

# How would Epicurus view "differences from the start of life that are out of our control?"

**Post by "Cassius" of December 6, 2022 at 7:39 PM**

Here's a question I was asked earlier today, along with my first response, which I will post publicly as I am sure others can offer more complete thoughts than these:

Question:

"Do you know of any material on how Epicurus viewed differences from the start of life that are out of our control? For example, a baby being born into a rich family vs. a poor family and having more opportunities, or being born in adverse racial or ethnic or religious or other circumstances? Are these initial differences determined by Nature? I think not because that would imply some divine intervention?"

Response:

That's a good question and at first glance I am not aware of anything "completely" on point but I would point to several things that I think would lead to the answer pretty clearly.

As stated in the letter to Menoeceus and in other fragments Epicurus was against the idea that there is any "necessity" in human affairs, or that the gods intervene to produce their desired results. Therefore I think he would say that yes, there are natural inequalities of circumstances as a result of "accidents" of birth, but no, as you indicate, these circumstances are not determined by any predefined order by the gods or any kind of intentional fate, not directly nor by using "nature" as their tool.

Plus, we know from Lucretius that souls do not wait in line or choosing lots waiting to be born into particular bodies.

Another important thing is that we also know from Lucretius that through the use of human reason we can overcome many prejudices and circumstances. Lucretius indicates that there are natural limits to what can be accomplished through our own actions, and certainly people are born all the time with illnesses or disabilities which have no cure and hobble them for life or lead to early death.

But I think Epicurus would also say that even though many things are fully "accidental" as a result of the swerve of the atoms, there are also many things (and probably even true to say "most" things) that are not fully "accidental." "Most" things in the universe at large are in fact

the purely mechanistic result of the atoms moving through the void and bouncing off each other or combining in completely natural ways. In most of those atomic combinations the swerve is not sufficient to break the deterministic "billiard-ball" chain of action and reaction. In support of that I have seen this reference to "law of regular succession" cited from the letter to Herodotus:

"[77] Furthermore, the motions of the heavenly bodies and their turnings and eclipses and risings and settings, and kindred phenomena to these, must not be thought to be due to any being who controls and ordains or has ordained them and at the same time enjoys perfect bliss together with immortality (for trouble and care and anger and kindness are not consistent with a life of blessedness, but these things come to pass where there is weakness and fear and dependence on neighbors). Nor again must we believe that they, which are but fire agglomerated in a mass, possess blessedness, and voluntarily take upon themselves these movements. But we must preserve their full majestic significance in all expressions which we apply to such conceptions, in order that there may not arise out of them opinions contrary to this notion of majesty. Otherwise this very contradiction will cause the greatest disturbance in men's souls. Therefore we must believe that it is due to the original inclusion of matter in such agglomerations during the birth-process of the world that this law of regular succession is also brought about."

That's the Bailey translation but there are others that I think make that underlined sentence even more clearly indicate that certain things that we might think of as "inert" matter do in fact conduct their functions in billiard ball fashion, straight from as far back in time as when that particular part of the universe was originally formed.

I should add I think there's also a possible reference (Lucretius?) that the swerve might have been involved in the original formation of worlds in promoting the atoms becoming intertwined in the first place. But I am pretty sure I have also seen it argued persuasively that it isn't logically necessary that the swerve keep happening all the time in order for what we observe to be taking place to occur, so the main observation that leads to the deduction that the swerve exists is the free agency of higher animals.

This is a fascinating topic to me because it involves the issue of "how far does the swerve go in creating indeterminacy?" I think some people take the swerve way too far, and think it means that because atoms can swerve, anything can happen at any time. My view is that that would be an extreme position which cannot possibly be what Epicurus meant. My view comes from one of my favorite Epicurean articles of all time, which is called "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" by A.A. Long. It can be found here: [Article Added: A A Long's "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism"](#)

I highly recommend that article to anyone who is interested in issues involving determinism or the swerve. The article covers a lot of ground, but the main takeaway I remember from it is that Long concludes from the texts that Epicurus held that the effect of the swerve is very limited:

the swerve only "breaks through" to create visible results in our world only in a limited number of circumstances, primarily circumstances involving indeterminacy which we can see for ourselves, like the "free will" of higher animals to make their own decisions. Long argues that if the swerve was so pervasive that we could observe anything happening at any time, that observation (of all events being totally unpredictable) would undermine the entire foundation of atomism. If anything can happen at any time then atomism would be a totally untenable position and totally incapable of explaining the very many instances of the regular mechanistic workings of nature.

