

# Can Determinism Be Reconciled With Epicureanism? (Admin Edit - No, But Let's Talk About Why Not)

**Post by “waterholic” of September 24, 2022 at 8:46 AM**

I am confused. I was listening to a French writer Michel Onfray, who is known for his Epicurean views. The first half was very much in-line with what I would expect. Then there are his views on determinism. I have added the link, unfortunately, in French, but the essence is:

1. Your life has been impacted by many events driven partly by necessity (e.g. you were raised in the South, your taste for food would be a function of that) and partly by chance (people and events you encounter in your life limit your decisions). You choose very little. Even now, when you look back, few would have chosen exactly the life they had lived. So there is little free will. Onfray calls this determinism and accepts it as a reality.

2. Religion (he spoke specifically of Christianity) on the other hand assumes you have free will and can choose between good and bad, and can be punished for a bad choice. This, in Onfray's view, is the free will and he rejects it.

I am not very well versed in this, but isn't determinism rejected by Epicurus? How can Epicureanism and determinism co-exist in Onfray's mind?

[Link to the video](#)

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**Post by “Eikadistes” of September 24, 2022 at 10:10 AM**

[Quote from waterholic](#)

isn't determinism rejected by Epicurus? How can Epicureanism and determinism co-exist in Onfray's mind?

[Link to the video](#)

You are correct that Epicurus rejected strict determinism. A primary point of contention Epicurus had with Democritean atomism was his determinism. If you have not come across it yet, I recommend reading Karl Marx's doctoral dissertation "*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*" which addresses this point:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

[Full text of "Marx, Karl Doctoral Thesis The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature"](#)

*(Marx gets a few things wrong, but it is an interesting and somewhat surprising read)*

Onfray positions himself in a long line of hedonists and materialists *in general*, but is not necessarily an Epicureanism *in particular*. However, based on your description, Onfray is not arguing for strict determinism, but rather, what we might call a compatibilist proposition, wherein determinism and indeterminism are not seen as being mutually exclusive.

While I try to avoid placing Epicurus within the buckets on modern philosophical categories, compatibilism might be the appropriate bucket in which to place him. Onfray seems to agree with Epicurus that "*some [events] [...] happen by necessity and some by chance, and some are within our control*" (Letter to Menoikeus).

Regarding "free will", we tend to look upon the concept with scorn, not because of the proposition of indeterminism, but because the concept of "free will" is a Christian form of (*pseudo*-)indeterminism that is contextualized within the domain of a Creator deity. The term "free will" is problematic for materialists, but not indeterminism, itself.

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**Post by "waterholic" of September 24, 2022 at 10:27 AM**

[Quote from Nate](#)

The term "free will" is problematic for materialists, but not indeterminism, itself.

Thank you @Nate, I am closer to understanding Onfray, though he extends the argument too far for my liking.

I will definitely look into Marx's thesis; I am a bit familiar with his dialectical materialism and political economy, as well as Popper's extended criticism of Marx, but I never knew about his Epicurean references.

But with regards to free will, aside from the context of a deity (some external intelligence that "tests" us - an idea that has been an excuse to avoid any critical thought), what could materialism have against the concept of free will?

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**Post by "Martin" of September 24, 2022 at 2:18 PM**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

Free will has the connotation of a supernatural soul. In materialism without hard determinism, "agency" is the preferred term to replace the term "free will" to get rid of that supernatural connotation. This leaves enough room for anything from the little "free will" of Onfray to a lot of "free will" and is flexible enough to not be refuted by future research results on how far agency actually goes unless those results prove hard determinism. A proof of hard determinism in the real world as perceived by us appears to be not conceivable as of now.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 24, 2022 at 2:26 PM

### [Quote from waterholic](#)

But with regards to free will, aside from the context of a deity (some external intelligence that "tests" us - an idea that has been an excuse to avoid any critical thought), what could materialism have against the concept of free will

If you reduce everything to atoms and motion in a straight line, people think that that would lead to a totally mechanistic result, and so a straight line materialist such as Democritus would conclude that everything is in the grip of an iron "fate" that allows no room for personal decisions whatsoever. Cicero made this argument against Epicurus in criticizing the swerve as a departure and regression from Democritus.

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## Post by “waterholic” of September 25, 2022 at 6:19 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

If you reduce everything to atoms and motion in a straight line, people think that that would lead to a totally mechanistic result, and so a straight line materialist such as Democritus would conclude that everything is in the grip of an iron "fate" that allows no room for personal decisions whatsoever. Cicero made this argument against Epicurus in criticizing the swerve as a departure and regression from Democritus.

Ok, so this is where the Epicurean "swerve" comes in to introduce some level of chance. Looking at this from the vantage point of the modern science, we know for a fact that the small-scale world operates on probability (quantum mechanics) and not linearly. Additionally,

complex systems, Mandelbrot sets (fractals) all demonstrate how you can get from simple predictable small elements into extreme unpredictable complex whole. This suggests that absolute determinism cannot be defended. In this sense, I suppose "compatibilism" is probably the best description of the reality, though I somewhat dislike the notion of describing a certain feature of universe by accepting co-existence of two extreme and improbable ideas.

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

Free will has the connotation of a supernatural soul. In materialism without hard determinism, "agency" is the preferred term to replace the term "free will" to get rid of that supernatural connotation. This leaves enough room for anything from the little "free will" of Onfray to a lot of "free will" and is flexible enough to not be refuted by future research results on how far agency actually goes unless those results prove hard determinism. A proof of hard determinism in the real world as perceived by us appears to be not conceivable as of now.

Thank you [Martin](#), I now understand the connotation of a supernatural soul coming from "outside the system". I have been raised in a completely non-religious environment and developed scepticism later in life, so I did not develop a radar for theological red flags. I like the term agency!

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#### **Post by "Don" of September 25, 2022 at 7:28 AM**

#### [Quote from waterholic](#)

I have been raised in a completely non-religious environment

Lucky you! 😊

So your upbringing would fall under the first or second category of Epicurus's "some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power."

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#### **Post by "waterholic" of September 25, 2022 at 8:12 AM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Lucky you! 😊

So your upbringing would fall under the first or second category of Epicurus's "some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power."

Well I did get my fair share of a toxic mixture of cultural conservatism and marxist-stoicism. The net result is probably marginally better than a catholic school. It's funny how you can get even religion out of the people but not the instinctive hatred and mistrust of pleasure.

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**Post by “Don” of September 25, 2022 at 8:22 AM**

[Quote from waterholic](#)

It's funny how you can get even religion out of the people but not the instinctive hatred and mistrust of pleasure

Well put!

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**Post by “Onenski” of September 27, 2022 at 10:38 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If you reduce everything to atoms and motion in a straight line, people think that that would lead to a totally mechanistic result, and so a straight line materialist such as Democritus would conclude that everything is in the grip of an iron "fate" that allows no room for personal decisions whatsoever. Cicero made this argument against Epicurus in criticizing the swerve as a departure and regression from Democritus.

I hope to add something to the discussion by bringing up the difference between determinism and fatalism.

I don't think that Democritus' position imply that there's no room for personal decision, but I recognize that Epicurus could have understood so. Those who do think that we can't change our future whatever we do are the stoics. (They even talk frequently about Providence.)

Democritus was a determinist, stoics were fatalist. What's the difference? A determinist thinks that every event, including our decisions, is determined by previous states of the universe (out of our control). Every thought, decision and action is determined by too many factors (a good example is in the book "Behave" by Robert Sapolsky), but we don't know all of them. However, determinists consider our agency as part of the causes in the world. Whatever we do has consequences in the world. So, there's room for personal decisions. The future is unknown for us, but we are part of the causes that determine it.

(The practical implications, by the way, include the elimination of retrospective moral responsibility, that is: we're not responsible for what we've done, but we are for what we're going to do).

Fatalist, on the other hand, think that the future is pre-established. Whatever we do, that future won't change. We can decide and act, but it doesn't matter. So, it's like not having personal decision at all.

Now, by the way, I've never understood how the swerve can give us freedom. How random and subtle movements of the atoms can make macro-organisms to have the power of decision and action? Maybe you've discussed this in another thread, but I don't find it 😄

I agree with @Nate on how the quote from the Letter to Menoeceus suggests a compatibilist position of Epicurus. However, the postulation of the swerve as the source of our freedom would imply that Epicurus is a hard incompatibilist (that is, either the world is deterministic or we are free and responsible; and he takes the latter; so the world is indeterministic).

As I said, it's confusing to me. 😞

I know that we should not apply some modern labels to ancient philosophers, but I think in this case it's relevant. 😄

What do you think?

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## Post by "Cassius" of September 27, 2022 at 11:43 PM

You're right Onenski that I don't think we have had too many discussions in the past on this topic. I personally have not made myself an expert on the different theories that get packaged under the name "determinism" so (since it is late when I write this) I will see if others answer first before I reply further myself.

I guess the key to unwinding this is going to be figuring out if this makes sense, which intuitively seems hard to follow:

[Quote from Onenski](#)

? A determinist thinks that every event, including our decisions, is determined by previous states of the universe (out of our control). Every thought, decision and action is determined by too many factors (a good example is in the book "Behave" by Robert Sapolsky), but we don't know all of them. However, determinists consider our agency as part of the causes in the world. Whatever we do has consequences in the world. So, there's room for personal decisions. The future is unknown for us, but we are part of the causes that determine it

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### Post by “waterholic” of September 28, 2022 at 3:52 AM

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Now, by the way, I've never understood how the swerve can give us freedom. How random and subtle movements of the atoms can make macro-organisms to have the power of decision and action? Maybe you've discussed this in another thread, but I don't find it 😊

As [Cassius](#) said, this field is very confusing, but also very relevant and interesting not just for understanding the ancient thought but also for having an Epicurean approach to every day life.

My understanding is that Epicurus introduced the concept of swerve to avoid adopting full determinism (or fatalism, to be honest I still don't follow the intricacy of the difference). A key part of the philosophy is absence of anything non-material in the body, including our thoughts, feelings and decisions. These are all driven by material non-divisible particles that are in motion. But since, the logic goes, their movements are geometric and predictable (no movement comes from "outside the system"), the consequence is that every decision one makes, every thought one has, every event that happens, is in theory pre-determined (imagine a super computer that calculates the position of every atom at every moment). This is why Epicurus introduced the "swerve" - a randomness in the system that is unpredictable.

With the modern vantage point "the swerve" combined with the idea of the void are remarkable achievements of pure deductive reasoning. Although quantum mechanics does not exactly work as imagined by Epicurus, the introduction of chance/randomness is essential for understanding how the world works.

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 28, 2022 at 5:35 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

[Quote from waterholic](#)

(or fatalism, to be honest I still don't follow the intricacy of the difference)

Yes that will be key in unwinding the question. I can imagine the possibility based on those words that "fatalism" embodies a supernatural force guiding things, while determinism simply means everything is mechanical, but I would not rush to embrace those terms without a standard point of reference identifying them as such.

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**Post by "Onenski" of September 28, 2022 at 12:24 PM**

I'm sorry if I made things more confusing by introducing the distinction determinism/fatalism. I just wanted to make some justice to Democritus' position. Specially because there are contemporary people who defend something similar, that "free will" (that's the term they use) is an illusion.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

This is why Epicurus introduced the "swerve" - a randomness in the system that is unpredictable.

With the modern vantage point "the swerve" combined with the idea of the void are remarkable achievements of pure deductive reasoning. Although quantum mechanics does not exactly work as imagined by Epicurus, the introduction of chance/randomness is essential for understanding how the world works.

I totally agree with you, @Nate. However by introducing the swerve in the nature of the world Epicurus (or Lucretius) introduced a form of indeterminism. (The supercomputer that you mentioned could not predict a future state of the world.)

So we arrive to what in philosophy is called the problem of luck: if the world is indeterministic (in the macro level), then we must be lucky if our actions have the outcomes we want they have. A subtle deviation may cause a very great deviation (like in chaos theory that you mentioned).

In other words, if some random (even subtle) things happen, we have less control than we think we have.

(I'm sorry if, again, I make thing more confusing. I just think this can contribute to our understanding of Epicurus' position in order to make it more plausible.)

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## Post by “waterholic” of September 28, 2022 at 1:46 PM

[Onenski](#) absolutely no reason to apologise, introducing this distinction only means we (I) have to read and discover more, which is one of the reasons we are here! Besides, not understanding is my natural state, it's nobody's fault 😊

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

In other words, if some random (even subtle) things happen, we have less control than we think we have.

I am not very well versed in philosophy, so my take on this comes from everyday life observations. There is a range of different types of outcomes that populate the "control axis".

(Let's call these Type A) There are outcomes we can control nearly 100%. In front of me there is a paper cup that I can smash. I control this outcome with a probability of nearly 100%, since barring a small (but not null) chance of me having a heart attack before I smash it, I can definitely do it.

(Type B) Then there are outcomes that we can **learn to control**. Consider me with a basketball at the 3-point line. The probability of scoring is maybe 1 in 30. However, I know for a fact that if I dedicate my effort to it for a year or two, I will increase that probability to 20-30% (still a far cry from Stephen Curry, who hits 50% with the opposing team defending). The key here is that the controlled, repetitive environment of the game renders itself to learning and having an impact on the end outcome.

(Type C) Finally, at the extreme end of the scale are events that no matter how hard I try I cannot control. Flip of a coin is a simple example, but more interesting examples are economic forecasts, the performance of mutual fund investments or political analysis. No matter how hard I try, there is no benefit from learning (monkeys throughing darts have the same or better results).

These observations are very much aligned with my understanding of Epicurean/Lucretian position on chance. There are things that are outside our control indeed. Even in the paper cup case, some subtle things as you say may have an impact on the end result, but with very small probability. More complex situations will be impacted by endless permutations of events, which makes them hard to predict with any probability.

The key aspect of (in)determinism, in my view, is that we have agency, meaning that it was **not pre-determined** that I would want to smash that cup. This still does not mean that absolutely everything is unpredictable.

A final observation: somehow, we are much better at predicting the weather patterns (a complex system) and not so good at predicting social phenomena (wars, economic growth etc.) Is this because components of weather do not have agency?

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### **Post by “Onenski” of September 28, 2022 at 3:07 PM**

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

In other words, if some random (even subtle) things happen, we have less control than we think we have.

What I have in mind here, perhaps is clearer if I put it like this. Determinism is the idea that every event in the universe has a causal explanation. Every event is explained appealing to past events that caused it. There is no event without cause.

The idea of a swerve implies an event that is not caused (because is random). So, the world is indeterministic if we accept the swerve.

I imagine something like: you're a chemist, but in an indeterministic world sometimes chemical reactions doesn't work (because some atoms or molecules deviate from the behaviour we think they're going to have). Wouldn't that be strange? If chemical reactions sometimes doesn't work, then the same would happen to biochemical reaction. Life would have been hard even impossible.

In other words, the swerve is an event without cause, and it's hard to see how it helps to explain that I can do what I do. In fact, makes the explanation of my behavior more difficult, because some events previous to my action doesn't have an explanation. They are more out of my control in virtue of their randomness.

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### **Post by “Onenski” of September 28, 2022 at 3:32 PM**

#### [Quote from waterholic](#)

The key aspect of (in)determinism, in my view, is that we have agency, meaning that it was not pre-determined that I would want to smash that cup. This still does not mean that absolutely everything is unpredictable.

Thanks for your answer, @Nate. My understanding of determinism it's that even what you want is determined by previous events (what you've experienced, the culture where you live, the beliefs with which you've grown up, etc.). So the fact that you *wanted* to smash the cup was determined as well (I recommend one more time Sapolsky's book "Behave" for more on this). I fear that the use of the word "agency" in this paragraph and the next refers to a special kind of causation in the world. (Sorry if I misinterpret this part of your point of view.) If agency was special, we should wonder what make it so special? Perhaps you meant that agency is a kind of very complex causation, so that social phenomena it's harder to predict. I think a determinist could agree, because complexity is not indeterminism.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of September 28, 2022 at 4:19 PM**

Onenski I should have thought of this earlier but one of my favorite articles in all my Epicurean reading bears on what you are talking about.

It's "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism" by A A Long.

Look for it here: [Long: "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism"](#)

The bottom line (one among many) is that Long suggests that while the swerve is potentially operational at all times, it only "breaks through" to cause observable action in our world in the realm of higher living things who actually exhibit free will.

There's a reference in the letter to Herodotus how Epicurus held that indeed "most things" at least in the physical world are largely deterministic, but Long argues that we can have our cake and eat it too if we observe how Epicurus observed that the swerve was only very slight, meaning that only in rare cases (in the great scheme of things) is it observable in action, which still allows "natural law" to govern most things in our observable world.

I think you will find the article on point and I would very much like to hear what you think about it.

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### **Post by "Martin" of September 28, 2022 at 4:21 PM**

In response to #16:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

Anyone who has done chemical lab courses can probably confirm that some chemical reactions are difficult to reproduce, which may make passing a lab course in time difficult. Chemistry students make jokes about this, e.g., there is a reaction called Mannich reaction, named after Carl Mannich. Instead, you can interpret the name of the reaction as in the verbal German phrase "ma' nich'" (in written German "mal nicht" for "once not"), so it is the reaction which sometimes works and sometimes not.

Joking aside, the reason for such difficulties is usually that the reaction is very sensitive to the experimental conditions. It is conceivable that this sensitivity is associated with amplification from an atomic level subjected to quantum indeterminacy to the macroscopic level in some cases, especially if we have a microscopic cell structure with complex connections and interplay between chemical reactions and charge transport at every connection.

Now, let us take a simplistic model of the brain with domains for sensory input, memory, internal drives and a domain for random generation sensitive to quantum indeterminacy, all connected to a domain for reasoning, which in turn is connected to a domain for decision-making and a domain which controls actions. Especially the domains for memory and internal drives distinguishes an individual person from others.

If the sensory inputs indicate a problem, the domain for reasoning tries to find a solution. The domain for memory may provide something which worked in the past, but the case may appear too different to mechanistically repeat a past action. The domain for random generation produces a series of random patterns, whereby almost all of them are useless nonsense but a few might represent solutions. The domain for reasoning discards the nonsense and picks a workable solution, possibly one which is based on experience modified by an idea from the domain for random generation.

There is no proof that this model is adequate for decision-making of the human brain or that there are amplification mechanisms in the brain to get from quantum indeterminacy to a different output of a domain. However, the model does provide a conceivable explanation how quantum indeterminacy (i.e. the swerve) can lead to free will / agency of the individual in a world which is mostly deterministic at the macroscopic level.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2023 at 2:00 PM**

Here is [Nikolsky](#) making the point I think we keep circling around:

Everyone agrees that we call the actions involved in satisfying thirsts, hungers, and our desires for any type of pleasure by the name of "pleasure."

The big question is not (1) whether to label the natural state of life in which we find ourselves after we have (temporarily) satisfied our immediate thirsts, hungers, and desires as either "katastematic pleasure or kinetic pleasure."

The big question is (2) whether to label "the natural state of life in which find ourselves after we have (temporarily) satisfied our immediate thirsts, hungers, and desires" by the name of "pleasure."

