

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

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](#) 😊