

# Starting Discussion of "Free Will"

**Post by "Cassius" of January 29, 2018 at 5:49 PM**

This is a hot topic that flares up regularly. If anyone has anything to offer on this to get the ball rolling, please go ahead. Otherwise at some point I'll find a way to phrase the question so we can at least get the ball rolling. The key passages are at the end of the Letter to Menoecus, one of more Vatican Sayings, and this from Lucretius: (Martin Ferguson Smith, the best and most recent translator, from Lucretius Book 2):

"Moreover, if all movements are invariably interlinked, if new movement arises from the old in unalterable succession, if there is no atomic swerve to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of an endless chain of causation, what is the source of this free will possessed by living creatures all over the earth? What, I ask, is the source of this power of will wrested from destiny, which enables each of us to advance where pleasure leads us, and to alter our movements not at a fixed time or place, but at the direction of our own [260] minds? For undoubtedly in each case it is the individual will that gives the initial impulse to such actions and channels the movements through the limbs.

Have you not observed too that, at the very moment when the starting gates are opened,<sup>16</sup> the horses, despite their strength and impatience, cannot burst forward as suddenly as their minds desire? The reason is that the whole mass of matter throughout the whole body must be actuated: only when the whole frame has been actuated can it respond with energy to the eagerness of the mind. So you can see that the initial movement is produced by the mind: it originates from the act of mental [270] will, and is then diffused through every part of the body."

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**Post by "Maciej" of January 29, 2018 at 7:59 PM**

Another fragment from Lucretius Dn 4.878 -898 same translation

"Now I will explain how it is that we can step forward when we wish, and move our limbs at will, and what the force is that propels the huge bulk of our body. I want you to take in what I say.

I maintain, as I have maintained before, that first of all images of

movement present themselves to the mind and impinge on it. Then comes the act of will: no one can begin to do anything until the mind has foreseen what it wills to do; and what it foresees is determined by the image. So, as soon as the mind stirs itself in such a way that it wishes to move forward, it acts on the spirit, whose force is disseminated through all the limbs and members of the body; and this is easily done, since mind and spirit are intimately connected. The spirit in its turn acts on the body. and so little by little a forward motion is imparted to the whole mass. Moreover, once in motion, the body becomes rarefied and air, as one would expect of a substance that is always quick to move, penetrates the opened pores in an abundant stream and is thus distributed to every minute part of the body. So the body is driven forward by these two separate forces like a vessel propelled by the action of wind upon its sails."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 29, 2018 at 8:41 PM**

An excellent catch Maciej! The entire topic of "images" gets far too little attention in our online discussions, and it definitely relates to "free will." I think somewhere (maybe more than one place) Cicero ridicules the Epicurean treatment of images. Found one here:

CICERO TO C. CASSIUS LONGINUS (AT BRUNDISIUM), January 45 BC

***I think you must be a little ashamed at this being the third letter inflicted on you before I have a page or a syllable from you. But I will not press you: I shall expect, or rather exact, a longer letter. For my part, if I had a messenger always at hand, I should write even three an hour. For somehow it makes you seem almost present when I write anything to you, and that not "by way of phantoms of images," as your new friends express it, who hold that "mental pictures" are caused by what Catius***

***called “spectres”—for I must remind you that Catus Insuper the Epicurean, lately dead, calls “spectres” what the famous Gargettus, and before him Democritus, used to call “images.”***

***Well, even if my eyes were capable of being struck by these “spectres,” because they spontaneously run in upon them at your will, I do not see how the mind can be struck. You will be obliged to explain it to me, when you return safe and sound, whether the “spectre” of you is at my command, so as to occur to me as soon as I have taken the fancy to think about you; and not only about you, who are in my heart’s core, but supposing I begin thinking about the island of Britain—will its image fly at once into my mind? But of this later on.***

Maciej do you have an opinion on what Epicurus was saying about free will here? (Bailey translation):

"He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfil and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame. For, indeed, it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation. As to chance, he does not regard it as a god as most men do (for in a god’s acts there is no disorder), nor as an uncertain cause (of all things) for he does not believe that good and evil are given by chance to man for the framing of a blessed life, but that opportunities for great good and great evil are afforded by it. He therefore thinks it better to be unfortunate in reasonable action than to prosper in unreason. For it is better in a man’s actions that what is well chosen (should fail, rather than that what is ill chosen) should be successful owing to chance."