There's also an [article by David Sedley](#) which comes from another angle. Sedley suggests that the swerve really was not a physics position in the first place, but a deduction from human free will that was grafted back into the physics later, rather than emerging from as starting point in the physics. If I recall correctly, the Sedley article would be consistent with the Long article in limiting the indeterminacy caused by the swerve. In both arguments, even though the majority of things that happen in the universe are not "intended" by anyone or anything -- they do happen in a mechanistic and predictable fashion.

To summarize looking back at the original question: "Yes - determined by Nature" but "No - not as the result of any intentional or conscious plans by gods or nature."

If anyone else has any comments on this question please add them!

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### **Post by "ccarruth42" of December 6, 2022 at 9:44 PM**

Thanks Cassius. also, i found the Long article here

<http://newepicurean.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Long-ChanceAndNaturalLawInEpicureanism.pdf>

But there is something in the question that is more precisely focused on the social context that can't be explained by genetics (like being born with some physical attribute). Also, maybe this wouldn't have been a question for Epicurus without the social mobility that many people experience today. Maybe the question is more precisely about justice so I'll explore the Forum on that [here](#)

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### **Post by "ccarruth42" of December 6, 2022 at 10:13 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2770-how-would-epicurus-view-differences-from-the-start-of-life-that-are-out-of-our-c/>

I think your response to Don [here](#) is very applicable here

#### Quote

In many ways i think discussions like this remind us what a "high-level" we are dealing with here. Like Cicero said somewhere, Epicurean philosophy is not really very difficult to understand. The big picture comes down to denial of the allegations of the major competitors - There IS no god, there IS no life after death, there IS no otherworldly realm of absolute truth. There is for us only our natural world, during our lifetimes, and nothing from nature giving us any "stop" or "go" feedback other than pain and pleasure.

Much of what Epicurus is doing is simply exploding the opposition, and then pointing to the basic aspects of nature and saying: "This is what you have to work with - go to it with these basics as best you can."

Maybe the simple answer is that the differences at birth just ARE. Those differences don't prevent one person from experiencing pleasure and the other not as they both grow, feel, and make choices.

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### Post by "Don" of December 6, 2022 at 10:26 PM

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

Question:

"Do you know of any material on how Epicurus viewed differences from the start of life that are out of our control? For example, a baby being born into a rich family vs. a poor family and having more opportunities, or being born in adverse racial or ethnic or religious or other circumstances? Are these initial differences determined by Nature? I think not because that would imply some divine intervention?"

Fascinating question. I would reference VS09. From my perspective, this Vatican Saying addresses "differences from the start of life that are out of our control." It's also a clever bit of writing from Epicurus. The original Greek reads "κακὸν ἀνάγκη, ἀλλ' οὐδεμία ἀνάγκη ζῆν μετὰ ἀνάγκης." Note those three occurrences of ἀνάγκη/ἀνάγκης. The word itself means force, constraint, or necessity; so a literal translation would be something like "An evil, necessity (is);

but (there is) no necessity to live in the midst of necessity." This retains the clever wordplay but is honestly a little clunky in English. To get the import of the statement, a paraphrase is better. Consider what he is saying. Being constrained - or perceiving or assuming that you are constrained - in your choices is an evil. If you have only one choice - or feel you only have one choice - that is an evil and thus painful. However, we have free will, so we are not required to live having our choices curtailed and constrained. Even if we make choices we don't want to make, we are exercising our free will. "I don't want to go to work today, but I have to." No, you don't. You could quit. But are you ready to face the consequences of quitting your job? You can consciously decide today is not the day I quit. I make the decision to get up and do the work. Likewise, maybe getting a new job is the right decision. Weigh your options. Exercise your faculty of choice and rejection. You are not forced to be forced to do something.