The reason that (2) is the big issue is that everyone does not agree with labeling (2) as Pleasure. Plato and Cicero and most of the orthodox world do not consider "the natural state of life in which we find ourselves after we have temporarily satisfied our immediate thirsts, hungers, and desires." And because they don't consider (2) to be a state of pleasure, they conclude that it is impossible to ever reach satisfaction, because you are constantly chasing new food, new drink, and new stimulations.

Once you take the position that "the natural state of life in which find ourselves after we have (temporarily) satisfied our immediate thirsts, hungers, and desires" is a pleasure, then it's easy to see that you can live a life of pleasure in most everything you do, even if you have never heard of the words "kinetic" or "katastematic."

I keep putting "temporarily" in brackets only because we all know that we'll get hungry and thirsty and want more pleasures every couple of hours so long as we continue to live. That observation doesn't matter to Epicurus, because he identifies *\*both\** the state of acting to fulfill those desires, and the state of fulfillment, as pleasure, so the general condition of life is pleasure. It's only when some affirmative outside disruptive influence intrudes to cause pain that we are not in pleasure in that part of our experience.

Nikolksy says it this way:

sates from eating and drinking by compensation of something or something else something or other in the organism.<sup>21</sup> A similar description of pleasure is offered by Plato in the *Timaeus*: 'An impression produced in us contrary to nature and violent, if sudden, is painful; and, again, the sudden return to nature is pleasant';<sup>22</sup> '[bodies feel] pleasure when restored to their natural conditions.'<sup>23</sup> This idea of pleasure as a 'return' to the natural state or its 'restoration' (κατάστασις) was taken over by the later philosophers

of the Academic school. It manifests itself in the definition of pleasure as 'sensate restoration' (κατάστασις αἰσθητή), which Aristotle gives in his *Rhetoric* (1369b) and which is examined in detail in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1153a) and in the Peripatetic *Magna Moralia* (1204b-1205a). Apparently, Epicurus adhered to a similar standpoint. This can be inferred from an explanation of pain and pleasure found in Lucretius (*De Rerum Nat.* 963-72): in answering the question why the atoms cannot feel pain and pleasure, Lucretius says:

*Praeterea, quoniam dolor est, ubi materiae // corpora vi quadam per viscera viva  
per artus // sollicitata suis trepidant in sedibus intus, // inque locum quando remi-  
grant, fit blanda voluptas, // scire licet nullo primordia posse dolore // temptari  
nullamque voluptatem capere ex se; // quandoquidem non sunt ex ullis principio-  
rum // corporibus, quorum motus novitate laborent // aut aliquem fructum capi-  
ant dulcedinis almae. // haut igitur debent esse ullo praedita sensu.*

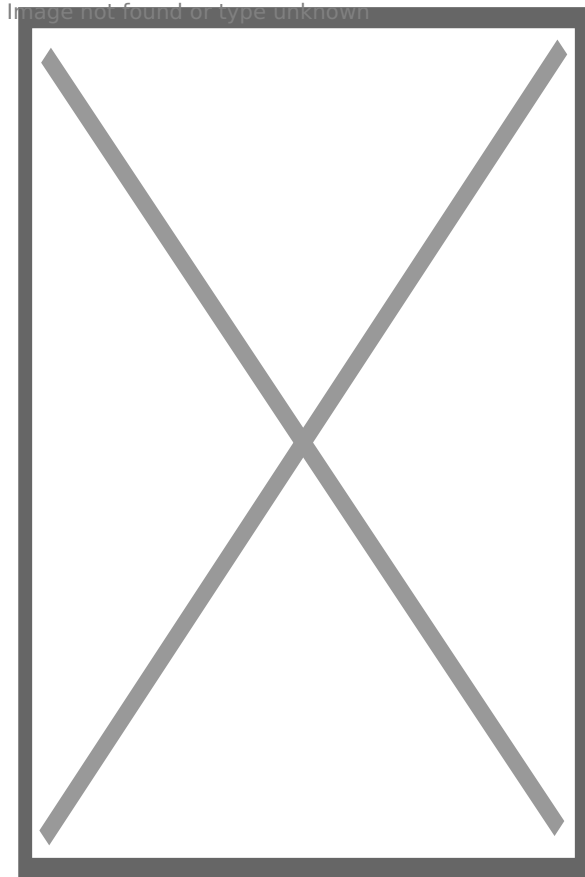
Thus, the Epicurean view of the physical nature of pleasure as a whole varies little from that of other philosophers: in Epicurus' opinion, pleasure is experienced when the atoms of a human body, acted upon by a certain force, find themselves in their proper places, i.e., when the organism attains its natural state under the effect of some influence. Epicurus, however, differed from his predecessors on one essential point. When speaking about pleasure as restoration, Plato and his followers meant by this only the process of restoration, separating this process from its result and believing that it leads to a neutral state, a state of rest when both pleasure and pain are absent. Proceeding from this, they proved that pleasure cannot be the actual good and end: from their point of view, it is a process of becoming leading to another end different from it – the absence of pain. For example, when we satisfy hunger, the end is not pleasure but the state of satiety regarded by the Academics as neutral.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, I propose, and aiming to refute this argument, Epicurus links pleasure not only with the process but also with the result of restoration, i.e., with the natural state which the organism attains. In connection with this new interpretation of pleasure Epicurus introduces his own term κατάστημα; unlike the Academy's term κατάστασις, cognate with it, it denoted the result and not the process of restoration. If we take into account all those associations with the traditional description of pleasure which the root verb καθίστημι carried, and also if we do not ignore the description of the nature of

## Post by "Don" of February 22, 2024 at 8:35 AM

I'm going to resurrect this thread since I think there are some good, thought-provoking points, and it mentions Sapolsky who recently came out with an even more provocative book than Behave:

Determined

A SCIENCE OF LIFE WITHOUT FREE WILL

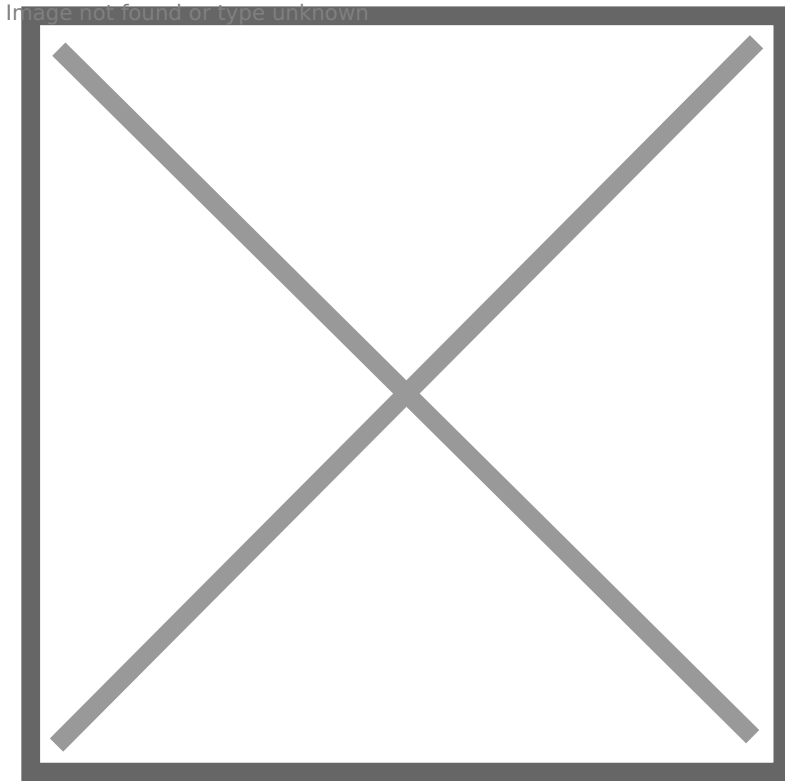


[Determined by Robert M. Sapolsky: 9780525560975 | PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/9780525560975/determined-by-robert-m-sapolsky/)

The instant New York Times bestseller "Excellent...Outstanding for its breadth of research, the liveliness of the writing, and the depth of humanity it...

[www.penguinrandomhouse.com](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

There's also a recent Clear and Vivid episode:



[Robert Sapolsky: You Have No Choice - Clear+Vivid with Alan Alda](#)

Learn to connect better with others in every area of your life. Immerse yourself in spirited conversations with people who know how hard it is, and yet how...

pca.st

The points earlier in the thread of determinism vs fatalism are very pertinent to this discussion. So, here we go again.... Discuss.... More later from me.

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**Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2024 at 10:29 AM**

Quote

....Now, in *Determined*, Sapolsky takes his argument all the way, mounting a brilliant (and in his inimitable way, delightful) full-frontal assault on the pleasant fantasy that there is some separate self telling our biology what to do.

*Determined* offers a marvelous synthesis of what we know about how consciousness works—the tight weave between reason and emotion and between stimulus and

response in the moment and over a life. One by one, Sapolsky tackles all the major arguments for free will and takes them out, cutting a path through the thickets of chaos and complexity science and quantum physics, as well as touching ground on some of the wilder shores of philosophy. He shows us that the history of medicine is in no small part the history of learning that fewer and fewer things are somebody's "fault"; for example, for centuries we thought seizures were a sign of demonic possession.

Yet, as he acknowledges, it's very hard, and at times impossible, to uncouple from our zeal to judge others and to judge ourselves. Sapolsky applies the new understanding of life beyond free will to some of our most essential questions around punishment, morality, and living well together. By the end, Sapolsky argues that while living our daily lives recognizing that we have no free will is going to be monumentally difficult, doing so is not going to result in anarchy, pointlessness, and existential malaise. Instead, it will make for a much more humane world.

I underlined two statements for comment:

(1) As I understand it Epicurus would certainly not assert that there is "some separate self telling our biology what to do." Epicurus is much more like "we are the sum of our biology and that sum has the ability to make choices affecting its life."

(2) "Making for a much more humane world" always seems to be at the bottom of attacks on free will, with the goal of nothing being anyone's "fault." In other words, this debate is usually driven by ethical issues rather than simply wanting to know more about "natural science." Where there is no "fault" and no "credit" there can be no praise and blame, which are essential to an Epicurean understanding of the workings of people in society. As Fernando brought up in our discussion last night, there is always the question of the fact that different people have different feelings of pleasure, and it is essential to think about how to reconcile what we think are the requirements of our feelings vs those of others.

Does the Epicurean want to fly to the stars for the pleasure of doing so, or does the Epicurean prefer to stay home where he is safe? Does the Epicurean who wants to fly to the stars stay home so that he can devote his resources to feeding and clothing people on the other side of the world who he's never met?

My view is that the answer to those questions from an Epicurean viewpoint has to start with the premise that there is no supernatural god, and there is no Platonic ideal, that gives every person the same answer to such questions. Not only is there no right and wrong course that every Epicurean / wise person should follow in every situation, the real heart of the matter is seeing why it is *wrong* to even consider the possibility that there *might be* inflexible and absolute ethical commandments for all persons, all times, and all places.

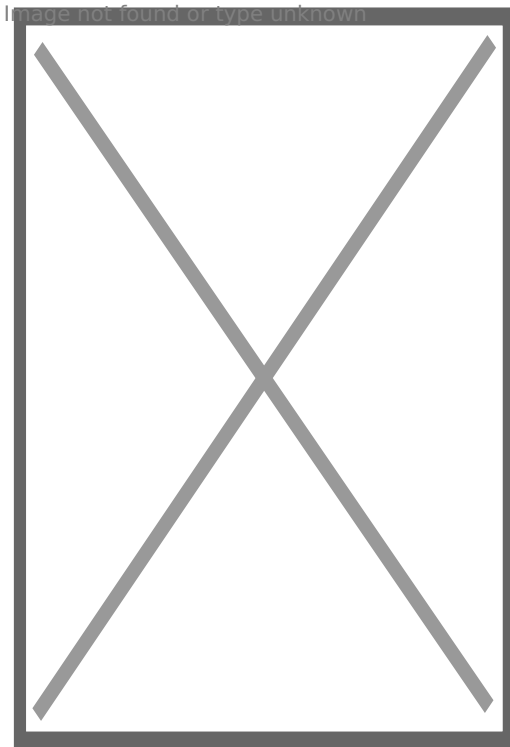
As also was stated yesterday, Epicurean philosophy doesn't consist of or lead to a set of "Ten Commandments." The way the [Principal Doctrines](#) are written is much different than those alleged tablets from Mount Sinai. Epicurus tells us what "is" about pleasure and pain, and then we have to go about applying it to our own circumstances.

And liking certain things (and "praising" them) and disliking other things (and "blaming" them) is what pleasure and pain are all about.

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## Post by "Kalosyni" of February 22, 2024 at 2:04 PM

[Don](#) have you read Sam Harris' book "*Free Will*" published in 2012?



[Free Will \(book\) - Wikipedia](#)

en.m.wikipedia.org

I wonder if the only thing new in the Sapolsky book is more detailed science. I did not listen to the audio link, and likely will not because after reading Sam Harris' book, I came to my own conclusion regarding this problem.

As soon as we think or speak the words "there is no free will" then it leads to thoughts and words such as either "I have no control over my life" or "I have very little control over my life"

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

and then that leads to further problems and likely a very negative attitude.

So then I must take for my own awareness and my own belief for *my* self and *my* body that "I have choices and the power to make choices", but other people are outside of my power - and I cannot hold other human beings to "free will" because they are outside of my personal power to make choices.

But also, we know that some things happen through the power of our choice and some things happen due to chance. Not everything is under our control, but with an optimistic attitude we can go much further with a belief that we have the power to act. And we need to be grounded in reality so as to be clear about the things in the world and in life that we do have the ability to affect and act upon.

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## Post by "Pacatus" of February 22, 2024 at 3:36 PM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Sam Harris' book "Free Will" published in 2012

VS09. Necessity is an evil, but [there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity](#).

VS40. He who asserts that everything happens by necessity can hardly find fault with one who denies that everything happens by necessity; by his own theory this very argument is voiced by necessity.

+++++

The full pdf of **Daniel Dennett's** (to my mind, quite cogent and devastating) **refutation of Harris** can be downloaded here: <https://www.rifp.it/ojs/index.php/.../rifp.2017.0018>. Interestingly, Dennett mentions Lucretius' "swerve."

Here is an interesting case where Dennett challenges Harris' claim to have no control over his desires:

Harris: "And there is no way I can influence my desires - for what tools of influence would I use? Other desires?"

Dennett: "Yes, for starters."

+++++

Because of the confusions among various understandings of “free will” (which Dennett addresses) I prefer the term “constrained choice” or “constrained agency” – that is, although facing causal/situational constraints (including endogenous ones, such as native intelligence or ability), nevertheless we have positive agency. That seems to be a version of “compatibilism.”

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2024 at 4:16 PM

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

Because of the confusions among various understandings of “free will” (which Dennett addresses) I prefer the term “constrained choice” or “constrained agency” – that is, although facing causal/situational constraints (including endogenous ones, such as native intelligence or ability), nevertheless we have positive agency. That seems to be a version of “compatibilism.”

I can understand that the corruptions of religious thinking have caused this area of discussion to require lots of hedging.

However from my admittedly "man on the street" Epicurean perspective, I get a strong feeling that the advocates of the position that Epicurus was embracing have gone far too much on the defensive. The pendulum of the discussion on this has swung far too much in the direction of accommodating the hard determinists, with the result that they monopolize the discussion and the common-sense support that ordinary people need is lacking.

It seems to me that Epicurus was "in-your-face" on this issue (as he was on others), and that he was trying to drive the point home with his "it would be better to believe in the myths of the religions" than to follow the path of the hard determinists. When it is better to believe a lie than to believe an error, the error must be pretty damaging!

I am glad that Don brought this up because it is a reminder that the determinists have held the initiative on this subject for far too long. Dennett seems to be the main one fighting this issues, and it deserves books from more people with a non-religious but Epicurean "in your face" strong reaction to it.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of February 22, 2024 at 4:37 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I can understand that the corruptions of religious thinking have caused this area of discussion to require lots of hedging.

Agreed. We have a lot of focus on defining our terms here, for clear understanding, and maybe it would have been better for me to say "This is what I mean, in practical terms, by a reasonable version of free will." Or something like that.

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### Post by “DavidN” of February 22, 2024 at 5:47 PM

First off I'd like to point out that most people who point to quantum physics do not actually apply it properly, and secondly that ALOT of it is not hard science but theoretical. So the author is basing assumption on assumptions. Mathematicians (Theoretical Physicists) in-particular love a deterministic universe because it makes maths easier when they don't have to account for any variations, it's the reason for short cuts like the blackbody.

As to whether or not determinism is Epicurean, it is not. I'm just gonna end this now, with a single statement. So long as we accept that the swerve exists, determinism does not. In fact this is the very purpose of the swerve to free us from the tyranny of determinists.

You can look at modern determinism, ethically, from 2 points of view, neither of which I like, nor should be advocated by any rational person.

First the Victimhood argument. That people are not responsible for their actions because of - insert any irrational emotion based argument here- and since it's all predetermined by said factor we should let them get away with whatever terrible behavior they are engaged in because they have no choice. When the opposite should be true for any rational being. If we know that factor x in our life may push us toward an undesirable outcome, we should adjust our-self accordingly to avoid said outcome. IE If you are predisposed to addictive behavior you should avoid alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc. Not doing so is a choice, no one puts a drink in your hand, unless someone actually did then you need to get better friends.

Secondly the Facist argument. The idea that behavioral genetics can identify undesirable elements and since we are just biological machines that cannot deviate from our programming those people should be treated as guilty and removed from society before they have a chance to cause harm.

Determinism is inherently nihilistic, in that your happiness is not in your control but predetermined, which is contrary to **literally** everything that Epicurus taught.

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## Post by “TauPhi” of February 22, 2024 at 9:42 PM

I like your post [DavidN](#) and I'd like to add slightly different perspective for you all to consider.

Whether we live under the impression of free will in deterministic universe or live having free will in indeterministic universe ultimately is indistinguishable for us humans. To be able to experience determinism one would require computational power we humans simply don't possess. Due to our limitations even if the universe is perfectly determined from start to finish, we have no option to experience the universe this way. In other words, even if we are part of a complete information game we are only capable of playing the game as if it would be an incomplete information game.

My point is, there are aspects of our reality where existence of something or lack of it does not change our situation a bit. In deterministic universe we live like we have free will; in indeterministic universe we have free will. The outcome for humans is the same. I can illustrate my point with more examples of the same outcomes despite opposite realities. [Epicurean gods](#) exist but we cannot have interaction with them equals to [epicurean gods](#) do not exist. Multiverse is a thing but we have no access to any of its infinite universes equals to there's only one universe. John Smith got his innate intelligence tested and now he knows it equals to 83 of whatever-units-of-intelligence. And now what? He's 83. Cool. He can't do anything with this knowledge. He can't be smarter nor he can be dumber.

Thinking and talking about things like these is very pleasant and intellectually stimulating but I personally wouldn't organize my life around (in)determinism; (lack of)gods; (multi/uni)verse or my (in)ability to connect dots better than John Smith.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 22, 2024 at 11:53 PM

Hi, everybody. You know that I sympathise with Hard Incompatibilism (the idea that we don't have free will nor moral responsibility).

