

Paul Thyry (Baron D'Holbach / Mirabaud) - French / German Sympathizer With Some Epicurean Ideas

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 8:42 AM

Main page of resources on Paul Thyry / Baron D'Holbach / Mirabaud:

[Baron d'Holbach](#)

So the Epicurus "riddle" appears in D'Holbach's "[Good Sense](#):"

§57. When we ask, why so many miserable objects appear under the government of a good God, we are told, by way of consolation, that the present world is only a passage, designed to conduct man to a happier one. The divines assure us, that the earth we inhabit, is a state of trial. In short, they shut our mouths, by saying, that God could communicate to his creatures neither impossibility nor infinite happiness, which are reserved for himself alone. Can such answers be satisfactory? 1st. The existence of another life is guaranteed to us only by the imagination of man, who, by supposing it, have only realized the desire they have of surviving themselves, in order to enjoy hereafter a purer and more durable happiness. 2ndly. How can we conceive that a God, who knows every thing, and must be fully acquainted with the dispositions of his creatures, should want so many experiments, in order to be sure of their dispositions? 3rdly. According to the calculations of their chronologists, our earth has existed six or seven thousand years. During that time, nations have experienced calamities. History exhibits the human species at all times tormented and ravaged by tyrants, conquerors, and heroes; by wars, inundations, famines, plagues, etc. Are such long trials then likely to inspire us with very great confidence in the secret views of the Deity? Do such numerous and constant evils give a very exalted idea of the future state, his goodness is preparing for us? 4thly. If God is so kindly disposed, as he is asserted to be, without giving men infinite happiness, could he not at least have communicated the degree of happiness, of which finite beings are susceptible here below? To be happy, must we have an infinite or divine happiness? 5thly. If God could not make men happier than they are here below, what will become of the hope of a paradise, where it is pretended, that the elect will for ever enjoy ineffable bliss? If God neither could nor would avert evil from the earth, the only residence we can know, what reason have we to presume, that he can or will avert evil from another world, of which we have no idea? Epicurus observed: "either God would remove evil out of this world, and cannot; or he can, and will not; or he has neither the power nor will; or, lastly, he has both the power and will. If he has the will, and not the power, this shews weakness, which is contrary to the nature of God. If he has the power, and not the will, it is malignity; and this is no less contrary to his nature. If he is neither able nor willing, he is both impotent and malignant, and consequently cannot be God. If he be both

willing and able (which alone is consonant to the nature of God) whence comes evil, or why does he not prevent it?" Reflecting minds are still waiting for a reasonable solution of these difficulties; and our divines tell us, that they will be removed only in a future life.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 8:45 AM

Also from "[Good Sense](#)"

§204. Some ancient and modern philosophers have been bold enough to assume experience and reason for their guides, and to shake off the chains of superstition. Democritus, Epicurus, and other Greeks presumed to tear away the veil of prejudice, and to deliver philosophy from theological shackles. But their systems, too simple, too sensible, and too free from the marvellous, for imaginations enamoured with chimeras, were obliged to yield to the fabulous conjectures of such men as Plato and Socrates. Among the moderns, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, etc., have followed the steps of Epicurus; but their doctrine has found very few followers, in a world, still intoxicated with fables, to listen to reason.

In every age, it has been dangerous to depart from prejudices. Discoveries of every kind have been prohibited. All that enlightened men could do, was to speak ambiguously, hence they often confounded falsehood with truth. Several had a double doctrine, one public and the other secret; the key of the latter being lost, their true sentiments, have often become unintelligible and consequently useless.

How could modern philosophers, who, under pain of cruel persecution, were commanded to renounce reason, and to subject it to faith, that is, to the authority of priests; how, I say, could men, thus bound, give free scope to their genius, improve reason, and accelerate the progress of the human mind? It was with fear and trembling that even the greatest men obtained a glimpse of truth; rarely had they the courage to announce it; and those, who did, were terribly punished. With Religion, it has ever been unlawful to think, or to combat the prejudices of which man is every where the victim and the dupe.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 8:47 AM

Also looks like some good leads: "Atheists Before Darwin" which references Jean Meslier:

[Atheists Before Darwin](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

In his 1986 book "The Blind Watchmaker" Richard Dawkins recalls expressing his position that he couldn't imagine being an atheist before Darwin. As it happens,...

www.atheistrepublic.com

Quote

Meslier, like D'Holbach and Diderot after him, proposes a common Enlightenment theme that priests and kings have formed an alliance to keep people under an oppressive and obedient absolute rule in fear. He asks: "Whom does the idea of God overwhelm? Weak men disappointed and disgusted with the world, persons whose passions are already extinguished by age, infirmities, or reverses of fortune."

