

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

Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2019 at 5:56 PM

Questioner:

What's the difference between chance and fate to an epicurean? Do Epicureans believe in chance? I know they don't believe in fate.

Answerer 1:

Whether they espouse it or not, they believe in the slings and arrows of fortune. You cultivate friendships and peace because you are getting buffeted from outside forces. Over which you cannot control...

[Cassius Amicus](#)

"Over which you cannot control..." UNLESS you develop friendships, and you take other precautions, to reduce the possibility of them occurring. If you do take steps, then you do reduce the likelihood of some problems. That is exactly how a prudent person acts, to take into our hands those things that are possible to control.

There's no "fate" by which gods or outside intelligent forces have complete control of the universe. There is an effective "determinism" however in certain non-living aspects of the universe, according to the letter to Herodotus (see below). This effective determinism in the way some things work does not however mean that intelligent animals don't have "free will" within certain limits, because we observe that they do, and we ascribe the cause of this to the swerve in the atoms from which the spirit is made.

As to "chance" there's also no god or outside intelligent force rolling dice. There is, however, the swerve, and the main way we see the swerve manifest itself in real life is that intelligent animals have a degree of free will, and are therefore unpredictable.

If you're a particle physicist then you can also discuss swerving at that level, but in the everyday world around us most things we see are the result of natural forces which can or could be predictable if we had enough understanding of all the variables involved.

Or at least that is my understanding of the texts.

Ref - Letter to Herodotus: "Hence, where we find phenomena invariably recurring, the invariability of the recurrence must be ascribed to the original interception and conglomeration of atoms whereby the world was formed."

Lucretius Book 2: "I desire you would attend closely upon this subject, and observe that bodies when they are carried downward through the void in a straight line, do at some time or other, but at no fixed and determinate time, and in some parts of the void likewise, but not in any one certain and determinate place of it, decline a little from the direct line by their own strength and power; so nevertheless, that the direct motion can be said to be changed the least that can be imagined.

[221] If the seeds did not decline in their descent, they would all fall downwards through the empty void, like drops of rain; there would be no blow, no stroke given by the seeds overtaking one another, and by consequence Nature could never have produced any thing.

....

[251] Besides, were all motion of the seeds uniform, and in a straight line, did one succeed another in an exact and regular order, did not the seeds, by their declining, occasion certain motions, as a sort of principle, to break the bonds of fate, and prevent a necessity of acting, and exclude a fixed an eternal succession of causes, which destroy all liberty, whence comes that free will, whence comes it, I say, so sensibly observed in all creatures of the world who act as they please, wholly rescued from the power of fate and necessity? That will by which we are moved which way soever our inclination leads us? We likewise forbear to move, not at any particular time, nor at any certain place, but when and here our mind pleases; and without doubt, the will is the principle that determines these motions, and from whence all motion is conveyed to the limbs. Don't you observe, when the barriers of the lists are thrown open of a sudden, the eager desire of the horses cannot start to the race with that celerity as their mind requires? Because the spirits, or particles of matter that maintain the course, must be got together from all parts of the body, and stirred through every limb, and fitly united, that they may readily follow the eager desire of the mind. You see then the beginning of motion rises in the heart, proceeds then by means of the will, and is thence diffused through every limb over the whole body.

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## Post by "C. Florius Lupus" of January 22, 2019 at 8:27 PM

Whether the **Parcae** (Greek: MOIPAI) or **Fortuna** (Greek: TYXH) ultimately rule the world is a very fundamental question and the reason why Stoicism and its belief in determinism has become obsolete.

The three Parcae (Norma, Decima, Morta / ΚΛΩΘΩ, ΛΑΧΕΣΙΣ, ΑΤΡΟΠΟΣ) represent **determinism**. This means the future is unchangeable. Fortuna on the other hand represents **randomness**. It means the future is uncertain and can be changed by our actions.

Until the beginning of the 20th century determinism was the prevalent view. It agreed with Newton's physics. He understood the world as a complex clockwork. If one knew the state of each particle in the universe, one would infallibly be able to calculate and predict exactly the future.

This view was proven wrong by quantum mechanics. We now know that the future state of particles are described by a wave function (**Schroedinger Equation**) of probabilities, which has more than one possible solution. The future can therefore not be predicted and is uncertain. Every present state has many possible futures. Which possible outcome will occur, depends on the observer and has a probability.

Epicurus had realized already 2,300 years earlier that free will is incompatible with determinism. The existence of free will was an observable fact. Therefore the Stoic belief of determinism contradicted empirical evidence.

Determinism is essential for the Stoic **dichotomy of control**. The Stoics taught that all of the outside world is not under our control and are therefore **things indifferent (res indifferentes)**, independent from the question whether they are desirable or undesirable. Only our thoughts are under our control. And they can be virtuous or not. If they are virtuous, they are good, if they are not, than they are bad.