The debate is: we human beings assume that we are free to choose what we do and we assume that every event in the universe can be explained by prior causes. For incompatibilists these to assumptions are, evidently, incompatible. Those who affirm that we are free and responsible (so that the world is indeterministic) are libertarians (traditionally in the debate Epicurus is considered a **libertarian**).

Those who defend that every event has prior causes are **determinists**.

**Compatibilist** think that, in fact, both assumptions are compatible: we can affirm that we have free will and we are moral responsible in a deterministic world. I think Epicurus is not a compatibilist.

Hard Incompatibilism says that if the world is deterministic or indeterministic is the same: we have no free will, nor we are morally responsible.

1. I'd like to suggest a question: why the burden of proof is on the side of skeptics of free will and not the other way.

2. [Kalosyni](#) , I think you mention something about the capacity of control. The idea of deterministic views is that that capacity can be explained scientifically by previous causes. From my perspective, accepting determinism doesn't need to imply that you have to be in your house doing nothing. Instead, implies to understand that you are not exempt to the chains of causes in the universe. If the notion of "agency", as Martin prefers to refer instead of "free will", is associated with self-control, I guess determinism would say that agency can be explained. So, agency would not incompatible with determinism. But, I don't know what [Martin](#) thinks.

2. [Cassius](#), the ethical worry is one of the motivations but not the justification:

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

In other words, this debate is usually driven by ethical issues rather than simply wanting to know more about "natural science."

The debate is metaphysical with ethical implications. Philosophers want to know in favor of which conclusion we have better arguments. The same applies to the metaphysical question on the existence of God, universals, the existence of time, and so on. So, the main reasons to accept determinism, compatibilism or libertarianism are metaphysical not ethical.

3. [TauPhi](#), the ethical implications bring up consequences on our human practices. In a world in which we accept as a fact that we are free and responsible of our actions we consider that rewards, punishments, jail, gratitude, resentment, guilt, proud, and others, are justified. If we thought differently, we'd have reasons to change those practices. Effectively, as Peter Strawson argues, we have reactive attitudes (guilt, resentment, proud, forgiveness, gratitude, etc.) and it's hard to feel differently when we interact with other people. However, our practices can be unjustified anyway.

4. [DavidN](#), your reconstructions are straw-man fallacies. The Victimhood argument particularly, besides being more ironic than descriptive, goes into revictimization. Addictions, for example, are public health problems, not a mere matter of choice.

The chapter dedicated to Quantum Mechanics in *Determined* I think is very reasonable. Do you think was simplistic?

5. I highly recommend to read Sapolsky's *Behave*, even more than *Determined* in order to

understand his point. Sapolsky offers a reconstruction of the causes of behaviour. The evidence he finds obviously is not conclusive, but he adds to the debate the picture some people need to see how strongly, using [Pacatus](#) terms, our decisions are constrained.

I believe that Epicurean philosophy and Free Will Skepticism can be reconciled, but in order to do so I will need a deeper understanding of both things and a better capacity to explain my ideas. 😊

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 12:12 AM**

Very in-depth post Onenski!

So why do you not consider your position to be hard determinism? (I see you called it "hard incompatibilism.")

A quick comment before I turn in for the night is that it seems to me that Epicurus thought that "reality" is what we perceive (or experience might be better word). And as I think has already been mentioned by several people in several ways, we perceive that we have the ability to make choices.

Even dreams are real from that perspective - anything that affects us is real; anything that does not affect us is unreal to us.

While I appreciate that it makes sense to look for physical explanations to back up that position (that we have the ability to make choices), in the end it seems to me the force of Epicurus' position comes from the opposite approach from that which draws some people to determinism.

Rather than looking for reasons not to praise or blame, it seems to me that if I think that my life is short I want to make the very most of it that I can. From that perspective, my first and really only concern is that which affects me in some way. What other people do can definitely affect me, and it really doesn't make any difference *\*why\** they do what they do - if it pleases me I should react appropriately; if it displeases me I should act appropriately. Of course the meaning of "appropriately" is going to be entirely contextual, but I would not consider it helpful to my own or to other people's lives to consider myself or them to be unable to make choices.

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### **Post by “Onenski” of February 23, 2024 at 1:33 AM**

Thanks for your answer, [Cassius](#).

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So why do you not consider your position to be hard determinism? (I see you called it "hard incompatibilism.")

"Hard incompatibilism" is Derk Pereboom's position and it means that whether the world is deterministic or indeterministic, we don't have free will. Another possible term is "Skeptic of free will".

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems to me that Epicurus thought that "reality" is what we perceive (or experience might be a better word). And as I think has already been mentioned by several people in several ways, we perceive that we have the ability to make choices.

Well, reality is more than what we perceive, because, as you usually recall, Epicurus thought that we can infer the existence of things that we can't perceive.

That, I hope, also means that we can be wrong in our experiences. Think about Müller-Lyer illusions: we can't stop "perceiving" two equal lines with opposing arrows as if they were different in magnitude. The same happens with other illusions, like that of the Sun going around the Earth because we see it rising every morning. Or the size of the Sun or the Moon. Indeed, we can infer the real nature of the world and see that we were wrong with those illusions.

Psychological facts can also be explained and criticized in that way. Beliefs are the product of a complex net of personal experience, culture, and a lot of other factors. Belief in free will can be an illusion too (we don't know it, but we can't assume it isn't just because).

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Of course the meaning of "appropriately" is going to be entirely contextual, but I would not consider it helpful to my own or to other people's lives to consider myself or them to be unable to make choices.

The idea of Free Will Skepticism is not that people don't make choices. The idea is that those choices are not independent of prior causes (in fact, that they are constrained totally, even if we don't see it). People will keep making choices, the difference will be how independent they think they are.

## Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 6:03 AM

1. Well then Onenski what is your definition of "free will?"
  2. What is your view of the word "agency?"
  3. Though it appears to be a scholium, what is your view of the passage "with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity and some by chance, and some are within our control...?"
- 

## Post by “Don” of February 23, 2024 at 9:50 AM

[Kalosyni](#) I have not read Harris's book. On my list but not yet.

<https://youtu.be/aYzFH8xqhns?feature=shared>

Here's a debate between Dennett and Sapolsky. Skimmed thru but applicable.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of February 23, 2024 at 10:00 AM

Here is the section from Letter to Menoecus (Saint Andre translation) that is relevant to this discussion:

"For he holds that we are responsible for what we achieve, even though some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power, because although necessity is not accountable he sees that chance is unstable whereas the things that are within our power have no other master, so that naturally praise and blame are inseparably connected to them. [\[note\]](#) Indeed he sees that it would be better even to cleave to the myths about the gods (since that leaves some hope of prevailing upon them through worship) than to be subject to the destiny of the scientists (since that way lies an inexorable necessity). [\[note\]](#) And such a man holds that Fate is not a god (as most people believe) because a god does nothing disorderly, and he holds that Fate is not an uncertain cause because nothing good or bad with respect to a completely happy life is given to men by chance, although it does provide the beginnings of both great goods and great evils."

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 10:54 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Kalosyni I have not read Harris's book. On my list but not yet.

Hey [Don](#) - You started this latest iteration of the Determinism saga and then you never weighed in yourself!!! 😊

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 23, 2024 at 11:01 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

1. Well then Onenski what is your definition of "free will?"

There two main ways to understand free will on the debate: leeway freedom (for incompatibilism: deterministic and libertarian) and source freedom (for compatibilists).

**Leeway freedom:** it's the capacity to have acted otherwise. Suppose, for a moment, that there are a chain of events caused by other events. That chain leads to the event that I will choose a strawberry ice cream. If I had leeway freedom, I'd be able to choose strawberry, chocolate, vanilla or any other, or doing something else. That is, prior events don't determine what I'm going to do.

**Source freedom.** I think it's more related to agency. The idea is that from the fact that people is the source of their intentional actions, we can attribute responsibility to them. The best way to understand it is with the famous Frankfurt cases.

Imagine that there's a scientific who implants a chip in my brain. He knows that I want to kill James, but to be sure the chip will activate if I stop in the last moment. So if I don't shoot, the chip will activate and I will shoot anyway. It results that I kill James, so the chip wasn't activated. The argument is that I couldn't do otherwise, but I'm responsible for my action, because I intentionally did it.

The majority of philosophers think that leeway freedom is very hard to defend, so they prefer compatibilism and a kind of source freedom.

Sapolsky's book, by the way, doesn't touch compatibilism. That's why so many philosophers think it's not a serious objection to moral responsibility.

As I said, Epicurus is usually considered a libertarian, so it can be interpreted that he was in favor of leeway freedom.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

2. What is your view of the word "agency?"

I share a very broad concept from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

#### Quote

In very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity. The philosophy of action provides us with a standard conception and a standard theory of action. The former construes action in terms of intentionality, the latter explains the intentionality of action in terms of causation by the agent's mental states and events.

So, I understand that an agent is a subject who can act intentionally. There's not a contradiction with Free Will Skepticism.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

3. Though it appears to be a scholium, what is your view of the passage "with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity and some by chance, and some are within our control..."?

I think that, as [TauPhi](#) sometimes recalls, there are aspects of the ancient thought that we can, and will never be able to, understand. We don't know exactly how Epicurus understood the debate and arguments on determinism and freedom. Possibly he thought it in terms of Fate (like in ancient tragedies). Fatalism is not the same that determinism and if he thought they were the same, I'd understand why he was so against it. (I doubt about this possibility because, supposedly, he knew very well Democritus' philosophy.)

In any case, my personal opinion on that passage of the Letter to Menoeceus, is that he's talking superficially (because is just a letter and it's about ethics).

He recognizes the distinction that it's present in other philosophers, including the Stoics: there are things in my control, and things beyond my control. Those beyond my control include necessity and chance (this one make sense with the introduction of the swerve).

I hope I answered clearly. Free will Skepticism can be a very sophisticated and interesting point of view, and I'm thankful that there's a thread on how epicureanism can be reconciled with it. I wish I can make a better contribution later.

## Post by “Don” of February 23, 2024 at 11:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Kalosyni I have not read Harris's book. On my list but not yet.

Hey [Don](#) - You started this latest iteration of the Determinism saga and then you never weighed in yourself!!! 😊

Sorry. Things came up. It's turned into a little of "Let the games begin!" It's on my agenda for this evening.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 12:54 PM

I also have one more follow-up question: how does believing that everything you do is predetermined enhance a person's happiness?

I am perfectly willing to think that for some people it might, because everyone does have different perspectives and pleasures and pains, and the same idea that some find offensive may be pleasing to others.

But I find it difficult to see how the positions being advocated for determinism would be of general usefulness even from a determinist point of view.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 23, 2024 at 1:48 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

how does believing that everything you do is predetermined enhance a person's happiness?

It's a belief about how the world is. It is what it is. Besides, Sapolsky believes, for example, that many people can feel liberated from regrets and guilts (I guess specially the belief that their circumstance it's their fault).

I think it can contribute to certain amount of individual serenity, and if more people agree with it, it can lead to a society more just. Imagine how happily can people live if the practical political, social and economic problems are solved in their roots instead of just blaming and punishing.

But, again, this is a metaphysical question. One can ask the same for this than for other questions: "how does believing that there isn't a God enhance a person's happiness?", "how does believing that the stars don't influence behavior enhance a person's happiness?", "how does believing that human beings are not special in the universe enhance a person's happiness?".

We have motives to investigate which metaphysical conclusion has the best arguments. The next part is to reasoning how that conclusion influence our ethical commitments. It can't go backwards (begin with ethical commitments and argue in favor of metaphysical conclusions, unless we want to conclude whatever people like).

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 3:09 PM**

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

The idea of Free Will Skepticism it's not that people don't make choices. The idea is that those choices are not independent of prior causes (in fact, that they are constrained totally, even if we don't see it).

I guess I would not call that “choice” but the illusion of choice. At the very least, it would seem a highly idiosyncratic usage, applying the term to behaviors that are “constrained totally.”

The same for "intentional agency" -- unless intentionality (itself a kind of choice?) is not totally constrained.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 3:45 PM**

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

I guess I would not call that “choice” but the illusion of choice.

Yes the linguistic leapfrogs being used by the professional determinists is a very big red flag to me.

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 3:50 PM**

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

But, again, this is a metaphysical question.

Following [TauPhi](#) , I would suggest that any "answers" to that question would, perforce, remain thoroughly speculative, even if intellectually interesting. Empiricism, always subject to evidentiary change (even Kuhnian paradigm shifts), cannot address such metaphysical questions.

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 4:13 PM**

I will go to dinner tonight (our weekly dinner out) with the (possibly erroneous) assumption that I will make a choice of what to eat – constrained, surely, by the menu, my wallet, my personal tastes and preferences of the moment, etc. – but, nevertheless what seems like a choice, considering all such factors. Whether those factors are rooted in determinism or indeterminism. If that is an illusion, it is a deeply embedded one (and very pervasive across centuries and different cultures of humanity – some survival function?). I will still **act as if** I am actually doing some intentional hedonic choice and avoidance decision-making.

Nor does it matter if I am a compatibilist in the sense described by Dennett. That makes more sense to me in terms of my day-to-day engagement with circumstantial reality – but if it’s incorrect, it’s incorrect.

I want to add that I do not think of “justice” in any metaphysical sense. If someone wants to torture children (to take a deliberately harsh example), I will act to prevent that – without considering their motivations, or even the practical Epicurean social compact to “neither harm

nor be harmed" (it does not matter that the child, or her parents, may not be signatory to that compact). In that sense, whilst I affirm the Epicurean idea of social justice, I am – at bottom – more of a moral non-cognitivist (let's say that Epicurean philosophy here might provide some cognitive "fencing" around that).

Since I obviously have been interested in this discussion, thank you [Onenski](#) for bringing it to us.

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## Post by "DavidN" of February 23, 2024 at 4:27 PM

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Those who defend that every event has prior causes are **determinists**.

1. I'd like to suggest a question: why the burden of proof is on the side of skeptics of free will and not the other way.

4. [DavidN](#), your reconstructions are straw-man fallacies. The Victimhood argument particularly, besides being more ironic than descriptive, goes into revictimization. Addictions, for example, are public health problems, not a mere matter of choice. The chapter dedicated to Quantum Mechanics in *Determined* I think is very reasonable. Do you think was simplistic?

5. I highly recommend to read Sapolsky's *Behave*, even more than *Determined* in order to understand his point. Sapolsky offers a reconstruction of the causes of behaviour. The evidence he finds obviously is not conclusive, but he adds to the debate the picture some people need to see how strongly, using [Pacatus](#) terms, our decisions are constrained.

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The fact that Causes exist does not necessitate determinism, this is a False Dichotomy fallacy. A cause could lead to multiple outcomes and in reverse any given event can have multiple causes, as Epicurus already theorizes. In reality A does not necessitate B. This is one of the reasons root cause analysis is difficult and most people are not successful at it.

The reason determinism requires proof rather than the other way around, at least on this thread, is because the question at hand is not whether or not the universe is deterministic but is epicureanism deterministic or even compatible with determinism. Which is Not part of my

argument you addressed. And because I loath the practice of applying theoretical science outside of it's intended field. When Quantum gravity becomes hard science Sapolsky can republish his book and not be a jerk in my eyes.

As for Sapolsky's **science**, his **version** of quantum mechanics requires that we eliminate singularities, alter the currently accepted notion of the big bang and accept new theories in there place, of quantum gravity, and of multiple quantum universes that removes variables rather than adding variables. In all of this I find his math to be at the very least overly convenient if not simplistic. Like Planck's Blackbody, instead of dealing with the variables he simply finds ways to eliminate them. Which is what I had suspected in my previous comment before even diving into his work.

Back to the matter at hand, Epicurus. I don't believe hard determinism can be reconciled with Epicureanism, but to be fair lets say it can. You would need to tackle the swerve, because as long as the swerve exists a cause or set of causes can lead to a number of effects or none at all, thus determinism cannot exist. Without the swerve you effectively render epicurean physics **Democritean**. You would then have to go through all the material and reconcile every instance were choice is required, because concept of choice would require a non-deterministic universe. In deterministic terms choice simply becomes effect. Effectively rendering the philosophy pointless, IMHO.

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

The idea of Free Will Skepticism it's not that people don't make choices. The idea is that those choices are not independent of prior causes (in fact, that they are constrained totally, even if we don't see it). People will keep making choices, the difference will be how independent they think they are.

Two fallacies here, one [Persuasive definition](#), choice is improperly used or defined here. If a choice is completely constrained, as your trying to prove, it's not a choice it becomes effect following cause. Secondly [affirming the consequent](#) fallacy, again just because B does not mean A. Free will is choice, prior cause does not negate choice but informs choice, it is the very reason for choice. In fact without prior cause what choice would we have, there would be nothing to choose. If your hung up on the word free lets examine freedom. Some people think freedom can only exist in a vacuum, but in reality freedom cannot exist in a vacuum, it is a concept devoid of meaning in a vacuum. Freedom can only have meaning in the face of tyranny, choice can only have meaning when cause and effect exist. Prior causes create our environment, the situation, the consequences, that inform, but do not necessitate our actions. The fact that my choice could be for any hundreds of reasons, is essential to free will not the antecedent of it.

Your argument also makes choice into [machina](#) by turning it into simple cause and effect. For this to be true machina and sentience must be closer than they actually are in reality. Which I find to be even more of an oversimplification on the part of determinists in behavior than in

physics. Having a background in AI I can assure you this is not the case. It makes my blood boil every time someone compares the glorified word processors that are the current generation of large language transformer modules to true AI. They aren't even good language models yet. Yet even some scientists make the mistake of granting them the mantle of sentience. This simply isn't the case even though they have the capacity to learn they don't have the capacity to deviate from they're programming, only the ability to add to there library. This is the crux of the argument. Machina have to be right, even if its only within there limited understanding of what that is. It cannot deviate from that, any deviation is in error. I on the other hand, have on occasion, chosen to be wrong, just to be a dick rather than in error. I am sentient, I have that choice, I get to sit in jail for a nite just to feel free. You could say that I have some internal drive towards that outcome created by some prior cause, but this does not necessitate the outcome. In fact prior cause gives me a greater range of outcomes not less, thus where you see constraint I see tools of expression, of freedom. In that instance I know and understand what I'm doing, I have the choice to do the right thing and not be a dick, to simply walk away, an easier choice to be honest. I know and understand that in the moment, but because I have the freedom to choose in that instance I decide to take the road less traveled. A decision, a choice.

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## Post by “DavidN” of February 23, 2024 at 4:55 PM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

how does believing that everything you do is predetermined enhance a person's happiness?

It's a belief about how the world is. It is what it is. Besides, Sapolsky believes, for example, that many people can feel liberated from regrets and guilts (I guess specially the belief that their circumstance it's their fault).

I find this view to simply be escapism, a desire to no longer be responsible for ones own life, which to me strips life of all it's meaning.

[Quote from Onenski](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

how does believing that everything you do is predetermined enhance a person's happiness?

