. An idea of the divine does not become more elevated by turning

every misfortune into deserved punishment. Sometimes the harshness of an image tells us more about the human understanding of power than about the object of belief.

This reasoning does not permit us to declare all religious ideas identical or primitive. Different teachings understand God's action, suffering, justice, and freedom in different ways. One philosopher's position does not amount to a verdict on all religious life. This is why it is more accurate to discuss a particular image than to wage war on the general word “religion.”

Avoiding the opposite extreme is just as important. The inconsistency of a particular image of a god does not prove any opposing picture of the world. Criticism removes a specific ground; it does not automatically supply a complete picture of what exists.

The reader is left with their own work of discernment. What exactly do they believe in: the possibility of meaning, a moral structure of the world, care, or a penalty for disobedience? These propositions are not identical. They can be considered separately, without forcing every unexpected incident to confirm the entire set at once.

Tranquillity then ceases to be a reward for guessing someone else's mood. It becomes the possibility of avoiding the transformation of our own vulnerability into an endless obligation to an invisible overseer.

V. Death and the Pain an Argument Does Not Remove

In the Letter to Menoeceus, §§124–125, the argument about death rests on the absence of sensation: while a person exists, their death is not yet present; when it has arrived, there is no longer anyone who could experience it as a state. This reasoning depends on the Epicurean picture of the human being. It cannot be presented as a proof binding on every metaphysics.

The argument's force becomes visible where imagination places us inside our own nonexistence. Someone imagines remaining in darkness forever, forever regretting the life they missed, or watching a world they can no longer touch. But in this picture the person's absence quietly acquires that very person as a spectator. They no longer exist, and are still sitting in the audience.

Removing this contradiction does not remove everything associated with death. A person may fear the process of dying, separation, or unfinished tasks. They may regret the possibility of never seeing their children grow up. They may grieve for someone who has died. These experiences require no imaginary presence inside nonexistence. They belong to a living connection with life.

A serious objection therefore arises here. Loss may matter to us both as pain we experience and as the loss of a possible future. The absence of sensation after death does not yet imply

that the continuation and ending of life are of equal value. Here the limit of the argument itself becomes apparent.

The argument remains useful if we do not force it to do extra work. It examines one specific image of terror: the perpetual experience of our own absence. It need not resolve the value of the future, explain grief, and offer everyone the same consolation in a single stroke.

Such limits do not make a thought weak. On the contrary, a precise argument deserves more trust than a promise to put a whole person at ease. We can give up the image of endless torment after death and still love life, fear loss, and need closeness. Inner liberation should not be accompanied by a demand to feel only what suits a philosophical scheme.

If we bring this distinction into an ordinary day, a question arises about how attention is spent. How much of today's time is occupied by the imagined experience of something that, according to the picture we have accepted, will never be experienced at all? The answer does not automatically return lost hours. But it lets us notice what we are filling our finite life with.

VI. Nature Without an Accuser Is Nature Without a Guarantor

After rejecting cosmic hostility, it is easy to take a further, now unwarranted step: to decide that the world must therefore be safe. But an absence of intention to do evil does not mean an absence of harm. A falling branch feels no malice; this does not help the person it falls on. Recognising danger does not require us to find hatred.

Moreover, a nature that does not punish is under no obligation to reward. A person may act honourably and receive an unpleasant result. They may make a mistake and happen to escape its consequences. If we see an outcome as an infallible assessment of an action, we must either justify cruelty or invent a hidden account that is certain to balance one day.

The Stoic Epictetus offers another philosophical answer. In the Discourses, I.6, “Of Providence”, the structure of the world is treated as grounds for recognising providence and for gratitude; the human capacity to understand it is given a particular purpose. This is a substantial difference from the Epicurean separation of natural processes from divine government.

The two answers cannot be glued together into a single ancient wisdom. In one, a person seeks their place in the meaningful structure of the whole. In the other, they are freed from the need to read natural phenomena as actions of a caring or angry ruler. Both approaches may discuss tranquillity, but the same word does not remove the difference in their grounds.

For our subject, what matters is the choice this difference reveals. We can seek tranquillity in confidence that everything belongs to a right order. We can seek it in giving up the assumption

that every event is a message about us. The first path offers trust in the whole; the second leaves more work to finite human connections.