Therefore the Stoics were not interested in the outcome of their action, because they believed it was not under their control anyway. Only the virtue of an action was relevant to them. A Stoic would go into a battle, even if it was extremely unlikely to win, if the battle was virtuous. The outcome of the battle would be indifferent to him, because he believed that he had no control over it to begin with. This created an absurd situation, which was often criticized by Epicureans (e.g. Lucretius).

The dichotomy of control is still a very helpful tool, if applied correctly. An Epicurean knows that he has free will. Therefore his actions often have an influence on the outcome of a situation. If there is a situation where his actions have no influence on the outcome, it is indeed a thing indifferent. If his actions can influence the outcome, he will choose the course of action, which is more likely to achieve the desirable outcome.

Even an Epicurean does not need to worry about things he cannot control (e.g. eventual death) or do not affect him (e.g. problems of people that he does not know). These would be things indifferent. But if something affects him and his actions have an influence on the outcome, then a decision is required and it is not indifferent.

This Epicurean view is actually far more logical (i.e. rational) than the Stoic approach, which usually worships logic over everything.

The fact that Fortuna, not the Fates (Parcae), controls the universe, changes everything. This is where Stoic philosophy went wrong and where Epicureanism was proven right once again.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2019 at 8:45 AM**

Great summary Florus! My comments would be:

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

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

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

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## Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of January 23, 2019 at 2:21 PM

I see you really have an intuitive aversion against Stoicism. 😊 This is the true Epicurean spirit!

However I see that both philosophies have a lot in common, more than either side would admit. Even Seneca and M. Aurelius cannot avoid quoting Epicurus from time to time. The difference between both is that Stoic physics has become obsolete, Epicurean physics has not.

Re: 1a: One of the major obstacles to *ataraxia* (ΑΤΑΡΑΞΙΑ / happiness) these days is worrying about things that we do not need to worry about. Even science is concerned too much about irrelevant issues (like your example the "far side of the moon") .

As Epicurus stated in [PD11](#): "If fears relating to the heavens did not disturb us, and if the terrors of death did not concern us, and if we had the courage to contemplate the natural limits of pain and of desire, we would have no need to study the nature of things."

Why do we need unverifiable theories about black holes, if we have never encountered one?

And regarding ethics: Why do we need to demand social justice for workers in India or China, if we never met one? A lot of unnecessary conflict and suffering is caused by getting involved in things that do not affect us and that we therefore cannot understand in their complexity.

This is what I would call "things indifferent". It is helpful to understand the concept in order to achieve *ataraxia*.

Re: 2: Randomness applies to microscopic details. This is where our freedom lies. On a statistical level, the deterministic laws of cause and effect apply.

It is impossible to predict how an individual will act. But it is quite easy to predict how a large group of people will act. It is impossible to tell, if a particular man is taller than a particular woman without specific data about their height. But it is easy to say that a large group of men will be taller than a large group of women.

Determinism applies to statistics and macroscopic scales. Randomness and probability apply to individual instances.

As individuals we have free will, as a group our behavior is predictable.

This is why the **swerve** is important on a quantum scale, while macroscopic events obey strict causality.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2019 at 2:47 PM

"As individuals we have free will, as a group our behavior is predictable."

Sounds to me like that means you are a market timer in your stock investments -- and that you probably would play indexes rather than individual stocks!;-)

I've been out of the stock market for many years for all sorts of reasons, but yes that is the attitude I would take if I were in it.

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### **Post by "C. Florius Lupus" of January 24, 2019 at 10:07 AM**



Warren Buffett once recommended to put all the savings simply into an ETF tracking the S&P 500 and forget about it. On the long run you cannot go wrong with it.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2019 at 5:51 PM**

OK I can't hit the "like" or the "dislike" button on that. Buffett has made more money than I'll ever dream of having, so who I am to question his success, but I'll still say that I've forsworn ever participating in the stock market again. 😊

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### **Post by "Martin" of January 26, 2019 at 4:35 AM**

Florius, I appreciate your clarity and depth regarding philosophy and agree mostly with your comments. Now, I found 3 items where I disagree. Here is the first one:

"Why do we need unverifiable theories about black holes, if we have never encountered one?"

Black holes are an important part of cosmology and therefore directly relevant for our understanding of the world. Although we may not be able to verify all details of the models of black holes, we have sufficient evidence of their existence and therefore encounter them remotely. E.g. we are fairly sure that there is one in the center of our galaxy.

Our offspring might even accidentally produce one in a future accelerator and better will have a fairly good understanding before taking that risk.

That black holes are often in the science headlines reflects rather public interest than that current science was putting a lot of effort on them. The percentage of researchers in that field is extremely small. I am an old physicist and have never knowingly met any of them in person.

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### **Post by “Martin” of January 26, 2019 at 4:36 AM**

"Why do we need to demand social justice for workers in India or China, if we never met one?"