In the current discussion, this implies that one is not ultimately constrained by their birth situation - albeit with important caveats.

Epicurus encourages us to make prudent choices and rejections and to practice well.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 7, 2022 at 5:40 AM**

Good answer Don. As a further extension I also feel compelled (sort of a pun there) to add that there is also the slightly less agreeable (but still true) implication that we are "able to leave when the play has ceased to please us" -- meaning that under truly horrible circumstances there is always the possibility of taking our "final exit."

And yes as I was reading the question I was also thinking that the question was probably aimed at the social implications, but i think it is pretty clear that there is no divine or other conscious intention behind what is. As ccaruth said, these differences just "are." Probably in this context there are other Lucretian passages worth consideration, in that he discusses the personalities / characteristics of different types of animals as arising from the different types of atoms and ways they are combined. That would no doubt apply to humans as well, even though we have more discretion over what to do with our atoms than lower animals do with theirs.

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### **Post by "Pacatus" of December 9, 2022 at 12:21 AM**

I'll just add that some of us are "slow learners" when it comes to social conditioning, and it takes us longer to (even try to) unravel the "slow, piece-by-piece hypnosis" that was imposed

on us in our formative years. I'm at the start of my seventh decade and I'm still working at it ... ☐

And sometimes it takes some traumatic event to kick-start us (mine in my fourth decade).

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### **Post by “Little Rocker” of December 9, 2022 at 1:57 PM**

One of my favorite passages in Lucretius (to which Cassius alludes, I think, above) talks about the explanations of human dispositions and behaviors at the atomic level (DRN 3: @310, attached). This is one of those great Epicurean science passages, actually, because it's like, 'trust me, there's a physical explanation. I just can't give it to you here, but it's definitely physical.' I find it interesting that he says we can change, but never entirely--some things can't be erased.

As for the effects of environment/circumstance rather than pure physiology, I remember one passage in Philodemus (also attached) where he says that the proper practitioner of 'frank speech' will know a lot about the person's 'birth and upbringing' because that influences their receptivity to frank speech and what kind of frank speech works best.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 9, 2022 at 3:22 PM**

Yes thank you that is exactly the passage I was thinking about, but was not nimble enough to find and cite quickly! Definitely a hugely important element of Epicurean psychology relevant to many issues, and another example of how there are both changeable and unchangeable aspects that have to be considered:

The mind contains as well the element of heat, which it displays when it seethes with anger and fire flashes fiercely from the eyes. It also contains an abundance of that chill breath, the attendant of fear, which provokes shuddering in the limbs and makes the frame tremble. It contains too that still, calm air, which is in evidence when the breast is tranquil and the countenance unclouded. But heat is the element that predominates in those creatures whose hearts are fierce and whose irascible minds readily seethe with anger. First and foremost in this class are lions, so strong and ferocious: often they growl and roar until they burst their bellies, since they are unable to repress their tempestuous rage. On the other hand, the chill minds of deer contain more wind and are quicker to send icy currents of air blowing through the flesh, thus inducing a trembling motion in the limbs. Again, the predominant element in the vital principle of cows is placid air: these beasts are never unduly inflamed and impassioned by the smoky torch of anger or blinded by its murky shadow; nor are they pierced and paralyzed by icy shafts of fear: they stand midway between deer and savage lions.

It is the same with human beings. Although education may give certain people equal refinement, it cannot obliterate the original traces of each individual's natural disposition. We must not suppose that faults of character can be extirpated, and that it is possible to stop one person from being excessively prone to sudden fits of rage, another from succumbing a little too readily to fear, and a third from accepting certain situations more meekly than one should. And in many other respects people must differ in character and consequently in behavior. But for the moment I cannot explain the secret causes of this variety or find names for all the atomic conformations that give rise to it. What I see that I can affirm in this connection is that the surviving traces of our natural dispositions, which philosophy is unable to erase, are so very faint that there is nothing to prevent us from living a life worthy of the gods.<sup>25</sup>