The second possibility can be difficult. Without a promise that goodness will necessarily pay off, a good action must be assessed differently: by what it does to a particular life, relationships, and the conditions of shared existence. The meaning of an action does not disappear with the guarantor. What disappears is the automatic receipt for a future reward.

In such a picture, helping another person carries a particular weight. It is not a miniature copy of a guaranteed cosmic order. It creates a limited human order where guarantees are absent. We cannot oblige the world to be entirely just. But we can take responsibility for what happens between us within the scope of our actual involvement.

VII. How Much Is Needed Before We Stop Waiting for Permission to Live?

The Letter to Menoeceus, §§127–132, distinguishes natural and empty desires, and connects the choice of pleasures with their consequences: not everything pleasant is worth choosing, and not every pain should be avoided. The Principal Doctrines, XXVII, XXXI, and XXXIII, place particular emphasis on friendship and an agreement not to harm one another.

From here we can develop a contemporary question about sufficiency. Imagine someone who repeatedly moves the beginning of a normal life to the next milestone: one more successful project, one more recognition, one more sum of money. The issue is not that they have too many desires. It is the condition they have imposed on the present: until the milestone is reached, the present does not count as a full life.

Such a condition can outlive any success. If the criterion is formulated as “more than now,” it has no predetermined endpoint. Tomorrow will bring a new “now.” From outside it may look like movement, but inwardly the person remains before a closed door whose key is promised after the next achievement.

The scale of a goal proves nothing by itself. A large undertaking may be meaningful and joyful; a small desire may keep someone under strain. What matters is the structure of dependence. One can work on a difficult book while valuing the life already taking place. One can own a comfortable home and feel that it still grants no right to rest.

Sufficiency, therefore, need not mean giving up development. It helps us distinguish continuing work from postponing existence. The first adds something to life. The second declares present life a draft whose value continually depends on proof that has not yet arrived.

At this point the theme of a cosmic verdict returns. Sometimes its role is played by an imagined infallible spectator: they must finally recognise that we have made something of ourselves. But

who this spectator is, what their rules are, and whether the next success will suffice are unknown. They resemble the ruler of the storm in that their opinion cannot be checked and their displeasure is easy to presume.

Concrete relationships work differently. A friend can say they need our help; an agreement can be clarified; gratitude can be heard. Difficulties and the possibility of error remain, but there is something to discuss. A living connection does not guarantee safety, yet it gives it a form that can be sustained through actions rather than endless guessing.

This is the authors' application of the Epicurean question about desires. It does not turn every ambition into an illness or establish a universal size for a good life. It merely asks which goal enlarges life and which continually cancels it until a new confirmation arrives.

VIII. Why a Liberating Thought Also Needs to Be Checked

We want to preserve the right to make mistakes for a philosopher who reduces fear. Otherwise, every disagreement seems to return us to the old terror. But if tranquillity depends on a ban on checking a favourite explanation, it becomes very fragile: the explanation has to be protected from the world.

Epicurus held specific views that cannot be carried over into modern knowledge. In the Letter to Pythocles, §91, the size of the Sun is treated as close to the size it appears to be. Modern astronomy describes it as a star roughly one hundred times wider than Earth, about 150 million kilometres away from us. NASA, “Sun: Facts”. The resemblance of individual ancient words to modern terms does not turn ancient physics into a modern theory.

This example disrupts a convenient story in which an early thinker simply guessed all the essentials, leaving later centuries merely to refine the details. The philosophical project and the truth of a particular explanation are different subjects of verification. We can value the question Epicurus posed without accepting his answer about the size of the celestial body. We can see the value of giving up superstitious threat without treating every explanation he proposed as true.

There is also a subtler danger. If tranquillity is declared the sole goal of knowledge, inconvenient information becomes superfluous. Yet sometimes a person needs to learn about a real danger, reconsider a pleasant habit, or acknowledge the limits of their own understanding. Reducing unease today is not always the same as making a better decision over a longer period.

In On the Nature of Things, I.936–950, Lucretius compares the poetic presentation of the teaching to honey on the rim of a cup, helping bitter medicine go down. This ancient image lets

us put a question to our own text: what does beautiful language do? Does it help us see a thought, or cover its weak points?