I think it can contribute to certain amount of individual serenity, and if more people agree with it, it can lead to a society more just. Imagine how happily can people live if the practical political, social and economic problems are solved in their roots instead of just blaming and punishing.

Being that I am professionally trained in root cause analysis I can tell you that the first rule is that if you get the root cause wrong all attempts to fix the problem will fail at best and more likely spider out into new problems confusing the original issue.

So onto root cause, in your deterministic world were is root cause. If there is never any choice only a endless stream of cause and effect to follow back infinitum, can there even be root cause? There can be no guilt because there can be no choice, no error, only necessity. There is infact nothing in this world to fix. Criminals will be criminals without any choice because of prior cause. Authorities will continue to punish criminals because the criminal behavior is a prior cause. etc Ad infinitum.

However when we add in choice, we have a conceptual break in the chain of cause and effect. To which we can contribute root cause and into which we can insert change.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 5:08 PM

[Quote from DavidN](#)

Secondly affirming the consequent fallacy, again just because B does not mean A.

An oldy but goody:

1. If all swans are white, only white swans are observed;
2. Only white swans are observed;
3. Therefore, all swans are white.

—Until black swans were discovered in Australia. 🙄

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 23, 2024 at 5:25 PM

Hi, [Pacatus](#), thanks for comment.

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

Following TauPhi , I would suggest that any "answers" to that question would, perforce, remain thoroughly speculative, even if intellectually interesting.

That's correct, it's a speculative issue. However, behind our practical life there are a bunch of metaphysical assumptions: there are people who, for example, believe in God and their behaviours and beliefs take certain direction. The same happen with belief in free will.

I hope it's evident that I don't pretend to have the last word, and of course I don't intend to change the viewpoints of anybody. I just think that I could add something to this thread with my understanding of this debate in order to make it richer. 😊

---

## Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 5:31 PM

### [Quote from DavidN](#)

I don't believe hard determinism can be reconciled with Epicureanism, but to be fair lets say it can. You would need to tackle the swerve, because as long as the swerve exists a cause or set of causes can lead to a number of effects or none at all, thus determinism cannot exist. Without the swerve you effectively render epicurean physics Democritean.

The Epicurean swerve is an event in an otherwise causal universe (and one in which, as you pointed out, there can be multiple causes for any identifiable effect, and multiple effects from any identifiable cause). Therefore, it seems to me, it does not entail a universe of total indeterminism either.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 5:32 PM

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

I hope it's evident that I don't pretend to have the last word, and of course I don't intend to change the viewpoints of anybody. I just think that I could add something to this thread with my understanding of this debate in order to make it richer. 😊

Totally! 😊

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2024 at 5:38 PM**

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

The same happen with belief in free will.

The word “belief” has become increasingly suspect for me over the years. If someone means what appears to me to be the case, or makes sense, based on my experience and observation and study, then fine (emphasis on “appears”). But that is all I will ever mean by it.

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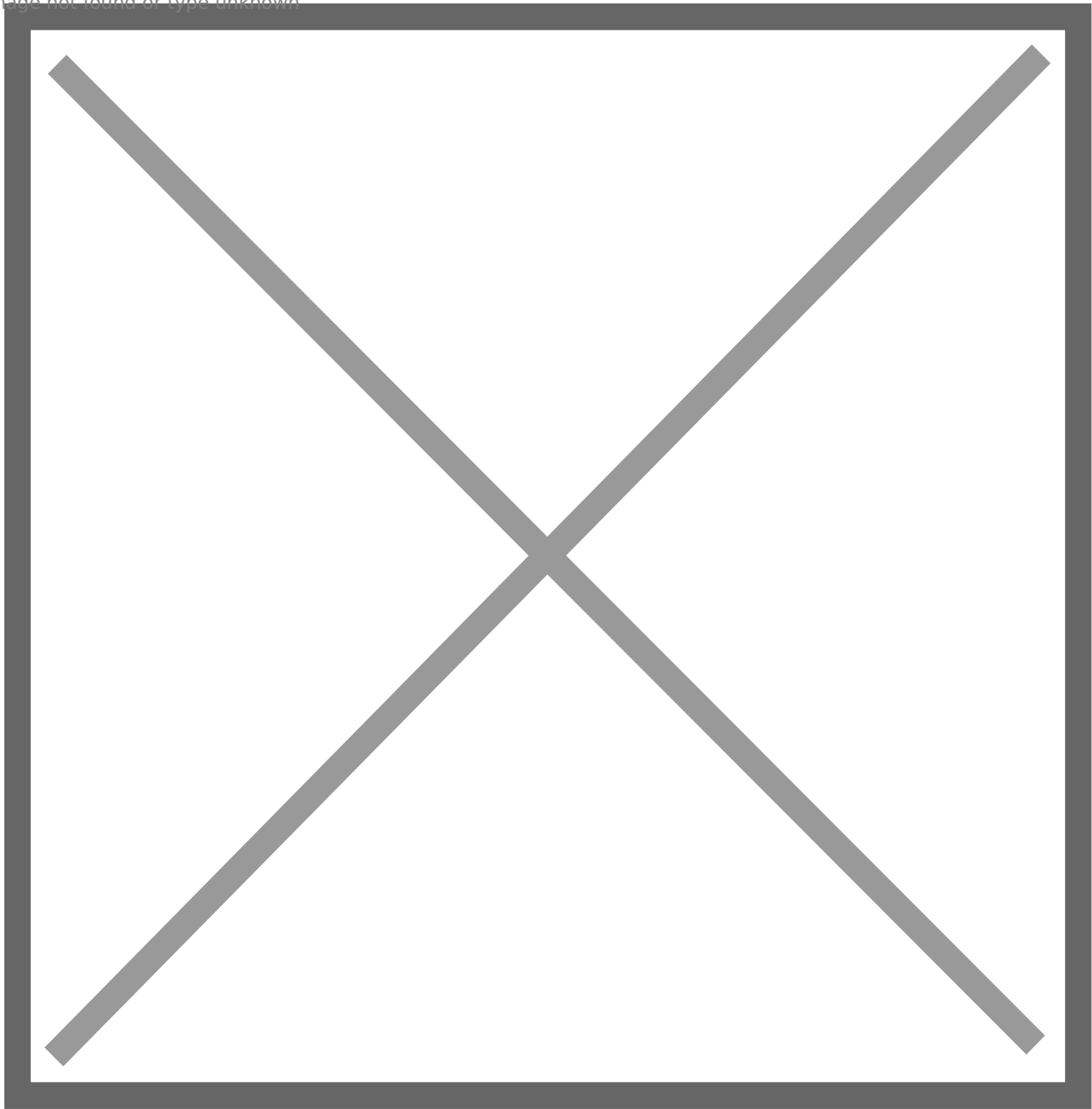
### **Post by “Kalosyni” of February 23, 2024 at 5:57 PM**

I just found this, which brings up more ideas (have not fully read it yet, plus I am behind on reading the newest posts above).

### **Author Kevin J. Mitchell makes a neuroscientific case against determinism**

And a review of his book "Free Agents: How Evolution Gave Us Free Will"

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[Did evolution give us free will?](#)

Author Kevin J. Mitchell makes a neuroscientific case against determinism.  
reason.com

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of February 23, 2024 at 6:00 PM**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

And this:

## Robert Sapolsky vs Kevin Mitchell: The Biology of Free Will | Philosophical Trials #15

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=V9Y1Q8vhX5Y>

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### Post by "Onenski" of February 23, 2024 at 6:09 PM

Hi, [DavidN](#). Thanks for taking the time to comment.

#### [Quote from DavidN](#)

The fact that Causes exist does not necessitate determinism, this is a False Dichotomy fallacy. A cause could lead to multiple outcomes and in reverse any given event can have multiple causes, as Epicurus already theorizes. In reality A does not necessitate B.

I gave the characterisation of determinist. They believe that the common assumption that "every event in the universe is caused by prior events" is true and the belief in free will is false. Determinism is false if there is at least one event that wasn't caused by any prior event: an uncaused cause. The majority of philosophers prefer to admit that although determinism can be true, free will it's compatible with it.

Metaphysical determinism is independent of epistemological determinism (the idea that we can predict deterministically any o some events). Epistemological determinism is, effectively falsified thanks to chaos theory. Sapolsky agrees with it.

#### [Quote from DavidN](#)

The reason determinism requires proof rather than the other way around, atleast on this thread, is because the question at hand is not whether or not the universe is deterministic but is epicureanism deterministic or even compatible with determinism.

Conceded.

#### Quote

As for Sapolsky's **science**, his **version** of quantum mechanics requires that we eliminate singularities, alter the currently accepted notion of the big bang and accept

new theories in there place, of quantum gravity, and of multiple quantum universes that removes variables rather than adding variables. In all of this I find his math to be at the very least overly convenient if not simplistic. Like Planck's Blackbody, instead of dealing with the variables he simply finds ways to eliminate them. Which is what I had suspected in my previous comment before even diving into his work.

Did you read the chapter of the book or you're speculating about he implications of his determinism? He doesn't talk about any of those things.

#### [Quote from DavidN](#)

Back to the matter at hand, Epicurus. I don't believe hard determinism can be reconciled with Epicureanism, but to be fair lets say it can. You would need to tackle the swerve, because as long as the swerve exists a cause or set of causes can lead to a number of effects or none at all, thus determinism cannot exist. Without the swerve you effectively render epicurean physics Democritean. You would then have to go through all the material and reconcile every instance were choice is required, because concept of choice would require a non-deterministic universe. In deterministic terms choice simply becomes effect. Effectively rendering the philosophy pointless, IMHO.

In strict sense, you're right. I used a flexible notion of reconciliation. My opinion is that the swerve has only one function in epicurean theory: sustaining free will. But it's not clear if it can be defended independently of the reason of defend that we feel we are free. In the case of the atoms, we have the inferences by analogy. How he arrives to the swerve and which phenomena help to explain besides our feeling?

I think the scientific spirit, the hedonism and the materialism can be reconciled with Free Will Skepticism.

#### [Quote from DavidN](#)

Two fallacies here, one Persuasive definition, choice is improperly used or defined here. If a choice is completely constrained, as your trying to prove, it's not a choice it becomes effect following cause.

The notion of agency, as I said up, is consistent with determinism. An agent can choose intentionally in a deterministic scenario without contradiction. If choice requires necessarily free will (leeway freedom), then you're right and, probably, I'm not using the language competently.

I'd agree with the fact that choices are events following causes, why not? Human beings are natural beings like other animals and other living beings.

I take the oppportuniy to ask you something. In your point of view, who has free will and where is its origin? Do non-human animals, or other beings, have free will? Can they be morally

responsible?

I didn't understand the last paragraph, I'm sorry.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 23, 2024 at 6:24 PM

### [Quote from DavidN](#)

Being that I am professionally trained in root cause analysis I can tell you that the first rule is that if you get the root cause wrong all attempts to fix the problem will fail at best and more likely spider out into new problems confusing the original issue.

You're right. We can't know all the prior causes nor the future event caused by them. But we can do the best we can. Think about addictions. We don't have complete information of its causes, but there are information that psychology, neurochemistry, social work, and so on, that can be used to design a better strategy and public policies to help people in addiction, and to reduce new cases. That sounds like a better strategy than trying to deter people with higher sentences or blaming people for their choices ("choice" taking in the source freedom/agency sense).

One can do that without discarding free will (I hope more governments do it), but it makes so more sense from Free Will Skepticism.

Again, David, thanks for taking the time to comment.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2024 at 7:21 PM

I think it's time for an Administrative comment targeted mainly at those who might lurk and be reading this thread without knowing anything about the major participants.

Those who know Onenski know that he is a highly valued participant of long standing who has piled up tremendous amounts of credibility points for his general support and interest in Epicurean philosophy over many months, even years. He is a regular in our meetings and he is always constructive and helpful.

Onenski's posts in favor of determinism certainly contradict a key aspect of Epicurean philosophy, and a long series of pro-determinist arguments would violate our forum policies, as

we are not here to invite in people who are dedicated to anti-Epicurean positions. We don't have to all agree on every issue, but we do need to respect that this is a pro-Epicurean forum, and those who conclude that their beliefs require them to be a constant thorn in the side of those who support Epicurus will eventually be shown the door. More to the point, there are many "outsiders" who - if they came into the forum and pursued determinist arguments strongly - would have their posting privileges restricted or removed.

We just don't have the time to patronize the many Stoics and other anti-Epicureans who are determinists and would be happy to monopolize our time. We also don't need to expose our sincere lurkers and newer participants to the demoralizing aspects of determinism any more than is necessary.

However this is a topic that will never go away, and people who study Epicurus will be regularly confronted by it, just as was Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans. It's important for people to have at least a basic understanding of the arguments and to have a basic understanding of where Epicurus stood on the issue, and that's why this thread is continuing and why the posters here aren't violating the letter or the spirit of our forum rules.

We should thank Onenski and others for their respectful postings on this topic, as the thread is becoming an excellent resource for the future.

Since Epicurus strongly opposed determinism, and held that praise and blame can be attached to actions regardless of what the determinists argue, we can simply remind anyone who might be tempted by the leeway we offer to established members that we will happily wield the ban hammer when necessary for the protection of the purposes of the forum.

No one at this point is anywhere near needing this warning, but given that the related issues of determinism and skepticism have proven in the past to be two of the best indicators of the division between those who stay with Epicurean philosophy and those who are just "passing through" on their way somewhere else, this can serve as a marker to assist in future moderating decisions.

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## Post by "Godfrey" of February 23, 2024 at 7:32 PM

[Kalosyni](#) thanks for your post #51! I've had both of those guy's books on my list, but this may save me from reading them 😁 Not my preferred method of delving into a subject, but in this case, for me, it seems to be just right.

So much to read, so little time....

Carry on.

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## Post by “DavidN” of February 23, 2024 at 8:09 PM

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

I take the opportunity to ask you something. In your point of view, who has free will and where is its origin? Do non-human animals, or other beings, have free will? Can they be morally responsible?

I didn't understand the last paragraph, I'm sorry.

Thanks for asking this question, I've actually spent some time debating and contemplating this topic, I even went so far as to write to one of my favorite authors [David Brin](#) who wrote a series based around this question and who is an advocate of animal rights. In my opinion it is a spectrum of intelligence leading to sentience, with the cutoff being defined quite correctly by Epicurus as the covenant to not harm one another. And as such I believe he correctly reached the conclusion that those creatures and people who cannot or will not abide by this covenant are outside of justice and morality. As Pacatus stated earlier about harming a child, such an act would place you outside the realm of justice and morality as you are unable to abide by the covenant and I don't believe Pacatus would be in violation of epicurean justice or morality in acting to stop such an event.

As to who has free will, as I said earlier free will would be measured by an entities capacity to recognize and conceptually break from cause and effect, and it's capacity to act contrary to it's own nature. As to its origin I could only speculate. I know when I was a younger philosopher I was quite enamored with the [Holonomic Brain Theory](#), If you accept conventional theories of the indeterminates in wave theory then the Holonomic brain allows for indeterminates in its function, the level of complexity of which could explain free will. But again I'll fully admit to this being entirely speculative.

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## Post by “DavidN” of February 23, 2024 at 8:13 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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Display More

I agree with Cassius I definitely appreciate Onenski and his questions and participation, even if I don't share his opinion, without it I wouldn't be able to delve so deeply into my own.

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## Post by “Don” of February 24, 2024 at 12:45 AM

I noticed way back on post #34, [Cassius](#) called me out for re-initiating this thread and then stepping back, grabbing popcorn, and watching it all unfold. In deference to him, I feel I should weigh in BUT I have greatly enjoyed the erudite and in-depth discussion taking place!! You all have \*obviously\* given this topic a great deal of thought. And I \*fully\* concur and applaud [Cassius's](#) "administrative note" to keep everything in context. My nudge just.. yesterday?...way back on post @20 has generated...I'd even say "caused" 😊 ... some wonderful and thought-provoking posts and far exceeded what I had anticipated. Thank you all!

And, thank you to [Kalosyni](#) for posting the info about Kevin J. Mitchell. I was completely unaware of him, but I'll have to put his book Free Agents on my list now!

I'm afraid my contribution is going to be woefully inadequate to this conversation, but I'll lay my cards on the table...first general, then specifically Epicurean...

There is nothing that doesn't have a cause. There is no uncaused caused or an effect that comes into being *sui generis* with no antecedent cause. That just seems simple physical reality to me. However, everything has numerous - if not infinite - causes. All those lines of causation collide and contribute to any physical, material phenomenon... from the toppling of a particular tree in a particular forest to the decisions I make. I like the words used earlier (by [Pacatus](#) ?) that the "choices" (and I'll use "scare quotes" for now) we make are *constrained choices*. Theoretically, I have an infinite or at least innumerable options to choose from at any given moment. As I write this, I could decide:

- just to randomly punch the keys and produce gibberish
- or to stop typing and to not hit send
- or to throw my laptop across the room
- or to attempt to chew the corner off my screen or...

but I feel I am a rational being with something to relate to my Epicurean friends on the forum, and so I continue to type and relay my thoughts. My choices are, in practice, not infinite or innumerable but constrained to a finite selection of realistic choices I could be predicted to take. Does that make them "determined"? Can they be predicted? Maybe, within a statistical margin of error...but does that mean they're determined? I guess it depends on your definition of "determined."

I feel there was discussion on the difference between deterministic and fatalistic. I think that remains significant. Even Sapolsky allows for change...although I admit I'm not sure I followed his argument. Change seems to go against his other parts of his argument. If by determined, we mean causes with effects, that's true to some extent. If by fated, we mean the outcome could have been no other than it was... that one I have problems with... but I can't necessarily articulate (at this point) why.

Take the view from the other end of my choices or the effects... looking back over my own life and those of my relatives and ancestors, I can see the effects of individual choices on the future lives of myself and those others. But those past decisions, even now, don't feel determined. Some feel random. But others feel like there was a "decision" that was weighed and made. Again, causes leading to effects becoming causes of future events leading to... you get the idea.



So... that all didn't get us anywhere... "Thanks, Don."

But I also promised some Epicurean thoughts...

We've seen Epicurus's message to Menoikeus: "Remember that what will be is not completely within our control nor completely outside our control, so that we will not completely expect it to happen nor be completely disappointed if it does not happen." (127, Saint-Andre) This, to me, recognizes the element of indeterminacy of our lives. Somethings are going to happen to us that we have no control over; and somethings will not happen for us regardless of whether want it or not.

We also read in verses 134-135 about Fate not being a god because Fate does things haphazardly and randomly. Epicurus also clearly states that we can assign praise and blame to people's actions, directly opposite of the direction Sapolsky wants to go. BUT Sapolsky and Epicurus both agree that bad actors - people who do things against the social contract - need to be removed from society for the good of the other members of society. Sapolsky just thinks there shouldn't be blame assigned to the actions.

The character of Torquatus in *On Ends* also has a pertinent quote (emphasis added): "**In a free hour**, when **our power of choice** is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to **this principle of selection**: he **rejects** pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures (i.e., chooses) pains to avoid worse pains." The Epicurean position is clearly that we are not constrained in our ability to make choices... but it seems to me that those choices are predicated on the character of the individual, the taking into account the future effects of those choices which will, in turn, be the \*causes\* of those future pleasures or pains. The choices we make are \*still\* constrained by

taking into account what we desire weighed against the future states those choices will engender.

