

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

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Whether the **Parcae** (Greek: ΜΟΙΡΑΙ) or **Fortuna** (Greek: ΤΥΧΗ) 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.