Text is here: <https://archive.org/stream/Epicuru...ge/n89/mode/2up>

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**Post by “Maciej” of January 30, 2018 at 4:43 PM**

I see here 4 observations about "free will" in this fragment:

1. It is one of the three powers that determine course of events.
  2. It gives us control over some events.
  3. What is in our control is subject to no master (other than us). Implicitly it depends on us.
  4. To that which is in our control is naturally attached praise and blame.
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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2018 at 6:28 PM**

Good breakdown Maciej. Everything in that list seems eminently sensible to me, and it is frustrating that people with other agendas seem to want to insist on definitions of "Free will" that no one in their right mind, on either side of the debate, should consider to be reasonable.

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### **Post by "Maciej" of January 30, 2018 at 6:43 PM**

What do you mean?

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2018 at 8:13 PM**

What I keep running into is the two extremes - some people want to define free will as "there are absolutely no limits on anything I want to do" which is obviously untrue.

Then there is "there is absolutely nothing I can choose for myself" even whether i pick salt or pepper, and that seems to me to be equally absurd.

It seems obvious to me that the common sense position is similar to what you have listed - some things are in our control, some things out,

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## **Post by “EricR” of February 3, 2018 at 10:39 AM**

This is among my favourite topics. The philosophical and psychological debate has raged forever and for me it seems to come down the "momentary ability to assess information and choose what is correct".

Here is my blog about it. <http://mindmusing.net/free-will/> which explains this is more (but not tons of) detail.

I make no claims as to how or why or to what extent our will is free. Bigger brains than mine have grappled with that down the ages. 😊

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## **Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 10:58 AM**

Great essay Eric! and it is a good thing that we enjoy that debate because it never goes away. And maybe that's why Epicurus basically laughed at it with:

VS42 - The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity.

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## **Post by “KDF” of March 25, 2018 at 2:43 PM**

In my [Epicurean Outline](#) I noted my view on free will:

1. We live in a deterministic universe. There is no free will, but as conscious beings that can never be aware of our own lack of free will, this lack is not relevant to how we find meaning in our lives. (I think that Christopher Hitchens put it best when he said that he believes in free will, because he "has no choice.")<sup>1</sup>

I arrived at the conclusion that the lack of free will is not contradictory to living a purpose and meaning driven life after several years of reading and contemplation. The conclusion follows from several points that I believe to be true:

1. The evidence for determinism is compelling (I am not sure that it is worth rehashing this in the context of how it relates to epicureanism in this thread, but I would be happy to discuss)
2. "The Swerve", and its analogs in more recent scientific discoveries (e.g. quantum physics and the uncertainty principle) if proven do not form the basis for a belief in free will. In other words, if there is indeterminacy it does it follow that some type of agency can control one's thoughts and actions.
3. If our conscious experience is that of having free will, why does it matter if we do or do not. We will always act and feel as if we have free will.
4. If our end is to increase happiness by avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure (in an orthodox epicurean sense), why would lack of free will have relevance.

I know that some of what I write above may challenge a core principal of epicureanism. It is not my intent to overturn or diminish any aspect of the ethical principals - I hold these principals to be cohesive and consistent with my personal philosophy. I am hoping to reconcile my epicurean principals with a lack of belief in free will. I believe that it is possible, but am certainly open to be convinced otherwise.

1 It might be worth noting that Christopher Hitchens called himself an Epicurean.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 25, 2018 at 3:56 PM**

Thank you for posting this! It's a very important issue and we need to discuss it thoroughly. It's going to take time but I know several people are here are interested in this so let's explore it in as much detail as we can.

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### **Post by "EricR" of March 25, 2018 at 5:46 PM**

[KDF](#) Have you read my blog post on Free Will? If so, I would love to read your response to the central question I pose there. Namely, if we cannot make any free choices, how can we assess evidence and come to a conclusion about something being true or false?

Why bother giving any topic the thought and examination in order to come to a conclusion? We have no choices so it's all a waste of time. Further, why present any arguments or evidence in order to persuade someone of an alternate position to the one they hold? They cannot make any choices about what is true or false, and even if they do seem to, how can we know if they

are correct? We have no free will with which to assess anything. Without free will, how can we have knowledge?

Please forgive me if I am being a pain about this. 😊 Also, understand that I am not talking about some kind of ghost in the machine that is free of all influences. I am talking a level of evolutionary complexity that over the vastness of time has given rise to our unique ability to "know that we know" and make choices about what is true or false.

Perhaps I'm way off base on this and someone can show me how to have knowledge without free will. I am open to ideas.

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### **Post by "KDF" of March 25, 2018 at 8:16 PM**

Eric,

I think you have outlined many of the central questions around the free will debate. My view is that the conscious experience of having free will is the same as the conscious experience of lacking free will. In other words, one wouldn't know the difference empirically (or with your senses).