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 12:23 PM

After reading the first Chapter of "System of Nature" I am very impressed. In general terms I see nothing with which Epicurus would disagree, and it is written in a very clear focus on the conclusions that I think most of us share from reading Epicurus. I don't see direct reference to pleasure and pain but that seems to be implicit. Seems likely that if there prove to be issues it will not be because he hedges on a supernatural god.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 12:42 PM

Stanford philosophy entry on D'Holbach. This indicates he may have been a determinist so it will be interesting to look to see if that deviation from Epicurus is really there as to humans, or if he is just referring to the background majority of events which Epicurus himself held to be determined from the beginning of world formations (letter to Herodotus).

[Paul-Henri Thiry \(Baron\) d'Holbach \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 2:23 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

From the Stanford article. This confirms for me that I don't have a fix at all on how Rousseau fits with Epicurus, because at present for me it's hard to see where Holbach diverges from Epicurus, so it's also hard to see what objection Rousseau had to Holbach.

Quote

Indeed Rousseau, who himself came to feel unwelcome by the coterie, nevertheless memorializes Holbach in *La nouvelle Héloïse*, as the paradoxical figure, Wolmar, an atheist who nonetheless embodies all of the Christian virtues.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 2:41 PM

It seems clear from this chapter that D'Holbach has deviated from Epicurus on the matter of "free will"

[System of Nature - Part 1, Chapter 11](#)

Last paragraph of that chapter:

Quote

The false ideas he has formed to himself upon free-agency, are in general thus founded: there are certain events which he judges necessary; either because he sees they are effects that are constantly, are invariably linked to certain causes, which nothing seems to prevent; or because he believes he has discovered the chain of causes and effects that is put in play to produce those events: whilst he contemplates as contingent, other events, of whose causes he is ignorant; the concatenation of which he does not perceive; with whose mode of acting he is unacquainted: but in Nature, where every thing is connected by one common bond, there exists no effect without a cause. In the moral as well as in the physical world, every thing that happens is a necessary consequence of causes, either visible or concealed; which are, of necessity, obliged to act after their peculiar essences. In man, free-agency is nothing more than necessity contained within himself.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 2:46 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

Assessing whether Holbach differs from Epicurus on the issue of "innate ideas" might be a little trickier than his relationship to "free will." Holbach appears to be campaigning against "innate ideas," which would probably be compatible with Epicurus, but he might go considerably further and deny any innate principles or mechanisms whatsoever. I've only skimmed this chapter:

[System of Nature - Part 1, Chapter 10](#)

Edit: But here is a summary from "[Good Sense](#)," and on first glance this seems to deviate pretty far:

§80. Theologians repeatedly tell us, that man is free, while all their principles conspire to destroy his liberty. By endeavouring to justify the Divinity, they in reality accuse him of the blackest injustice. They suppose, that without grace, man is necessitated to do evil. They affirm, that God will punish him, because God has not given him grace to do good!

Little reflection will suffice to convince us, that man is necessitated in all his actions, that his free will is a chimera, even in the system of theologians. Does it depend upon man to be born of such or such parents? Does it depend upon man to imbibe or not to imbibe the opinions of his parents or instructors? If I had been born of idolatrous or Mahometan parents, would it have depended upon me to become a Christian? Yet, divines gravely assure us, that a just God will damn without pity all those, to whom he has not given grace to know the Christian religion!