I've prattled on long enough for now... Satisfied, [Cassius](#) 😄

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### Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2024 at 6:06 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I've prattled on long enough for now... Satisfied, Cassius 😄

Yes, very satisfied, thank you!

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### Post by “Don” of February 24, 2024 at 12:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

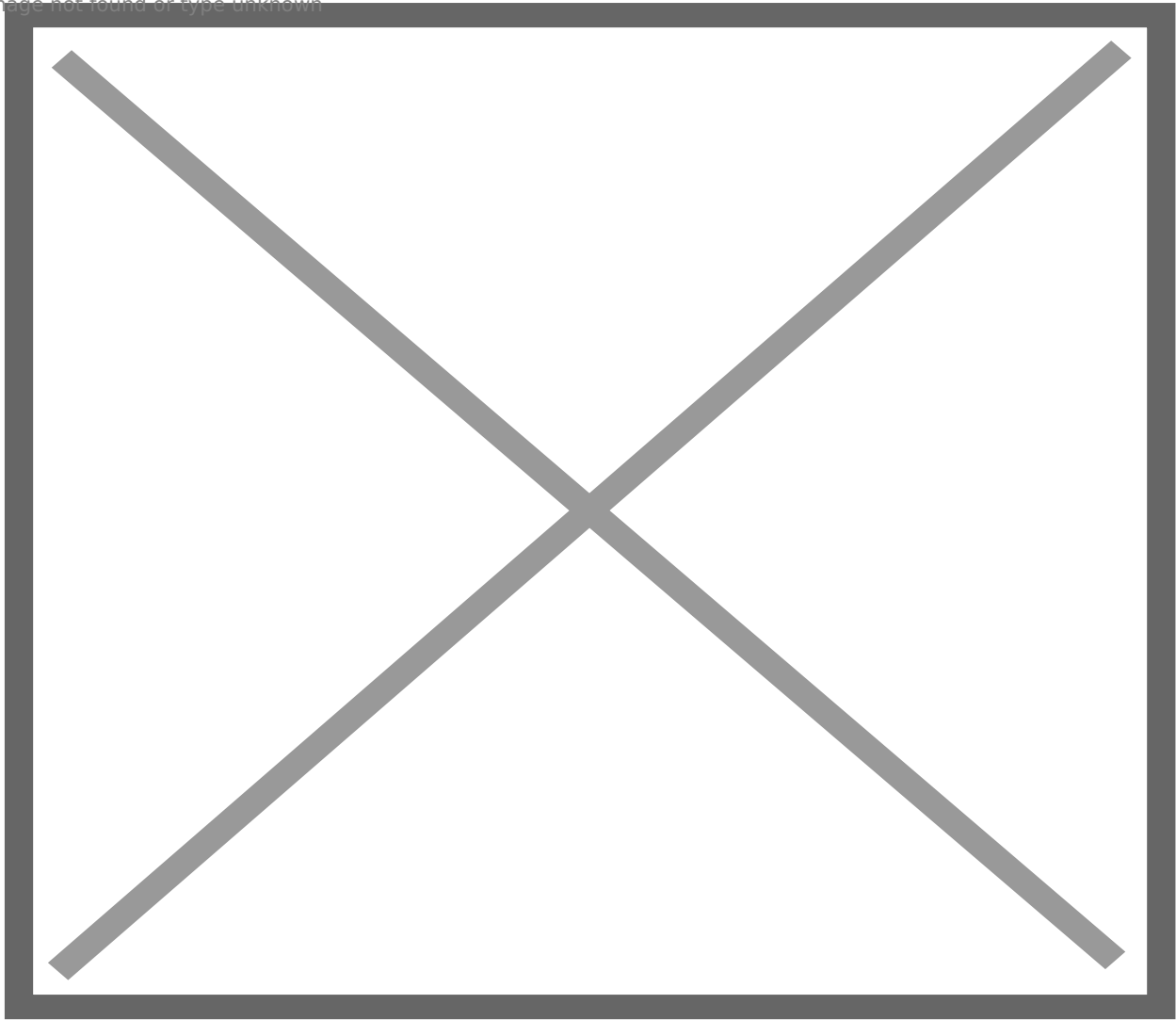
I've prattled on long enough for now... Satisfied, Cassius 😄

Yes, very satisfied, thank you!

I do hope my good-natured invocation of your name in my post came across that way 😊  
Thanks for the nudge!

I've been looking around about Kevin J Mitchell and found this review of his book with links to blog posts of his reacting to Sapolsky:

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[Book review – Free Agents: How Evolution Gave Us Free Will](#)

A tightly argued and compelling case in favour of free will, Free Agents provides thought-provoking ideas that are relevant far beyond this debate.

[inquisitivebiologist.com](http://inquisitivebiologist.com)

Mitchell's position seems very interesting and possibly fruitful. Nothing more from me at the moment, but posting here to share.

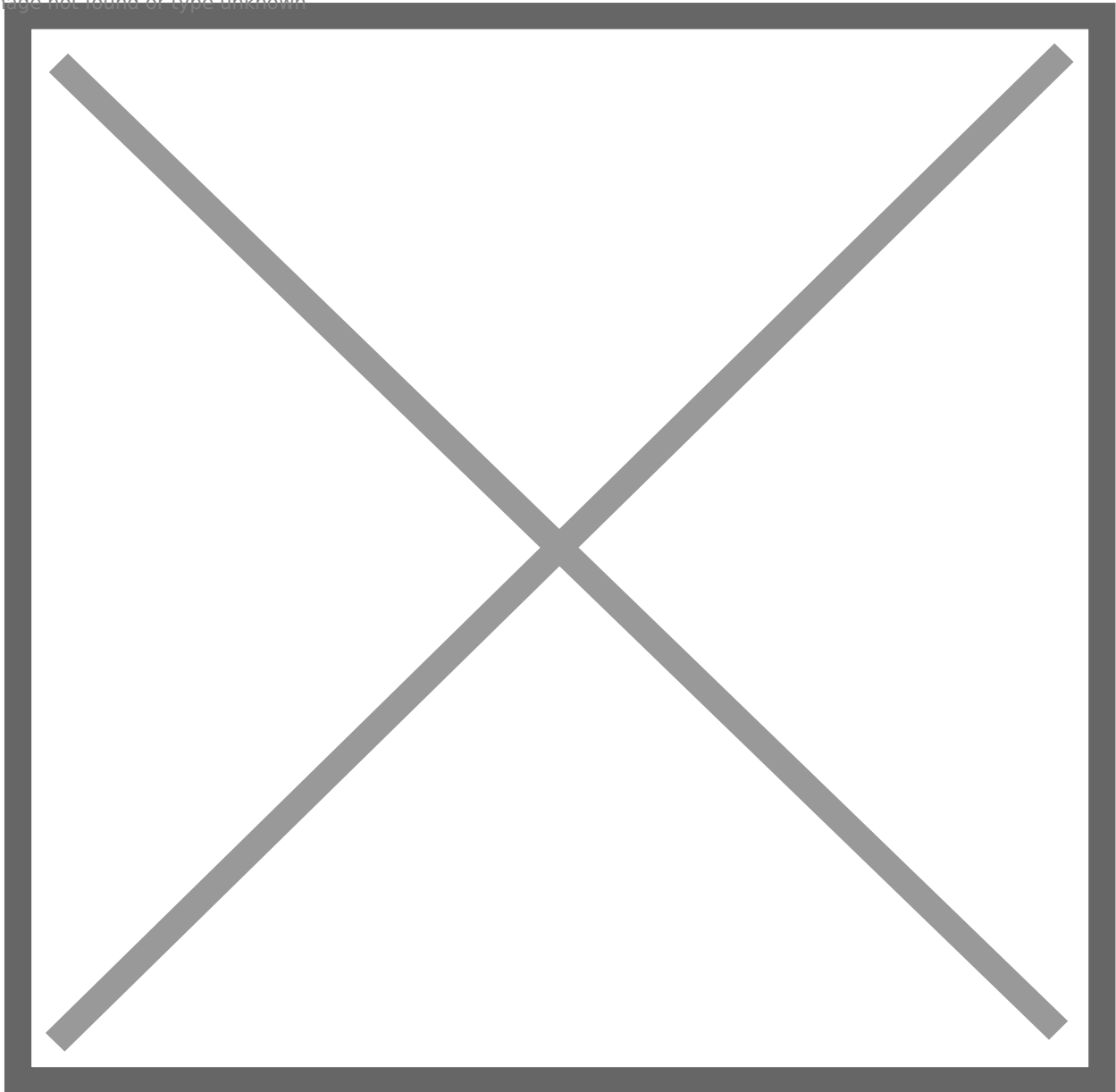
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**Post by “Don” of February 24, 2024 at 1:08 PM**

I'm reading Mitchell's blog.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

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### [Undetermined - a response to Robert Sapolsky. Part 1 - a tale of two neuroscientists](#)

Free will is in the air. Among neuroscientists at least, the question of whether we are in control of our actions has been attracting renewe...

[www.wiringthebrain.com](http://www.wiringthebrain.com)

I was originally attracted to Dennett's compatibilism stance, because I wanted to keep my free will but was enamored of the scientific (read: deterministic) arguments. However, that stance seems less tenable now to me. It's still a deterministic wolf in free will clothes.

Mitchell, on the other hand, seems just as hard-nosed scientifically as Sapolsky and Dennett but appears at first blush to provide a mechanism for free will, or more accurately maybe free agency. That line, which I am still very much exploring, seems more "compatible" 😊 with

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

Epicurus' position.

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### Post by "Cassius" of February 24, 2024 at 2:04 PM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

It's still a deterministic wolf in free will clothes.

I've not studied Dennett closely but something that sounds like "you don't really have it but you think you do" cannot be particularly satisfying.

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### Post by "Cassius" of February 24, 2024 at 2:13 PM

I've got limited time to pursue this at the moment but when I can I will also review David Sedley's "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism." In the meantime I highly recommend this for those digging into the issue.

File

#### [Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"](#)



1983 Paper which is the one of the best treatments of Epicurus' view of the Free Will / Agency / Determinism issue available.



Cassius

June 3, 2020 at 8:40 AM

Also, in my own mind I combine Sedley's interpretations with those of AA Long in his "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism" which puts forth an explanation I find convincing as to why "the swerve" does not swallow up and invalidate the entire rest of the physics. By providing

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

how small is the degree of the swerve you have a theory that allows both for the swerve of the atom giving rise to "choice" while also allowing the rest of the universe to proceed in a uniformly mechanistic way.

To me the two positions staked out by Sedley and Long go hand in hand to allow consistency in the theory.

File

### [Long: "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism"](#)



Long: "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism"



Cassius

June 28, 2019 at 8:52 AM

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### Post by "Pacatus" of February 24, 2024 at 3:41 PM

From the review cited by [Kalosyni](#) in post #50:

"To be clear, Mitchell does not believe our choices are absolutely free from any prior causes. We are all constrained by our genes, our histories, our psychological traits, and our developed characters. Instead of radical metaphysical freedom, Mitchell persuasively develops a more modest conception of free will that entails the evolved ability to make real choices in the service of our goals—that is, to act for our own reasons."

Thus, Mitchell is not advocating for so-called "libertarian free will."

From the review cited by [Don](#) in post #60:

"Organisms are not passively driven by outside signals, they interpret them, they are *"meeting the world halfway, as an active partner in a dance that lasts a lifetime"* (p. 217). This is the kind of academic poetry that blows my mind." **Mine too!** 😄

"Ultimately, he thinks the question of free will is a red herring and takes a pragmatic view: *'If free will is the capacity for conscious, rational control of our actions, then I am happy in saying we have it'* ... Rather than all-or-none, we have degrees of freedom, and not all people are equal in that regard."

Thus, we can recognize mitigating circumstances with regard to personal and ethical responsibility -- without denying responsibility altogether.

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## Post by "Don" of February 24, 2024 at 3:56 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

the swerve of the atom giving rise to "choice"

I'll have to read your Sedley and Long papers again, but I don't see how the "swerve" - by definition a random event if I understand - can lead to a macro level volitional "choice" exercised by an free agent on the individual level.

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## Post by "Cassius" of February 24, 2024 at 4:48 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

but I don't see how the "swerve" - by definition a random event if I understand - can lead to a macro level volitional "choice" exercised by an free agent on the individual level.

You won't find a detailed explanation in those papers either, any more than Epicurus' atomism allowed him to be a nuclear physicist. As I gather the situation, the swerve operates on determinism in the same way that atomism operates on religion and "[he who says that nothing can be known knows nothing](#)" operates on skepticism. These positions provide a plausible perspective on specific challenges so we can live our lives productively while never knowing a complete "explanation" of all the mechanisms involved in any of them.

The religionists and the radical skeptics and the hard determinists don't have the evidence to establish their conclusions with certainty either, but they happily insist on superficially

persuasive arguments which have real impact on real people who swallow them. And it appears that Epicurus held that it's not valid to retreat into "agnosticism" on any of these. Doubt and uncertainty on basic questions of life don't lead to happy living, they lead to passivism and nihilism and other unpleasanties.

If you adopt those views (religion/skepticism/determinism) then you go through life under the sway of people who generally use those religious / skeptical / determinist viewpoints to promote specific social conclusions.

At the end of your life you're dead and no more aware of whether the religionists / skeptics / determinists were right than when you started, but you have accepted viewpoints of others which are not what you yourself could validate through your own experience. You've lived your life (if you lived it at all) in practice without gods telling you what to do, in fact acting as if knowledge is possible, and in fact as if you had choices about the decisions you made. But all the while, if you accepted their claims, you lived under the sway of people who told you that your practical perspectives were unreal.

It seems to me that Epicurus was saying that the best course is just to reject the pretensions of religion, skepticism, and determinism in the first place, and live with the faculties that Nature gave you.

The burden of proof on the issues is not on Epicureans, who are living as nature provided using the faculties nature provided. The burden of proof is on the religionists, skeptics, and determinists, and Epicurus' arguments provide real-world observations that contradict their assertions. Nothing comes from nothing - the supernatural gods are refuted. Those who allege nothing can be known contradict themselves - skepticism is refuted. You can cite the swerve or simply say that it is not necessary to "live with necessity" because at the very least we can exit life when it ceases to please us - determinism is refuted. Each issue comes down to having confidence in the faculties that nature gave us vs imagining that there are "logical" proofs that can invalidate our practical experience. Epicurus says to go with practical experience.

Letter to Pythocles:

First of all then we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky, whether they are dealt with in connection with other doctrines or independently, than peace of mind and a sure confidence, *just as in all other branches of study.*

[86] *We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account*

of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

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### **Post by “DavidN” of February 24, 2024 at 4:55 PM**

Free will is still on the table depending on how you interpret it. Some, only Some, view it in the terms of an absolute. Which in my previous statements I deny in terms, as simply bad logic. If you take it at it's definition without bias it is simply "the ability to choose between different possible courses of action unimpeded." Not the actions itself nor the number or quality of choices to be made. What then are impediments to choice. Neurological impairment perhaps. Ignorance only decreases the number and quality of our choices, experience and genetics informs them or may alter the number of choices see previous category. Prudence and reason likewise need only inform not impede. The physical world only limits action, changes the quality of outcomes and thus informs our choice, but does not necessarily limit them. So what actually stops us if anything from making a choice at all. If you take for instance the lucid dreamer, who's environment is entirely of his own making and who's limits are that of his imagination, what are his impediments. What actually impedes the mechanism of turning thought to action, or even thought into another string of thoughts. When making a choice are we even then confronted with choices to consider about the choice. Whether to be bold or cautious, prudent or carefree. Though these choices may seem autonomic at times, dictated by ones character, do we not on occasion act out of character or even develop and change in manner and taste. Are these changes in character truly forced upon us or are they even then choices to be made.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2024 at 5:06 PM**

Boy this thread is extremely helpful for many reasons. Thinking about the David Sedley article equating Epicurus' attitude on Skepticism and Determinism leads to an obvious conclusion --- there was at least an "Unholy Trinity" of ideas that were anathema to Epicurus in the form of Idealism / Skepticism / Determinism. That leaves the question of whether supernatural religion falls with idealism, or whether it would be best to shift the literary analogy and consider supernatural religion, idealism, skepticism, and determinism to be the "Four Horsemen."

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### **Post by “DavidN” of February 24, 2024 at 5:21 PM**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

I'd say it's a four horseman scenario, the power of supernatural religion attempts to assert on people goes well beyond idealism. We could dedicate an entirely new thread to list the ways religion attempts to hold power over peoples lives. Of the four I would say, as I'm sure most if not all epicureans before us would agree, that religion is by far the more dangerous. Unless this warrants giving religion a category of its own.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 24, 2024 at 7:34 PM

I guess the best role I can have is to be a healthy critic of arguments in this debate. Instead of being a defender of Free Will Skepticism.

[Pacatus](#), Mitchell is a libertarian. In philosophical community, there are just a few libertarians just like there are a few free will skeptics (compatibilism is the established position for majority). Contemporary libertarians don't say that everytime we take decisions that event is an uncaused cause. Sophisticated libertarians think that it's enough to affirm that sometimes human beings make free choices (for example, in very important moments in your life, or for others when you are in the best circumstances, so that you take the more informed and rational choice).

So far as I know, Mitchell thinks that the brain can be modeled as a quantum computer that evolved to take choices the best as possible, evaluating complex information of environment. The best way this can be done, for him, it's by developing free will (taken in the leeway sense).

If I'm wrong in this interpretation, then Mitchell would be a compatibilist. I suggest to discuss how the Epicurean notion of Free Will should be understood (as a libertarian or as a compatibilist account). For compatibilist, determinism and free will are compatible. I guess that may be in contradiction with the common passages on the topic.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

By providing how small is the degree of the swerve you have a theory that allows both for the swerve of the atom giving rise to "choice" while also allowing the rest of the universe to proceed in a uniformly mechanistic way.

( [Cassius](#), surely your interpretation is stronger than what I'm going to critic.)

This fragment imply an *ad hoc* explanation (that is, a very specific solution to explain a phenomenon, but without more general application in the theory). If the swerve only explains free will but doesn't have any other consequence, then it's *ad hoc*.

And the critic can be worse, there could be a vicious circle.

1. The swerve explains free will.
2. Free Will is the only reason for arguing in favor of the existence of the swerve.

If this is true, neither of them have a real basis. I'm sure this is not what you mean, but I write this to nudge you, so that we can develop a better argument.

I'd like to add this:

So far as I understand, the swerve is a mechanism to introduce indeterminism to the world. By definition is an uncaused cause (a slightly deviance from the direction the atoms have, that deviance is uncaused by any prior event). If the swerve is not indeterministic, then Epicurean position becomes a compatibilism (because the world would be deterministic and there would be free will, just like Epicurus affirms).

If the indeterminism stays in the level of the microscopic, it would be useless to explain free choices of the agents. Indeterminism should extend to macroscopic events. And for not being an *ad hoc* explanation, we need more instances of free (random) events.