The very act of reading these words may (or may not) change your mind about free will. Either way it won't be your "free" choice, but it will impact your thinking in some way. The non-conscious lack of free will does not alter the fact that new information or new relationships change the course of our lives and thinking.

Thank you for your reply, and I a very much appreciate the interest on this topic.

Kevin

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 25, 2018 at 9:07 PM**

I hope this isn't a tangent, and I don't mean it to be argumentative, but here is an aspect of this discussion I have never understood:

If "the conscious experience of having free will is the same as the conscious experience of lacking free will. In other words, one wouldn't know the difference empirically (or with your senses)"

Then why is this issue of such great importance to hard determinists? It is always been my observation that hard determinists are much more interested in refuting free will than those who hold free will are in refuting hard determinism.

In Epicurus' position, it seems to me that he decided to weigh in on the issue because the existence of the hard determinist argument poses a hurdle to happiness for those who think that hard determinism means that they have no ability to work to make their own lives more happy. So that was Epicurus' motivation for the argument.

What is the motivation of the hard determinists?

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### **Post by “KDF” of March 25, 2018 at 9:41 PM**

Cassius, it seems that we are perhaps choosing different paths to the same destination. I am a hard determinist, because I have trouble arriving at another view. However, I don't feel that my view robs me of the ability to work to make my life more happy - I view hard determinism as peripheral to the importance of consciously pursuing happiness. If I became convinced of free will, no other aspect of my philosophy would change.

Again, please note that I hold my view on free will to be consistent with an epicurean philosophical outlook.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2018 at 5:29 AM**

Thank you for discussing this so civilly as it frequently becomes more heat than light. The great benefit of this forum software is that we can pick up the conversation and add to it over time. This is a topic I need to look further into as I have never pursued it in the detail necessary to be fluent in it. In fact, I am not able easily to even draw up a list of the major arguments of the Pro and Con sides, which probably ought to be a starting point (perhaps a new thread in this same forum group.).

Has the topic interested you (or Eric) enough that one of you has already done that?

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### **Post by “EricR” of March 26, 2018 at 6:40 AM**

Kevin, in your Epicurean outline you said: "The fact that that the question of free will has been discussed for millennia, does make me feel like my perhaps over-simplified view may have a huge blind spot. To the extent that the question of free will is interesting to you I welcome any further thoughts."

That is one of the most honest and open statements I've seen on any philosophical topic. Very impressive and trust me, rare. I too try to be open about others' ideas and the likelihood of being blinded by my own notions. 😊

I don't think your view is over-simplified. I think you have thought this through. That you have done this yet still "welcome further thoughts" is commendable. If I may offer a possibility for you to consider - I think your blind spot is that you are using free will to deny free will. Everything you said is based on the ability to assess evidence and decide on conclusions. As I said in my post here <http://mindmusing.net/free-will/> there seems to be something about the psyche must be able to choose what is true or false.

I do not deny the deterministic aspect of nature. It's there to be seen by any thinking person. I also don't understand free will and don't even like the phrase given its religious overtones. I prefer volition. Further, the idea that we are "completely free" is silly. Obviously we react to stimuli, are affected by our environment, influences etc. But somewhere, somehow, we have the ability to make some choices.

You now have the choice about responding to me or not. If you do, you can choose to agree, argue, discuss, condemn, laugh, or insult me. Take a moment to think about how you want to come across in your response. That too is an act of volition.

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### **Post by "KDF" of March 26, 2018 at 5:52 PM**

Eric,

Thanks again for the interesting analysis and discussion. I am trying to tread lightly on this topic, because judging from the responses (as well as from the thousands of pages that have been written on it) it is a topic that individuals feel is central and essential to their philosophical world view. I am coming at this from a perspective of having wrestled with it and then having dismissed it as not relevant to my philosophical views. I dismissed it because I feel that our lack of free will or volition has no impact on one's ethics. We have a perfect illusion of free will, so if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, as far as I am concerned it is a duck.

You make a few points in support of "free will" or volition. I thought that it might be productive to outline my view in response to your points:

1. **"You now have the choice about responding to me or not."** - The fact that I am responding does not prove that I am doing so out of free will. We make what appear to be thousands of choices every day. The fact that these appear to us to be conscious choices does not prove that these choices are not predetermined.
2. **"Everything you said is based on the ability to assess evidence and decide on conclusions."** - If we had the perfect illusion of free will (which I hold that we do) how would the experience of assessing evidence and deciding on conclusions be any different?

Our experience is that we have free will and volition, or as Einstein put it, "We can choose what we do, we just can't choose what we choose." That is enough for me.

Kevin

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 27, 2018 at 3:55 AM**

KDF what is your definition of "free will"? We probably always ought to start at that level.