Because that social injustice makes them unfairly compete with our offspring for jobs and has reduced potential growth of our own paychecks for 2 decades already. The loss of mass-manufacturing in Europe and North America is a major contributor to unpleasant political developments. Therefore, it is in our own interest to support social justice in Asia. Another reason is to prevent undesirably large streams of migrants.

As lab manager at manufacturing service factories in Thailand since 2004 and in other jobs already since 1996, I have unintentionally been supporting economic globalization. I am pleased to see how much social progress local engineers have made but I am very dissatisfied with the meager progress of workers' rights and prosperity at lower levels. That lack of progress has certainly contributed to the dramatic drop in Thailand's political stability since 2005.

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### **Post by “Martin” of January 26, 2019 at 4:45 AM**

"Determinism applies to statistics and macroscopic scales. Randomness and probability apply to individual instances.

As individuals we have free will, as a group our behavior is predictable.

This is why the swerve is important on a quantum scale, while macroscopic events obey strict causality."

These assertions are typically adequate but not in general/strictly:

Instead of boiling smoothly at 100 C as usual, a large portion of liquid water may overheat considerably above 100 C and then suddenly evaporate by a large percentage with explosive

power.

A totalitarian regime may appear to be stable and invincible for decades and then quickly crumble in an unexpectedly successful revolution (France 1789, East Germany and Romania 1989, in a wider sense the victory of the American independence movement over the UK, the victory of the meager remainder of the Texan "army" against the much larger contingent of the Mexican army at San Jacinto 1836).

So, the swerve may become important for macroscopic events but this is just much less often observed than at a quantum scale (and in complex non-linear systems which by their structure amplify quantum fluctuations or other microscopic fluctuations to macroscopic events), where swerve may happen at a rate of about every millisecond.

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## **Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of January 26, 2019 at 6:22 PM**

Let me address the three mentioned issues:

### **1. Black Holes:**

It is probably not the right place to go into astrophysical details and apparent flaws in current theories (According to General Relativity time stands still at the event horizon, therefore nothing can ever cross it and reach the point where not even light can escape.).

For an Epicurean there is a different problem: Which of the proposed effects of black holes have we actually perceived with our senses (or instruments)? The Hawking radiation for example cannot be measured. It can only be mathematically deduced. So what is its relevance for us, if we do not experience it? If we had measurable data, we could easily form explanations and theories. The fewer data we have, the more difficult the explanation becomes. But at the same time it is less important for us and our wellbeing.

For Epicurus observation comes first. The purpose of science is only the explanation of these observations and how good this explanation is for future observations.

Unfortunately modern theoretical physics works reversed. They come up with a theory, and then they search desperately for observations to confirm it.

**If we have no observation, we do not need a theory.**

### **2. Social Injustice**

In your example not the social injustice of the worker in Thailand is the problem, but the pressure on our own labor market and the reduced salaries of us and our friends (reduced pleasure).

Insisting on fair working conditions and wages in Thailand is not the only possible solution, but a solution can also be reached by import tariffs to name just one example.

Justice for people we have no covenant (*contrat social*) with, should not worry us. Often outside intervention causes more harm than benefit ("The road to hell is paved with good intentions"). I would say that the Thai workers know best, what is good for them. If everyone cares for himself, everyone is taken care of.

This way we avoid unnecessary worries and unnecessary conflict.

### 3. Randomness in Macroscopic Events

Under normal pressure I would only expect small bubbles to have slightly higher temperatures than 100° C, before they evaporate. I doubt that this would be possible for large quantities like a cubic meter of water.

Historic events can depend on individual persons. This is true (similar to Schrodinger's Cat whose life depends on a quantum event). But the social circumstances usually trigger this event sooner or later.

Isaac Asimov described in his "Foundation" series a new branch of science dealing with the prediction of historical developments not by predicting singular incidents, but statistical analysis of social developments. He called it "psychohistory".

There are also recent scientific papers that seem to prove Asimov right. (e.g. <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/3663/3040#p4>)

The more data we look at, the more predictable major developments become. So both phenomena have their place: Epicurus' swerve for particles and free will of individuals, determinism for huge objects or group behavior.

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Nice to see that you are in Thailand! I plan to relocate there in March.



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**Post by "Martin" of January 26, 2019 at 10:09 PM**

Thanks for the details. On the 3 items, let us agree to disagree, especially since they are mostly outside philosophy.

I hope we can meet up occasionally when you are here.

I will be on a time-out in Germany for about 2 months from April, and sooner or later after that 2 weeks in Canada. So, if we cannot meet soon after your arrival, we should have plenty of opportunity in the second half of the year. To discuss details, we should eventually use private communication channels.

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**Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2019 at 9:40 AM**

Wow a detailed discussion. TWO of us living in Thailand of all places? First Martin now Florius?