I hope this comment can be useful to develop and strength your ideas. 😊

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### **Post by “Bryan” of February 24, 2024 at 7:35 PM**

I am almost totally ignorant of modern ideas about determinism. I experience having free will and I am not sympathetic to arguments that are counter to repeated experience. It is not a matter of logic but simple immediate proof.

There is, as we know, also the fact that atoms would never have been able to make contact with each other without an uncaused swerve - in a void, heavy atoms are not able to catch up to lighter ones and and therefore unable to cause a collision.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of February 24, 2024 at 8:24 PM**

[Onenski](#) I'd like to "swerve" away from theory and metaphysics for a moment and ask: Can, and how can, one find eudaimonia in their life if they believes in hard determinism?

As [Bryan](#) notes, determinism is counter to lived experience. This implies that in order to live pleasantly with a deterministic philosophy one must negate one's perceptions, which seems to me to be problematic.

From watching the video above in post #51, it seems that even Sapolsky has trouble with this aspect of determinism.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 24, 2024 at 9:04 PM

[Cassius](#), I'd like to point out something so that the arguments, again, become stronger.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The burden of proof on the issues is not on Epicureans, who are living as nature provided using the faculties nature provided. The burden of proof is on the religionists, skeptics, and determinists, and Epicurus' arguments provide real-world observations that contradict their assertions. Nothing comes from nothing - the supernatural gods are refuted. Those who allege nothing can be known contradict themselves - skepticism is refuted. You can cite the swerve or simply say that it is not necessary to "live with necessity" because at the very least we can exit life when it ceases to please us - determinism is refuted. Each issue comes down to having confidence in the faculties that nature gave us vs imagining that there are "logical" proofs that can invalidate our practical experience. Epicurus says to go with practical experience.

It's necessary to say that every metaphysical conclusion has the burden of proof in order to be solid, otherwise is only assumed. Both, free will and free will skepticism have the burden of proof to sustain their conclusions. No matter if it's an automatic or an extended belief among people, that doesn't make it true.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The religionists and the radical skeptics and the hard determinists don't have the evidence to establish their conclusions with certainty either, but they happily insist on superficially persuasive arguments which have real impact on real people who swallow them.

If any metaphysical conclusion is on the same level, we can read this paragraph like this:

The **atheist** and the **dogmatics** and **free will defenders** don't have the evidence to establish their conclusions with certainty either, **but they happily insist on superficially persuasive arguments which have real impact on real people who swallow them [e. g. blaming, punishments, meritocracy, revictimization, resentment, guilt].**

I don't mean to be ironic, or something like that. I just pretend to point out certain aspects of arguments in order to make enhance them. It's not so easy to refute a position, and it's worthy to develop the most solid interpretation of Epicurus.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 24, 2024 at 9:31 PM

Hi, [Godfrey](#), thanks for commenting.

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Onenski I'd like to "swerve" away from theory and metaphysics for a moment and ask: Can, and how can, one find eudaimonia in their life if they believes in hard determinism?

As Bryan notes, determinism is counter to lived experience. This implies that in order to live pleasantly with a deterministic philosophy one must negate one's perceptions, which seems to me to be problematic.

The possible practical problems that one may find in a metaphysical or physical conclusion are not reasons to deny that conclusion. The story says, for example, that certain pythagorean was killed when he revealed that the square root of 2 was irrational. The, seemingly, practical inconveniences were not a reason to deny that. Pythagoreans believed that it was very bad for their lives that there were irrational numbers.

Some philosophers (like Saul Smilansky), however, have concluded that effectively free will skepticism leads to immoral behavior or meaningless lives. In their opinion, we should maintain free will illusion.

For others (Strawson) , even if we recognize that we're not free, we can't resist having certain reactive attitudes. For them, we can't feel resentment when someone hurts us, or gratitude when someone benefits us.

Other philosophers (Derk Pereboom, Greg Caruso) think that free will skepticism imply a modification of several of our practices, but they're optimistic that these changes can enhance our lives and make them more just.

Finally, how do an epicurean find eudaimonia?: recognizing his place in the universe, studying nature, moderating desires, looking for pleasures, avoiding pain/suffering, feeling satisfied, enjoying time with friends. Is that contradictory with free will skepticism? If you think so, you can help me in developing my understanding both of free will skepticism and of epicureanism by pointing out those contradictions. 😊

I insist that I'm not an expert, I don't think I have the last word. I recognize I may be wrong. But I know as well that having a divergent opinion can improve discussion.

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### **Post by “Bryan” of February 24, 2024 at 9:38 PM**

Sincere question: how is

(1) My experience of having freewill means that I do have freewill.

more of a 'metaphysical' conclusion than

(2) My experience of my cat being soft means that my cat is soft.

Also what does 'metaphysical' mean, in a simple/general sense?

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of February 25, 2024 at 12:54 AM**

Thanks for the response [Onenski](#) .

Quote from Onenski

...how do an epicurean find eudaimonia?: recognizing his place in the universe, studying nature, moderating desires, looking for pleasures, avoiding pain/suffering, feeling satisfied, enjoying time with friends. Is that contradictory with free will skepticism? If you think so, you can help me in developing my understanding both of free will skepticism and of epicureanism by pointing out those contradictions.

The biggest practical contradiction, in my mind, has to do with the Canon and methods of inference. If we don't use proper reasoning based on our sensations, anticipations and feelings,

then we can't form correct conclusions.

As I understand the determining of opinions to be true or false, based on Philodemus (and I'm not sure that I understand this very well) there is **confirmation** (also called attestation), and **contradiction** (also called contestation). **True** equals confirmed and not contradicted. **False** equals not confirmed and contradicted. **Conjectural** equals awaiting confirmation/contradiction. Based on this, I would say that denying free agency is false, based on our perceptions. Or at best conjectural.

From Diogenes Laertius 10.32; Mensch translation:

*...the fact that our perceptions exist guarantees the truth of our sensations; for seeing and hearing are as real to us as feeling pain." Hence, it is from phenomena that we must draw inferences about nonevident realities. For all our thoughts are derived from sensation, either by contact, analogy, resemblance, or synthesis (with some assistance from reasoning). And the delusions of madmen, as well as the visions we see in sleep, are real, since they have effects; whereas what is unreal has no effect.*

From Philodemus, On signs 34.29-36.17 Long and Sedley translation 1987:

*(1) Those who attack sign-inference by similarity do not notice the difference between the aforementioned [senses of 'in so far as'], and how we establish the 'in so far as' premise, such as, for instance, that man in so far as he is man is mortal.... (2) For we establish the necessary connexion of this with that from the very fact that it has been an observed concomitant of all the instances which we have encountered, especially as we have met a variety of animals belonging to the same type which while differing from each other in all other respects all share such-and-such common characteristics. (3) Thus we say that man, in so far as and in that he is man, is mortal, because we have encountered a wide variety of men without ever finding any variation in this kind of accidental attribute, or anything that draws us towards the opposite view. (4) So this is the method on which the establishment of the premise rests, both for this issue and for the others in which we apply the 'in so far as' and 'in that' construction - the peculiar connexion being indicated by the fact that the one thing is the inseparable and necessary concomitant of the other. (5) The same is not true in the case of what is established merely by the elimination of a sign. But even in these cases, it is the fact that all the instances which we have encountered have this as their concomitant that does the job of confirmation. For it is from the fact that all familiar moving objects, while having other differences, have it in common that their motion is through empty spaces, that we conclude the same to be without exception true also in things non-evident. And our reason for contending that if there is not, or has not been, fire, smoke should be eliminated, is that smoke has been seen in all cases without exception to be a secretion from fire. (6) Another error which they make is in not noticing our procedure of establishing that no obstacle arises through things evident. For the existence of chance and of that which depends on us is not sufficient ground for accepting the minimal swerves of atoms: it is necessary to show in addition that nothing else self-evident*

*conflicts with the thesis.*

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

The possible practical problems that one may find in a metaphysical or physical conclusion are not reasons to deny that conclusion

I agree with this if the conclusion is true, as described above. The reason that I asked about how to live with eudaimonia if you believe in hard determinism is that I'm genuinely curious how that would work.

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Finally, how do an epicurean find eudaimonia?: recognizing his place in the universe, studying nature, moderating desires, looking for pleasures, avoiding pain/suffering, feeling satisfied, enjoying time with friends. Is that contradictory with free will skepticism?

I honestly don't understand how you can achieve eudaimonia doing these things if you believe that you have no free will. Is the answer that you just go ahead and do them, realizing that there's not really a "you" that's doing them, and find eudaimonia in that? I'll have to ponder that for a while....

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## **Post by "Don" of February 25, 2024 at 1:00 AM**

I continue to find pleasure in this discussion and appreciate everyone's willingness to share their views. In light of that, let me share some of my own thoughts on this:

### **The word Metaphysical**

Several of you have used this word, and I will admit I find it ill-defined. To me, the word smacks of "woo" as in "mystical, supernatural, or unscientific." Merriam-Webster has one definition that tells me "a division of philosophy that is concerned with the fundamental nature of reality and being and that includes ontology, cosmology, and often epistemology." If I remember correctly, Aristotle used it in his works to simply refer to the topics that weren't Physics... Oh, [I don't remember correctly](#). It dates to 70 BCE and ordering of books covering "the science of what is beyond the physical." In any case, I find it unhelpful when it can be so vague and can be imbued with hazy meanings.

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

I experience having free will and I am not sympathetic to arguments that are counter to repeated experience. It is not a matter of logic but simple immediate proof.

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

determinism is counter to lived experience.

I know where you're coming from, but we also experience the oar as being bent when we see it in the water. IF we investigate further, we do find the oar isn't bent (or the tower isn't round to use the classical example). So, I don't see anything inherently incorrect about examining free will and digging deeper more additional experience and investigation. And, yes, I agree that we have "repeated experience" of free will, but we also experience the oar as bent and the tower as round repeatedly and have to catch ourselves to remember other past repeated experiences. The "feeling" of free will is one sensation that could be backed up - or some say refuted - by examining it from other perspectives and experiences. I'm still inclined to free will, but these recent books and this discussion are helpful in making me defend my experience and making me question \*why\* I might maintain that free will exists.

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Some philosophers (like Saul Smilansky), however, have concluded that effectively free will skepticism leads to immoral behavior or meaningless lives. In their opinion, we should maintain free will illusion.

This seems to be similar to Dennet's compatibilism: the free will "illusion" has practical benefit so we should continue to live "as if" "free will" is a real thing... even though they don't believe there is such a thing. Additionally, I find the whole "absence of free will" (just another way, to my thinking, as saying "there is no god") leading to immoral behavior or meaningless lives a fallacy. Which fallacy, I couldn't say (sorry.. .that's an area of study I need to explore!) [Dennett tells a similar fable of the "nefarious neurosurgeon" to illustrate the point](#). I see the point of the story, but it smacks of the "people can't be good without God" argument.

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

For them, we can't feel resentment when someone hurts us, or gratitude when someone benefits us.

Sapolsky goes down that road, too, but admits he can't maintain it for more than (something like, in his words) 30 seconds at a time every few months. We naturally feel resentment and gratitude naturally arises unbidden (for the "average" human). Other non-human primates appear to express "gratitude," they groom each other, they appear to comfort each other.

Emotions, to me, appear to be on a spectrum from rudimentary in less complex animals to chimpanzees, bonobos, and humans. Even if there is "no free will" and actions are determined, nature/evolution has endowed life with the capacity to feel there is and to express and feel emotions.

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Finally, how do an epicurean find eudaimonia?: recognizing his place in the universe, studying nature, moderating desires, looking for pleasures, avoiding pain/suffering, feeling satisfied, enjoying time with friends. Is that contradictory with free will skepticism?

I would fully agree that that's how an epicurean finds eudaimonia "well-being." Trying to answer the second part is harder for me. As I understand "[free will skepticism](#)" isn't necessarily "determinism" per se. One source simply says "*Free will skepticism*" refers to a family of views that all take seriously the possibility that human beings lack the control in action - i.e. the free will - required for an agent to be truly deserving of blame and praise, punishment and reward. " If that's the case, I would say "free will skepticism" (which implies to me "hard determinism") would be incompatible with Epicurean philosophy. At the root of Epicurean philosophy is that humans have the agency to choose the direction they take their life - to make "choices and rejections" - and praise and blame can be affixed to the choices people take. I see Epicurean philosophy as a philosophy of personal responsibility - we are responsible for the choices we take. Free will skepticism is the exact opposite of that.

That said, the things that [Onenski](#) lists (recognizing his place in the universe, studying nature, moderating desires, looking for pleasures, avoiding pain/suffering, feeling satisfied, enjoying time with friends) are all aspects of an Epicurean eudaimonic life. The questions are: How are those things pursued? Why do we pursue those things? Do we make choices to pursue avenues that will lead to this kind of life? Or are we, as Sapolsky and the free will skeptics say, simply the kind of person that would "choose" these things based solely on our genetics, environment, childhood, pre-wired neural activity, etc., and that we cannot in any way be credited with pursuing "good" decisions anymore than we can be blamed for "bad" decisions? There is no personal responsibility for the free will skeptic. If you're leading a eudaimonic life, that's just the life you \*had\* to lead. If you've done things that hurt others, you have no real responsibility for those actions, but we need to sequester you from the rest of society for other people to get on with their pre-determined lives.

I'm going to have to explore Mitchell more, and this whole topic. But I don't think these are necessarily "metaphysical" questions. I think we can explore, study, scan, etc., etc., and at some point come up with answers. Maybe we don't have "free will" - we certainly have constrained choices! I "freely" admit that. But I don't think we can state definitely - a la Sapolsky and others - that we've determined there is no free will.. at least at this point in time.

## Post by “Martin” of February 25, 2024 at 2:44 AM

### Quote

There is, as we know, also the fact that atoms would never have been able to make contact with each other without an uncaused swerve -

This is a fact only within Epicurus' ancient physics. In modern physics, there are forces which attract particles to each other and thereby bent the straight paths expected by both Epicurus and Newton's first law. Once the particles are close enough, there are mechanisms which can bond them together.

### Quote

- in a void, heavy atoms are not able to catch up to lighter ones and and therefore unable to cause a collision.

In Epicurus' ancient physics, the atoms move with constant speed irrespective of their weight.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 25, 2024 at 4:31 AM

While the anti-determinism viewpoint features prominently in the Letter to Menoecus and the Vatican Sayings, it's interesting to think about why it is not so explicit in the [Principal Doctrines](#).

I would say that (at the very fewest) the following presume that we have the power of choice to pursue the things mentioned (prudence, honor, justice, reason) and, that Epicurus would say that holding to hard determinism is therefore detrimental to their implementation. Most of the rest (even the existence of a list in the first place) imply that the statements therein can be chosen as a basis of a happy life, which also presumes that the person seeking to implement them is not a hard determinist.

[PD05](#). It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly, [nor again to live a life of prudence, honor, and justice] without living pleasantly. And the man who does not possess the pleasant life is not living prudently, honorably, and justly, [and the man who does not possess the virtuous life] cannot possibly live pleasantly.

[PD16](#). In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters, reason has ordained, and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain.

[PD17](#). The just man is most free from trouble; the unjust most full of trouble.

I also think one of my favorite passages from Lucretius Book 2 strongly implies an anti-determinist viewpoint:

[1023] Now apply your mind closely to the documents of true reason, for a new scheme of philosophy presses earnestly for your attention, a new scene of things displays itself before you. Yet there is nothing so obvious but may at first view seem difficult to be believed, and there is nothing so prodigious and wonderful at first that men do not by degrees cease to admire. For see the bright and pure color of the sky, possessed on every side by wandering stars, and the Moon's splendor, and the Sun's glorious light; these, if they now first shown to mortal eyes, and suddenly presented to our view, what could more wonderful appear than these? And what before could men less presume to expect? Nothing surely, so surprising would the sight have been. But now, quite tired and cloyed with the prospect, none of us vouchsafes so much as to cast our eyes up towards the bright temples of the sky. Therefore do not be frightened, and conceive an aversion to an opinion because of its novelty; but search it rather with a more piercing judgment. If it appears true to you, embrace it; if false, set yourself against it.

(The above quote is from the 1743 edition, whose "lost" translator [Joshua](#) is diligently even as we read this working on finding!)

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## Post by "Don" of February 25, 2024 at 9:04 AM

In some ways, Epicurus's position on choice and free will and determinism is δογματικός (dogmatikos), not being afraid to declare a position.

[Epicurean Sage - Declare their beliefs and not remain in doubt](#)

Hicks: He will be a dogmatist but not a mere sceptic; Yonge: he will pronounce dogmas, and will express no doubts; Mensch: He will assert his opinions and will...

sites.google.com

In light of Sapolsky and Dennett and the rest, a big part of me wants more than to simply declare a position. That's why Mitchell is intriguing to me. I'm planning on exploring his stuff before weighing back in (too much, that is).

## Post by “Onenski” of February 25, 2024 at 12:12 PM

In order to improve the account on the swerve I thought about the following argument. It is important to identify the flaws in it, possibly [Martin](#) or [DavidN](#) can help us.

1. Assumption: The swerve is the basis for sustaining free will (leeway freedom a.k.a. the capacity to have done otherwise).
2. Definition: the swerve is a random deviance of the movement of atoms. Is an uncaused cause.
3. Definition: determinism is the affirmation that every event in the Universe is caused by prior events. Indeterminism can be defined as the falsity of determinism: the affirmation that not all events are caused by prior events.
4. The swerve works indeterministically; introduces indeterminism (for 2 and 3)
5. Incompatibilist premise: leeway freedom is incompatible with determinism.
6. The swerve can have effects only on the microscopic level or both in the microscopic and macroscopic level.
7. If the swerve has effects only in microscopic level, the indeterminism (for 4) occurs only in this level, so that the macroscopic level operates in a deterministic way. (This is actually Sapolsky's point of view defended in "Determined"). If this is the case, then the swerve is not the basis for leeway freedom (For 1 and 5)
8. If the swerve has effects on both the microscopic and macroscopic levels, then there is indeterminism (for 4) in both levels. This means that there are events that weren't caused by prior events (that is, the swerves). (For 6 and 7)
9. The swerves either occurred only in one moment in the past and the rest of the time the world worked and works deterministically or they occur continually.
10. If the swerves occurred only once, or just in the past and the rest of the time the world worked deterministically, then the swerve is not the basis for leeway freedom (for 1, 5 and 9).
11. The swerves happen continually (for 9 and 10, and the affirmation of Lucretius (Book ii) that the very existence of bodies need the swerve).
12. Events can have multiple effects and be caused by multiple events (as pointed out by [DavidN](#)). Besides, scientific reasoning tell us that the same event has the same cause(s): if a phenomenon happens in certain circumstances by events A, B, C, we will expect that in the same circumstances under the same events A, B, C, we will have the same phenomenon.

13. The swerves are unpredictable and their effects are unpredictable as well (for 2 and 4)

14. If the swerve occurs continually and unpredictably (for 11 and 13), it would be less probable that the same circumstances for a phenomenon repeat (Considering 12). It seems that there will be new circumstances continually and there would be new and different events continually.

