

What's the Difference Between Chance and Fate to an Epicurean?

Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2019 at 8:45 AM

Great summary Florus! My comments would be:

(1) I dislike ever using the word "indifferent" myself, except in discussing Stoicism as you are doing. From an Epicurean perspective if something affects me or a friend at all, then I am never going to be "indifferent" to it - it is going to cause me either pleasure or pain, and not be "neutral" (which is related to the issue of there being only two feelings, I presume). Of course there are many things outside of our control, and uncertainty even in those that are largely within our control, but the word "indifferent" has such a stupid Stoic ring to it (sort of like "apathetic") that I recoil from using it as proper attitude toward much of anything.

(1A) As a subpoint, depending on how the term is used I also think an Epicurean would not be quick to use the terminology of "indifferents" especially in examples such as you listed. If we go off to fight a war, we may not be able to control who wins and who loses, but we are darn sure going to experience pleasure or pain depending on the result. If something comes into our sphere of contact at all, it's not ultimately something to which we are indifferent, but something that has implications for pleasure or pain. Of course there are many facts and circumstances (far side of the moon, etc) that never come to our attention or have any real relevance to us at all. I suppose it would not hurt to say that we are "indifferent" to them, but the terminology strikes me as inherently perilous from an Epicurean worldview.

(2) Also when this subject comes up I like to refer people to A A Long's "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism." I think that article is very helpful in analyzing when Epicurus thought the swerve was of relevance, and when it was not, and I don't think that distinction is made obsolete by modern quantum physics. As Long points out, if Epicurus has taught that *everything* is effected by swerves, then there would be no regularity in the universe at all, and the rest of the Epicurean system based on properties and qualities of the elements would have been mercilessly attacked as impossible (which our surviving texts do not indicate was contended by Cicero or others).