

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

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 Dennett'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.