15. The basis for regularities and laws in nature is the repetition of phenomena.

16. The swerve doesn't permit to explain regularities in nature (for 14 and 15). (From this we can conclude that human behavior is impossible, but let's consider more things.)

17. Free Will is the basis for moral responsibility (if a person acts freely, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control (in a strong sense, as the capacity to have done otherwise, the leeway sense). (For 1)

18. Human behavior is under the unpredictable effects of the swerves (for 8 and 13), so we can imagine at least the following scenario: James intends to do A in order to have certain effects. The swerve can produce events between the intention to do A and the action A, and between the action A and its intended effects. So, sometimes he has success in his intention (he does A), sometimes the action doesn't occur (because there are unpredictable events that produce other events different to James intention), and sometimes the action A has different effects than those intended by James.

He needs lucky to act and to have the effects he wants.

19. If human choices are not the outcome of their will, their behavior is beyond their control and they're not responsible of it. If the outcomes of actions are beyond reasonable control of the agents, then they're not morally responsible for them (for 17 and 18).

20. If agents are not responsible of their actions, then they don't have free will (for 17).

21. Agents don't have free will (for Modus tollens of 19 and 20) [Modus tollens is an inference that say that if we have the conditional "If A then B", it is equivalent to "if not B then not A". So if we have "Not B". Then we infer "not A"]

22. Given that 21 is the product of assuming 1 and leads to it's negation, there's a contradiction.

23. If an assumption leads to a contradiction, then we should conclude that it's false. So, the swerve is not the basis for free will.

If the argument is valid, then the swerve will need revision. So far I inferred that the swerve occurs continually and its effects are on the macroscopic level, but these characteristics are problematic.

Contemporary libertarians tend to restrict the scope of indeterminism, but one needs to be careful, because there's the risk of ad hoc explanation.

Another option is to take a compatibilist account of free will, but that would make the swerve an useless concept.

Probably you have the impression that determinism is one of the "Four Horsemen", but if you think carefully on a strong indeterminism, you may want to include it as well.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 25, 2024 at 12:18 PM**

#### [Quote from Onenski](#)

Assumption: The swerve is the basis for sustaining free will (leeway freedom a.k.a. the capacity to have done otherwise).

I look forward to the responses to the detailed way that Onenski presents this, but (per the arguments I seem to recall from the Sedley article) I do not think we should presume that Epicurus held that the swerve is the main reason for sustaining free will. It is likely more of a "multiple possibility" response, with the real basis for holding "free will" to be found as much in the canon as in the physics.

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### **Post by “Onenski” of February 25, 2024 at 1:39 PM**

Hi, [Don](#), thank you very much for your comments and for being caritative in your interpretation of my comments.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

The word Metaphysical

I'm sorry for using the word without explain what I meant. Metaphysics, in effect, is a branch of philosophy that goes beyond physics. The idea is that its theses cannot be proven or falsified by empirical data. Empirical information is consistent with two opposite theses. Some examples of metaphysical objects of study are God (whether exist a supernatural entity with certain properties or not), soul, time (what is its nature or even if it exists), free will, universals,

personal identity, the existence of a self, etc.

Everyone has an assumption on any of these objects. Some people believe that a God exists, that they have a soul, that time exists and has certain properties and so on. If they reflect about these assumptions they may find arguments to sustain them, or to change their minds.

You may think that no matter what people assume, they will live their lives anyway. But I've insisted that these assumptions give form to our practices. People who believe in a God usually pray, those who believe in soul are afraid of their luck after death (or they trust in a Paradise), people who believe that humans have a telos will try to improve their virtue in order to be excellent human beings.

Some people change their metaphysical commitments in a moment of their lives: they discover that a God is not necessary for their lives, or they think that humans don't have a telos and they don't need to be virtuous just by itself.

So this debate is metaphysical, all the empirical information works for both conclusions, the arguments need to be metaphysical and reasonable. Sometimes people use a reduction to absurd (like in the argument I've just posted), for example.

Ontology, in other hand, can be thought as a list of things a theory or a person consider that exist. Metaphysical commitments use to have implications in ontology. For example, Epicurus considered that gods exist, but his metaphysical commitment with materialism implied that those gods should be material. This commitment also implies that ghosts don't exist.

Now, on the issue of control. You think that free will skepticism imply that we lack control over our actions. Not exactly, we lack leeway freedom, but we have control over our actions. The capacity, for example, for self control can be explained as the outcome of your personal history under certain circumstances, I invite you to read Walter Mischel's "The Marshmallow Test" to have an idea of what I mean, or Sapolsky's "Behave".

In other words, the notion of agency (as source freedom) is compatible with determinism. But, as you found in the characterisation of free will skepticism, that notion is not the one that permit to attribute moral responsibility (for these skeptics).

If you also take the conclusion that we can't have too much indeterminism (or not having it at all), almost all the time we are not free. If we need leeway freedom to exercise epicurean philosophy, then the libertarians would have just a little degree of freedom to exercise epicurean philosophy. Their situation wouldn't be so different that the one of the free will skeptic.

## Post by "Don" of February 25, 2024 at 1:47 PM

My opinion is that we have to acknowledge that *there is no such thing as "the swerve."*

It was an innovative thought experiment by Epicurus (and Lucretius who mentions it) given the atomic parameters he was working with at the time. Yes, it has parallels or we can overlay the \*basic\* idea onto modern quantum physics, but the overlay doesn't fit perfectly because it wasn't designed to! But atoms do not move like Epicurus and Democritus thought/said they did. Quantum particles do not move like that. Plus, Epicurus could very well have thought that atomic motions could engender free will because everything was atomic movement, including sensations. And, yes, we know that chemical and biological processes are at the heart of sensation, but they're NOT like Epicurus proposed them. We don't intercept atoms from outside us into channels in our ψυχή (psyche) leading to memories and thoughts. Again, we can make analogies and see Epicurus's atomic movements and swerves as precursors or metaphors of how actually "the way things are." But we are not constrained by Epicurus's physics! Science has come a long way in the last 2300 years, and using outdated terms and ideas to argue for free will is not going to get us anywhere in the year 2024 CE. We need to work with the material world at hand as it is currently understood. That's why I find Mitchell intriguing... and no I haven't had a chance to read any of his stuff in the last couple hours. This is just a visceral reaction to our continuing to talk about whether the swerve leads to free will. Unfortunately, I find it similar to discussing whether God has anything to do with our free will. That's it for me right now.

[Epicurus | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

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## Post by "Don" of February 25, 2024 at 2:41 PM

### [Quote from Onenski](#)

The capacity, for example, for self control can be explained as the outcome of your personal history under certain circumstances, I invite you to read Walter Mischel's "The Marshmallow Test"

Thanks! Book is on reserve.

Would you correct I characterize Mischel as deterministic or doesn't that label fit his presentation?

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<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2679-can-determinism-be-reconciled-with-epicureanism-admin-edit-no-but-let-s-talk-abo/>

## Post by “Cassius” of February 25, 2024 at 3:45 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

We need to work with the material world at hand as it is currently understood.

If that means that no ordinary person can have an opinion about the way his world works without a career in physics, and that even those with careers in physics have to be prepared to revise their opinions of the way the world works with every new seminar from Cambridge, then that is a prescription for total skepticism if taken literally.

I don't think anyone suggests that we need to take De Rerum Natura as a blueprint for a nuclear reactor, but the principles and perspectives laid down there remain valid and useful even as science changes.

And it is far more important for happy living to keep the global principles and perspectives in mind rather than it is to pore over the latest dissertations from Cambridge with our minds open to accepting any possibility.

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## Post by “DavidN” of February 25, 2024 at 8:13 PM

I just wanted to pop on and thank Onenski for the thought provoking discussion, I haven't actually considered the Holonomic Brain theory in almost a quarter century. Now that I'm reconsidering it in the context of free will, and considering free will in the context of a programming break for the purposes of debugging, It might solve one of the biggest problems in Epistemology of AI. How learning takes place, how does one break from cause and effect programming and apply new knowledge, or even test new knowledge. An error in logic as the process of learning rather than true error is very human. Almost wish I still worked in that field cause now that I think I might have figured it out I have no idea who I'd approach with my hypothesis. Although to be honest given enough time to considered and weigh the choice I'd probably still make the same choice I did when i left the field, and simply let my curiosity go. Anyways I don't actually have much time today, I have an previous obligation to get to. Just popped on to say great discussion everyone, thanks.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2024 at 3:36 AM

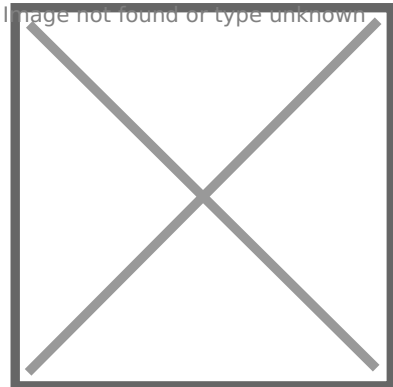
No one is overstepping. Even if someone decides that they disagree so firmly with a key Epicurean tenet that they just can't see calling themselves an Epicurean, that is for the best, because no one will be happy with being less than honest.

On the other hand, this forum is for made by and for people who are interested in promoting Epicurean philosophy, so that goal has to override total free speech here at the forum, as is very clearly set forth. That's a hard policy to enforce, but I think I need to do it as best I can for the good of the project.

Sometimes a higher "level" forum will solve the issue, as more "mature" Epicureans can better handle the debate. Another step after that would be "take it to private conversation.". The best I can say for now is that I think continuing the conversation in level three will be better, and we will see where things go from here.

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## Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2024 at 3:55 AM



### [Richard Dawkins On Free Will](#)

I posted this a couple years ago on one of my past blogs. I always find the topic worth revisiting. The following is a transcript of a question posed to and...  
notesfrombabel.wordpress.com

### **Richard Dawkins at Politics and Prose .. The God Delusion Question and Answer**

Questioner: Dr. Dawkins thank you for your comments. The thing I have appreciated most about your comments is your consistency in the things I've seen you written. One of the areas that I wanted to ask you about and the places where I think there is an inconsistency and I hoped you would clarify it is that in what I've read **you seem to take a position of a strong**

**determinist who says that what we see around us is the product of physical laws playing themselves out but on the other hand it would seem that you would do things like taking credit for writing this book and things like that. But it would seem, and this isn't to be funny, that the consistent position would be that necessarily the authoring of this book from the initial condition of the big bang it was set that this would be the product of what we see today.** I would take it that that would be the consistent position but I wanted to know what you thought about that.

Dawkins: The philosophical question of determinism is a very difficult question. It's not one I discuss in this book, indeed in any other book that I've ever talked about. Now an extreme determinist, as the questioner says, might say that everything we do, everything we think, everything that we write, has been determined from the beginning of time in which case the very idea of taking credit for anything doesn't seem to make any sense. **Now I don't actually know what I actually think about that,** I haven't taken up a position about that, it's not part of my remit to talk about the philosophical issue of determinism. **What I do know is that what it feels like to me, and I think to all of us, we don't feel determined. We feel like blaming people for what they do or giving people the credit for what they do. We feel like admiring people for what they do. None of us ever actually as a matter of fact says, "Oh well he couldn't help doing it, he was determined by his molecules."** Maybe we should.. I sometimes.. Um.. You probably remember many of you would have seen Fawlty Towers. The episode where Basil where his car won't start and he gives it fair warning, counts up to three, and then gets out of the car and picks up a tree branch and thrashes it within an edge of his life. Maybe that's what we all ought to... Maybe the way we laugh at Basil Fawlty, we ought to laugh in the same way at people who blame humans. I mean when we punish people for doing the most horrible murders, maybe the attitude we should take is "Oh they were just determined by their molecules." It's stupid to punish them. **What we should do is say "This unit has a faulty motherboard which needs to be replaced." I can't bring myself to do that. I actually do respond in an emotional way and I blame people, I give people credit,** or I might be more charitable and say this individual who has committed murders or child abuse of whatever it is was really abused in his own childhood. And so again I might take a ..

**Questioner: But do you personally see that as an inconsistency in your views?**

**Dawkins: I sort of do. Yes. But it is an inconsistency that we sort of have to live with otherwise life would be intolerable.** But it has nothing to do with my views on religion it is an entirely separate issue.

Questioner: Thank you.

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**Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2024 at 3:57 AM**

## [Interview: Richard Dawkins](#)

QUESTION: Now, if we are gene machines, presumably then our behavior is also programmed by genes -- you have made that case. But Christians would say that there is a thing called [free will](#), and that free will gives us a genuine choice about our actions, that effectively free will allows us to override biology. What is your response to that as a scientist?

MR. DAWKINS: I am very comfortable with the idea that we can override biology with free will. Indeed, I encourage people all the time to do it. Much of the message of my first book, "The Selfish Gene," was that we must understand what it means to be a gene machine, what it means to be programmed by genes, so that we are better equipped to escape, so that we are better equipped to use our big brains, use our conscience intelligence, to depart from the dictates of the selfish genes and to build for ourselves a new kind of life which as far as I am concerned the more un-Darwinian it is the better, because the Darwinian world in which our ancestors were selected is a very unpleasant world. Nature really is red in tooth and claw. And when we sit down together to argue out and discuss and decide upon how we want to run our societies, I think we should hold up Darwinism as an awful warning for how we should not organize our societies.

QUESTION: So you are not saying then that our genetic programming is fully [deterministic](#)?

MR. DAWKINS: It's an important point to realize that the genetic programming of our lives is not fully deterministic. It is statistical -- it is in any animal merely statistical -- not deterministic. Even if you are in some sense a determinist -- and philosophically speaking many of us may be -- that doesn't mean we have to behave as if we are determinists, because the world is so complicated, and especially human brains are so complicated, that we behave as if we are not deterministic, and we feel as if we are not deterministic -- and that's all that matters. In any case, adding the word "genetic" to deterministic doesn't make it any more deterministic. If you are a philosophical determinist, then adding the word "gene" doesn't increase the effect.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2024 at 4:12 AM**

We can go round and round quoting Richard Dawkins vs Sam Harris til the end of time, but if doing so causes us to lose sight of the larger goal of living happily through Epicurean philosophy, then we are not doing justice to the reason we are here in the first place.

Not everyone is going to agree with the way we implement that balance, but I think the best we can do is to try to accommodate "privately" those who have the time and interest to pursue the Harris road, while at the same time acknowledging that the Harris view is contrary to Epicurus

and therefore not something to be promoted in public on this website.

As Dawkins says "we feel as if we are not deterministic -- and that's all that matters."

Now if someone wants to argue that that is not the position Epicurus took, or that he was wrong to do so, then \*that also, or in fact even more\* would be a point of productive discussion, because that would implicate the feelings anticipations and senses as the canon of truth. As Sedley says, the swerve itself may well have been an afterthought, as it certainly did not even make the letter to Menoeceus. We aren't required to ground the significance and importance of freedom of will on the swerve by a long shot, any more than we are tied to supporting every one of Epicurus' multiple possibilities for eclipses.

Which leads me to repeat again - if these discussions lead someone to think that Epicurus was so far off on basic issues that they want to drop major parts of his philosophy and refrain from representing themselves to be Epicurean, then we are all better off if that person pursues that result to their satisfaction. But those deviations aren't proper for extended development on this forum.

We do allow people here at the forum - even as Level 3 - who are clearly stating that they do not consider themselves to be "fully Epicurean." We can work with that so long as we do not have long and regular and unbalanced campaigns in public against core Epicurean positions. People who have agency can in fact change their minds, and working through defenses against attacks on Epicurean positions has extremely helpful results, exactly as we are doing in going through Book 2 of Cicero's On Ends in the Lucretius Today podcast.

But I think we owe it to those who are here to study Epicurus to keep the focus on explaining and defending Epicurean positions, and to conduct plank-walking episodes as privately as possible. In general and for the public, we should provide an Epicurean support group and not just another general philosophy forum where the only firm position is that all firm positions are wrong. There are plenty of those on the internet where hard determinism is welcome. The "articles of faith" at such places are that all knowledge is impossible and that no one has any freedom of will whatsoever. That's exactly the kind of thing that Epicurus fought against, and we need to continue that tradition here if we expect to have an "Epicurean" community.

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## Post by "Martin" of February 26, 2024 at 5:13 AM

Quote

In order to improve the account on the swerve I thought about the following argument. It is important to identify the flaws in it, possibly [Martin](#) or [DavidN](#) can help us.

1. Assumption: The swerve is the basis for sustaining free will (leeway freedom a.k.a. the capacity to have done otherwise).

[...]

Here you go:

1 - 11 seem to be OK. What might be fishy does not show up within 1 - 11.

"12. Events can have multiple effects and be caused by multiple events (as pointed out by DavidN). Besides, scientific reasoning tell us that the same event has the same cause(s): if a phenomenon happens in certain circumstances by events A, B, C, we will expect that in the same circumstances under the same events A, B, C, we will have the same phenomenon."

Anyone trying to reproduce a chemical reaction can tell you that it is sometimnes not like that because in addition to the known A, B, C, there may be unknown events D, E, F, which combined with A, B, C give a different result because D, E, F have changed while A, B, C have not.

"13. The swerves are unpredictable and their effects are unpredictable as well (for 2 and 4)"

Some effects are predictable: The existence of the swerve enabled in Epicurus' physics the formation of compounds.

"14. If the swerve occurs continually and unpredictably (for 11 and 13), it would be less probable that the same circumstances for a phenomenon repeat (Considering 12). It seems that there will be new circumstances continually and there would be new and different events continually."

This seems to be OK.

"15. The basis for regularities and laws in nature is the repetition of phenomena."

This seems to be OK.

"16. The swerve doesn't permit to explain regularities in nature (for 14 and 15). (From this we can conclude that human behavior is impossible, but let's consider more things.)"

This statement is wrong. We can arrange apparent irregularities in a systematic way and find and explain regularities. In the quantum physical analog, this is expressed in the Ehrenfest theorem: The laws of classical physics for classical quantities are usually valid for expectation values of the corresponding quantum mechanical quantities. (This is my dumbed down

version.)

"17. Free Will is the basis for moral responsibility (if a person acts freely, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control (in a strong sense, as the capacity to have done otherwise, the leeway sense). (For 1)"

The argument in 17 is mixing und blurring different perspectives. Free will and moral responsibility are words of idealism meant for an I identified as a supernatural soul different from the body with which it is only temporarily associated. In Epicurus' philosophy, the soul is not an independent entity on its own but an organ of the living being. In the materialistic context, the meaning of free will and moral responsibility is different. If we do not change the words, we hide the change in definition. With the change in definition, the logic becomes invalid.

We can try to reformulate 17 with the analog words. For free will, agency is an established choice. For moral responsibility, we might choose accountability. With the new words, we might state:

17'. Agency is the basis for accountability (if a person acts, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control.

E.g., I usually do not cause outbreaks of volcanoes. An outbreak of a volcano will not give me remorse, and no one can reasonably hold me accountable for it.

However, an action which I carry out and which results in unpleasant consequences may give me remorse, and I may be held accountable for it, irrespective of how much leeway I had to do otherwise.