The force of an impression cannot supply the answer. A good image can hold our attention; it cannot replace grounds. A story about a nature that poses no intentional threat also needs to be checked wherever claims about what is actually happening are derived from it.

We can therefore take a question from Epicurus without swearing allegiance to his entire answer. How do we distinguish observation from added interpretation? Which danger is confirmed? What do we know about the cause? Where has a convenient story become more confident than its grounds? The ability to ask these questions keeps philosophy alive better than the inviolability of a name.

IX. What This Means in Practice

Let us return to the person at the window. The conversation did not go as they wished. The storm continues. Fatigue has not gone away. To look at the evening differently, we do not have to declare everything that happened good. Nor do we have to force ourselves to feel tranquil at a philosopher's command.

We can begin with what is actually known. A thought remained unspoken in the conversation. The person nearby responded in a particular way. Rain is falling outside. These observations do not yet imply that life is delivering a final assessment. An unpleasant event remains unpleasant, but stops automatically representing the world's entire attitude towards a person.

More precise work then becomes possible. Can we return to the conversation? What exactly could not be expressed? Does the breakdown require a repair or a change of habit? Where is another person's help needed? These questions are more modest than the question of the universe's secret design. But the answers may concern the actual situation.

Sometimes there is no answer, or action fixes nothing. Not every loss can be turned into a task, nor every injury into a lesson. Honesty then means refraining from completing a consoling story simply for the sake of completeness. Misfortune may remain misfortune. It need not be assigned a role in a supposed plan for our improvement.

Personal meaning is still permitted. What happened may change priorities, reveal the importance of relationships, or show the limits of habitual confidence. But such meaning arises in our response and does not become a proven intention of the cause. A person can choose to make something meaningful out of what they have experienced. They are not obliged to believe the experience was deliberately arranged for that possibility.

This distinction also protects against the cruel demand to find benefit in every pain. If meaning is created in a response, it cannot be imposed on the person harmed as a duty to the world.

Help, silence, time, and acknowledgment of loss may be more fitting than a beautiful explanation.

Nature without a cosmic threat does not promise eternal safety. Risk, finitude, and uncertainty remain within it. But we need not add another suffering to them: the need continually to prove our innocence before everything that happens.

Lightning flashes outside again. It lights up the room, the table, the cup left there. The conversation still awaits a continuation. The evening has no verified opinion about the person. The person still has the evening.

Key Quotation

> *“Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us...”*
>
> *Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, §124, opening. English translation by R. D. Hicks; the Russian article translates this passage from Hicks.*

The formula does not promise to remove grief. It is directed against one image of fear: that we shall endlessly experience our own absence. Beyond its limits remain finite life, attachment to it, and responsibility for what is still possible.

Connections Between Traditions and Ways of Understanding

One Side	The Other Side	Connection and Limit of the Comparison
The Epicurean explanation of nature	The Stoic account of providence in Epictetus	A shared concern for human tranquillity does not mean a shared metaphysics: the structure of the world is explained differently.
Epicurus's ancient physics	Modern astronomy	A common subject of inquiry does not produce identical answers. Matching terms do not validate an ancient theory.
The philosophical argument about death	The living pain of loss	Removing a contradictory picture of nonexistence does not abolish our relationship to finite life.
An event's personal significance	The intention of its cause	Meaning can be created and discussed without declaring an intention established.

Primary Sources and Studies

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3. Epicurus. Letter to Menoeceus, §§123–125, 127–132. English translation by R. D. Hicks, Internet Classics Archive. Gods, the argument about death, desires, and choice. The relevant passages are used; the Russian article's paraphrases are not presented as direct quotations.

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6. Lucretius. On the Nature of Things, I.936–950. English verse translation by William Ellery Leonard, Project Gutenberg, ebook 785. The image of honey and bitter medicine; the passage used has been read, without claiming to have read the whole poem.

7. David Konstan. “Epicurus”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, revision of 8 July 2022, sections 1–2 and 5. Academic commentary for historical context and the limits of interpreting the account of gods; not a separate ancient source.

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Tags

Epicurus, Epicureanism, ancient philosophy, nature, atomism, worldview, cosmic threat, fear, causality, intention, meaning, observation, uncertainty, limits of knowledge, gods, providence, death, finitude, desires, sufficiency, friendship, responsibility, Epictetus, Lucretius, history of thought.

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