"18. Human behavior is under the unpredictable effects of the swerves (for 8 and 13), so we can imagine at least the following scenario: James intends to do A in order to have certain effects. The swerve can produce events between the intention to do A and the action A, and between the action A and its intended effects. So, sometimes he has success in his intention (he does A), sometimes the action doesn't occur (because there are unpredictable events that produce other events different to James intention), and sometimes the action A has different effects than those intended by James.

He needs lucky to act and to have the effects he wants."

The swerve may increase the options James has to choose from. It is his choice which option he chooses and not merely a random outcome.

"19. If human choices are not the outcome of their will, their behavior is beyond their control and they're not responsible of it. If the outcomes of actions are beyond reasonable control of the agents, then they're not morally responsible for them (for 17 and 18)."

19 falls apart because it depends on 17 and 18, which have been shown to be invalid.

"20. If agents are not responsible of their actions, then they don't have free will (for 17)."

20 is wrong because agents are always responsible for their actions in Epicurus' philosophy as expressed in 17'.

"21. Agents don't have free will (for Modus tollens of 19 and 20) [Modus tollens is an inference that says that if we have the conditional "If A then B", it is equivalent to "if not B then not A". So if we have "Not B". Then we infer "not A"]"

This is invalid because 19 and 20 do not hold.

"22. Given that 21 is the product of assuming 1 and leads to its negation, there's a contradiction."

There is no contradiction because 21 is invalid.

"23. If an assumption leads to a contradiction, then we should conclude that it's false. So, the swerve is not the basis for free will."

The contradiction does not exist. The swerve can be the basis for free will/agency as described in the comment to 18.

"Probably you have the impression that determinism is one of the "Four Horsemen", but if you think carefully on a strong indeterminism, you may want to include it as well."

Strong indeterminism would lead to counterproductive skepticism and is foreign to Epicurus' philosophy.

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## Post by "Onenski" of February 26, 2024 at 10:23 AM

[Cassius](#), I perfectly understand your reasons and the change to a private forum. I'm sorry if my comments have been annoying or impertinent. I don't pretend to be against Epicurean philosophy, nor just discuss for winning an argument or something like that. I'm aware of the importance of frank criticism: the importance of words, arguments, and the fact that we must separate friendship from any discussion.

At the same time, I wouldn't say what I say if I wasn't convinced that my position on free will is at least reasonable and that a connexion with epicurean philosophy can be made, or that Epicurean philosophy can be developed with the arguments I share.

In any case, I respect your considerations as a moderator (which I imagine is not an easy work at all), and I'm really really thankful for your work maintaining the group and spreading epicurean philosophy. My admiration for you and our friendship are superior to my desire to

keep talking about this topic. If you want we stop talking about this and talk about something else, it would be ok.

[Don](#), Mischel was not a determinist, he was just a psychologist, he worked specially on personality, but he has a study on self-control in children. He followed these children for years to see if the self-control showed in infancy was correlated to later choices in life. His discoverings are very interesting.

[Martin](#), thank you very much for your analysis, I appreciate it. I hope the next comments make sense to you.

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

Anyone trying to reproduce a chemical reaction can tell you that it is sometimes not like that because in addition to the known A, B, C, there may be unknown events D, E, F, which combined with A, B, C give a different result because D, E, F have changed while A, B, C have not.

In this observation, I'd like to point out that the premise is not about *what we know*, but about *what it is*. I'd appreciate if you tell us if the premise is correct by doing this observation.

Probably we don't know D, E, F, but they are part of the circumstances to make that A, B and C cause the phenomenon. Do you agree that if we had different circumstances or different causes we have a distinct phenomenon or, even, we don't have that phenomenon at all. (For example, if we don't have B either the phenomenon doesn't occur or occur another one.)

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

"16. The swerve doesn't permit to explain regularities in nature (for 14 and 15). (From this we can conclude that human behavior is impossible, but let's consider more things.)"

This statement is wrong. We can arrange apparent irregularities in a systematic way and find and explain regularities. In the quantum physical analog, this is expressed in the Ehrenfest theorem: The laws of classical physics for classical quantities are usually valid for expectation values of the corresponding quantum mechanical quantities. (This is my dumbed down version.)

I forgot to make explicit that 16 is about regularities in macroscopic nature (for 8, if I remember well). According to the argument, we have new events and new circumstances all the time (we don't have the same phenomena because for this we need the same causes (if I'm ok with the last observation), but new causes (the swerves) produce different phenomena). So regularities in the macroscopic level should be less, much less, than those we see. Irregularities should be more than regularities.

### [Quote from Martin](#)

The argument in 17 is mixing und blurring different perspectives. Free will and moral responsibility are words of idealism meant for an I identified as a supernatural soul different from the body with which it is only temporarily associated. In Epicurus' philosophy, the soul is not an independent entity on its own but an organ of the living being. In the materialistic context, the meaning of free will and moral responsibility is different. If we do not change the words, we hide the change in definition. With the change in definition, the logic becomes invalid.

We can try to reformulate 17 with the analog words. For free will, agency is an established choice. For moral responsibility, we might choose accountability. With the new words, we might state:

17'. Agency is the basis for accountability (if a person acts, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control.

E.g., I usually do not cause outbreaks of volcanoes. An outbreak of a volcano will not give me remorse, and no one can reasonably hold me accountable for it.

However, an action which I carry out and which results in unpleasant consequences may give me remorse, and I may be held accountable for it, irrespective of how much leeway I had to do otherwise.

Possibly you missed one of the comments in which I made a difference between leeway freedom (the capacity to do otherwise) and source freedom (the capacity to act intentionally) in the free will debate. By reading your analysis of the argument I observed that you took the source sense instead of the leeway sense. The argument is directed to the second one (as I stated in the assumption, 1).

Agency and accountability are compatibilist concepts (this means, that they are compatible with a deterministic scenario, even if we are not in a deterministic scenario). I understand why if we take them, the argument gets invalid and your observations are precise in this aspect. But there would be a change in terms in the middle of the argument, because I started with the incompatibilist free will (leeway sense). (I hope you see that if we introduce the swerve as the basis for free will we are trying to defend the leeway sense, not the source sense.)

I don't see a problem if we take the compatibilist approach for epicurean philosophy, I even suggested it. However, that would do the swerve an unnecessary concept for free will basis. It would be a concept just to talk about the formation of compounds, as you pointed out.

### [Quote from Martin](#)

The swerve may increase the options James has to choose from. It is his choice which option he chooses and not merely a random outcome.

Another observation is that if we part from agency and accountability, more options (introduced by a very limited and specific swerve) don't add something relevant for moral evaluation. That is, the swerve is unnecessary and irrelevant for accountability. (If this part sounds obscure I can explain more.)

But let's think, as the argument goes in this part, that the swerve occur (and it has macroscopic effects and occurs continually) and we want leeway freedom. The idea is that we need a lot of luck to be successful in our purposes. First, we may have intentions that were formed by uncaused causes; intentions that have nothing to do with you and your life. We will need luck to have the intentions that are according to our personal identity, that is, we need luck in order to the swerves don't produce random intentions.

Second, we may have an intention and not being able to put them in practice in circumstances that permit to do it (because there are new intentions formed by uncaused causes). We need luck in order to the swerves don't produce something that precludes the intentions that are according to you.

Third, we may have an intention to act, do the action and have outcomes (because there are new events caused by the swerves) that would be unreasonable to attribute to the person. We need luck, so that our actions have the intended outcomes.

With these observations in mind, do you think the argument is valid?

Again, thanks for your observations!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2024 at 12:24 PM**

As long as several of our regular people remain engaged I am not inclined at all to see the conversation stop, so don't worry about that.

In my own case I am trying to edit the podcast we recorded yesterday as I think it contains some pressing material we also need to deal with, so I better work to keep [Joshua](#) in line over there while you guys tend to this.

Just keeping Joshua in line is a full time job so you guess tend to things so we don't need to many planks!!

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### **Post by “Joshua” of February 26, 2024 at 12:50 PM**

Don't worry, I'm just chained to my lounge chair reading Cicero at the rate of one sentence per week!

Edit to add;

#### Quote

Some say that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. I find that an awkward principle because, in my view, allowing good men to do nothing is the purpose of civilization.

-David Mitchell, *Unruly; A History of England's Kings and Queens*

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### Post by "Titus" of February 26, 2024 at 4:47 PM

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

As Dawkins says "we feel as if we are not deterministic -- and that's all that matters."

Isn't this the position of Epicurus in the Letter to Menoecus?

*"(He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, **but that which is in our control is subject to no master**, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame." (Bailey translation)*

I especially remind a German translation by Laskowsky. He renders the bold print as follows:

"und es an uns stehe, ob wir uns einem Herrn unterwerfen wollen!"

**"and it is up to us whether we want to submit to a master!"**

Laskowsky's translation might be questioned, but I like his wording very much, because it centers self-reliance and independent personal reasoning. It's in particular important, because I think otherwise we are in danger of appreciating every kind of logic that is approaching us in an beguiling way.

It's how Ca(t/ss)ius Cat would tell us: "And yet others will say that, *"No thing can be known!" All the while they will offer their own truth to loan.*" 😊

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## Post by “Martin” of February 26, 2024 at 9:19 PM

[Onenski](#)

Quote

"In this observation, I'd like to point out that the premise is not about what we know, but about what it is. I'd appreciate if you tell us if the premise is correct by doing this observation."

If the premise is about what it is, then the premise is correct by definition.

What it does not matter if we do not know it. This might inject a flaw into the logic because we are talking about something in the real world, and logic is notoriously shaky with propositions regarding reality instead of just an idealistic realm of thought.

Quote

"I forgot to make explicit that 16 is about regularities in macroscopic nature (for 8, if I remember well). According to the argument, we have new events and new circumstances all the time (we don't have the same phenomena because for this we need the same causes (if I'm ok with the last observation), but new causes (the swerves) produce different phenomena). So regularities in the macroscopic level should be less, much less, than those we see. Irregularities should be more than regularities."

No! Epicurus was careful to let the swerve just do a minimal change each time. This allows for almost deterministic regularity at the macroscopic level.

In the quantum mechanical analogon, this shows up in the difficulty of observing macroscopic quantum effects. Almost all of the indeterminacies at the microscopic level average out at the macroscopic level. This scales with the size of objects and the simplicity of the applicable laws of nature: We can calculate the path of Earth for millions of years ahead but not where I will be in one hour.

Quote

"Possibly you missed one of the comments in which I made a difference between leeway freedom (the capacity to do otherwise) and source freedom (the capacity to act intentionally) in the free will debate. By reading your analysis of the argument I observed that you took the source sense instead of the leeway sense. The argument is directed to the second one (as I stated in the assumption, 1).

Agency and accountability are compatibilist concepts (this means, that they are compatible with a deterministic scenario, even if we are not in a deterministic scenario). I understand why if we take them, the argument gets invalid and your observations are precise in this aspect. But there would be a change in terms in the middle of the argument, because I started with the incompatibilist free will (leeway sense). (I hope you see that if we introduce the swerve as the basis for free will we are trying to defend the leeway sense, not the source sense.)

I don't see a problem if we take the compatibilist approach for epicurean philosophy, I even suggested it. However, that would do the swerve an unnecessary concept for free will basis. It would be a concept just to talk about the formation of compounds, as you pointed out."

I do aim at leeway freedom. Even though the swerve might not be necessary for the original concept of agency, leeway freedom does considerably strengthen agency beyond the not fully convincing argument for it within hard determinism.

There is no issue in applying agency and accountability beyond compatibilism. (By contrast, applying idealistic concepts in a materialistic philosophy is a guarantee for contradictions.)

"Another observation is that if we part from agency and accountability, more options (introduced by a very limited and specific swerve) don't add something relevant for moral evaluation. That is, the swerve is unnecessary and irrelevant for accountability. (If this part sounds obscure I can explain more.)

But let's think, as the argument goes in this part, that the swerve occur (and it has macroscopic effects and occurs continually) and we want leeway freedom. The idea is that we need a lot of luck to be successful in our purposes. First, we may have intentions that were formed by uncaused causes; intentions that have nothing to do with you and your life. We will need luck to have the intentions that are according to our personal identity, that is, we need luck in order to the swerves don't produce random intentions.

Second, we may have an intention and not being able to put them in practice in circumstances that permit to do it (because there are new intentions formed by uncaused causes). We need luck in order to the swerves don't produce something that precludes the intentions that are according to you.

Third, we may have an intention to act, do the action and have outcomes (because there are new events caused by the swerves) that would be unreasonable to attribute to the person. We need luck, so that our actions have the intended outcomes."

We can force the luck by taking more time to think. If we expect to find the solution to a problem within 10 milliseconds, then we are strongly dependent on luck. By taking hours, days or weeks, we give the swerve a lot more opportunities to inject new options for consideration.

This may very well make the swerve relevant for moral evaluation (if we want to go that path at all).

#### Quote

"With these observations in mind, do you think the argument is valid?"

No, partly because of the preceding responses in this comment. There are other, more fundamental issues than the itemized statements in this discussion between you and me: Epicurus' philosophy does make some use of logic, but it should not be mistaken for a logical system. Going from axioms and definitions to increasingly sophisticated conclusions works reasonably well within mathematics and maybe some other variants of idealistic philosophy. However, with the exception of mathematical models skillfully chosen to describe reality, concepts of idealism are typically meaningless in materialism. Any proposition containing a meaningless concept is meaningless and has no logical value of true or false. This reminds me Wolfgang Pauli's comment on an inadequate theory that it is not even wrong. Moral responsibility is such a meaningless concept. Its prominent occurrence in the argument is already enough to render the argument invalid. If a materialist accepts the definitions of idealists, his materialistic philosophy can most likely be refuted with logic by deriving contradictions.

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### Post by "Don" of February 26, 2024 at 11:53 PM

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Even if someone decides that they disagree so firmly with a key Epicurean tenet that they just can't see calling themselves an Epicurean

I don't \*think\* this is directed at me, but I'm going to use that as a jumping off point anyway to expand on my comments about the swerve on the public thread. I stand by my assertion (my dogmatic assertion) that there is no such thing as "the swerve" because atoms don't act like Democritus and Epicurus thought they did. [The Standard Model](#) doesn't leave a place for "the swerve" although, like I said, a rough analogy can be made to overlay it on indeterminacy at the quantum level... but the overlay certainly doesn't fit well.

However, I also do not see the swerve as a "key Epicurean tenet." It's barely mentioned in the extant texts. There's Lucretius and Cicero, and I don't think Cicero relates the swerve to free will, just the impossibility of uncaused action on the part of atoms.

### [Quote from Cambridge](#)

"Lucretius presents the most extended consideration we have by an Epicurean of the swerve and freedom ([DRN II 251-93](#)). It comes immediately after his argument that the swerve must exist in order for atoms to collide. Atoms naturally fall straight downwards, and they also move because of collisions and entanglements with other atoms. However, there is a third cause of atomic motion, a random swerve to the side by one spatial minimum, which saves us from what Lucretius calls the "decrees of fate". "

However, if we want to explore "how" the swerve functions within the system of Epicurean philosophy: Lucretius talks about the swerve at the atomic level, but then goes into talking about horses at the starting gate of a race. This excerpt from Lucretius doesn't satisfy me:

### Quote

But that man's mind itself in all it does  
Hath not a fixed necessity within,  
Nor is not, like a conquered thing, compelled  
To bear and suffer,- this state comes to man  
From that slight swervement of the elements  
In no fixed line of space, in no fixed time.

A random swervement seems unlikely to lead to the ability of a "man's mind" to make a choice. If the description here is correct, our choices are random - which seems to me to possibly be worse than determined. If choices are random like the swerve, how could one be held responsible? How could praise and blame be attached to them? We would have no more control over them than random coin flips or rolls of the dice. **\*\*Maybe\*\*** by analogy.... atoms can swerve "on their own", humans can make choices "on their own"... but I don't see how the random swerve can be the mechanism of free choices.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Incremental advances in "scientific" textbooks do not upend basic philosophical conclusions about the nature of life and death, and yet I agree that Epicurus would be the first to accept and incorporate new discoveries.

I fully agree. My contention is that those "basic philosophical conclusions" that make up Epicurean philosophy include (but aren't limited to):

- The universe is material in nature, made of particles and space.
- There are no gods to provide benefit or punishment. We're on our own.

- Pleasure is the "thing" to which all other "things" point.. The endpoint of all actions if asking "Why do you do that?" is pleasure.
- Things like virtue, honor, knowledge, etc. are instrumental ways to achieve pleasure but they aren't the endpoint.
- We live finite lives. Wishing for eternal living wishes one's life away. Live in the here and now, plan for the future but don't be constrained by it, remember pleasant memories of the past, work to make pleasant memories in the future. This life is all we have.
  - We don't exist. We exist. We exist no longer. No reason to fret.

BUT... when it comes to making pronouncements about atoms and physics, we leave the specific details in the past and work with what we have now. Talk of "atoms and void" is certainly acceptable shorthand for a material universe. But if we insist on atoms falling "straight down" and randomly swerving the minutest distance, we will fail to translate Epicurus's core true meaning into a modern vernacular. We cannot be constrained to interpret the philosophy as if we are living in a world 2,300 years old or even 1,900 years old. My contention is that we do Epicurus's insight and foresight and genius a disservice if we do that. I truly believe his philosophy is evergreen and THE most applicable to a modern world, in contrast to the Stoics and their Logos (conveniently left out by modern followers of that philosophy). I think we can re-interpret and update some of Epicurus's terminology and physics and understanding of "how things work" without losing any of the vitality and applicability of his philosophy.

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## Post by “Onenski” of February 27, 2024 at 12:57 AM

Hi guys.

I'd like to say that I prefer not going beyond this point. I feel it has become in some moments a kind of ideological exchange of opinions. According to my hedonistic calculus, is better for me to stop commenting on this and move forward.

[Martin](#), thanks for your comments. I disagree with them, but I'll attribute my disagreement to a flaw in my understanding of your ideas.

At least, I think we've advanced in the shared understanding of this aspect of Epicurean philosophy, that means that we no longer take just for granted that the swerve gives us the capacity to make choices. We have reflected on this and now we can form a more refined idea of it. If you let me, I'll do a reconstruction of the positions:

From one side, [Martin](#) saves the swerve. He speculates that we live in an *almost* deterministic scenario. We are already accountable, but the swerve gives us more options (and, it seems that, more options is better for agency and accountability).

For him, the swerve is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for agency and accountability. So, even if we were in a deterministic scenario in the macroscopic level (and Martin speculates we aren't), that wouldn't posit a thread for agency. Therefore, determinism is not a thread at all (first, because he has defined agency in a compatibilist way and, second, because he thinks that the world is not deterministic anyway).

For another side, [Don](#) considers (just like me) that we can abandon the idea of the swerve and stay with the core ideas of Epicurus.

For another last side, [Cassius](#) considers that we can abandon the swerve, because the feeling of free will/agency is prior to any other consideration in the epicurean system, as part of the canonic (possibly, it can be another prolepsis). This means that that feeling doesn't need any argument, basis or proof. It is on the base of the epicurean system.

See you, guys.