Man's birth is wholly independent of his choice. He is not asked whether he is willing, or not, to come into the world. Nature does not consult him upon the country and parents she gives him. His acquired ideas, his opinions, his notions true or false, are necessary fruits of the education which he has received, and of which he has not been the director. His passions and desires are necessary consequences of the temperament given him by nature. During his whole life, his volitions and actions are determined by his connections, habits, occupations, pleasures, and conversations; by the thoughts, that are involuntarily presented to his mind; in a word, by a multitude of events and accidents, which it is out of his power to foresee or prevent. Incapable of looking into futurity, he knows not what he will do. From the instant of his birth to that of his death, he is never free. You will say, that he wills, deliberates, chooses, determines; and you will hence conclude, that his actions are free. It is true, that man wills, but he is not master of his will or his desires; he can desire and will only what he judges advantageous to himself; he can neither love pain, nor detest pleasure. It will be said, that he sometimes prefers pain to pleasure; but then he prefers a momentary pain with a view of procuring a greater and more durable pleasure. In this case, the prospect of a greater good necessarily determines him to forego a less considerable good.

The lover does not give his mistress the features which captivate him; he is not then master of loving, or not loving the object of his tenderness; he is not master of his imagination or

temperament. Whence it evidently follows, that man is not master of his volitions and desires. "But man," you will say, "can resist his desires; therefore he is free." Man resists his desires, when the motives, which divert him from an object, are stronger than those, which incline him towards it; but then his resistance is necessary. A man, whose fear of dishonour or punishment is greater than his love of money, necessarily resists the desire of stealing. "Are we not free, when we deliberate?" But, are we masters of knowing or not knowing, of being in doubt or certainty? Deliberation is a necessary effect of our uncertainty respecting the consequences of our actions. When we are sure, or think we are sure, of these consequences, we necessarily decide, and we then act necessarily according to our true or false judgment. Our judgments, true or false, are not free; they are necessarily determined by the ideas, we have received, or which our minds have formed.

Man is not free in his choice; he is evidently necessitated to choose what he judges most useful and agreeable. Neither is he free, when he suspends his choice; he is forced to suspend it until he knows, or thinks he knows, the qualities of the objects presented to him, or, until he has weighed the consequences of his actions. "Man," you will say, "often decides in favour of actions, which he knows must be detrimental to himself; man sometimes kills himself; therefore he is free." I deny it. Is man master of reasoning well or ill? Do not his reason and wisdom depend upon the opinions he has formed, or upon the conformation of his machine? As neither one nor the other depends upon his will, they are no proof of liberty. "If I lay a wager, that I shall do, or not do a thing, am I not free? Does it not depend upon me to do it or not?" No, I answer; the desire of winning the wager will necessarily determine you to do, or not to do the thing in question. "But, supposing I consent to lose the wager?" Then the desire of proving to me, that you are free, will have become a stronger motive than the desire of winning the wager; and this motive will have necessarily determined you to do, or not to do, the thing in question.

"But," you will say, "I feel free." This is an illusion, that may be compared to that of the fly in the fable, who, lighting upon the pole of a heavy carriage, applauded himself for directing its course. Man, who thinks himself free, is a fly, who imagines he has power to move the universe, while he is himself unknowingly carried along by it.

The inward persuasion that we are free to do, or not to do a thing, is but a mere illusion. If we trace the true principle of our actions, we shall find, that they are always necessary consequences of our volitions and desires, which are never in our power. You think yourself free, because you do what you will; but are you free to will, or not to will; to desire, or not to desire? Are not your volitions and desires necessarily excited by objects or qualities totally independent of you?

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 2:48 PM

As to no life after death D'Holbach appears to track Epicurus. The final sections of this chapter are a list of people who wrote in support of a similar view:

[System of Nature - Part 1, Chapter 13](#)

Quote

The sage and pious Antoninus says, "he who fears death, either fears to be deprived of all feeling, or dreads to experience different sensations. If you lose all feeling, you will no longer be subject either to pain or to misery. If you are provided with other senses of a different nature, you will become a creature of a different species." This great emperor further says, "that we must expect death with tranquillity, seeing, that it is only a dissolution of the elements of which each animal is composed."

To the evidence of so many great men of Pagan antiquity, may be joined, that of the author of Ecclesiastes, who speaks of death, and of the condition of the human soul, like an epicurean; he says, "for that which befalleth the sons of men, befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath: so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast; for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." And further, "wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him."

In short, how can the utility or the necessity of this doctrine be reconciled with the fact, that the great legislator of the Jews; who is supposed to have been inspired by the Divinity, should have remained silent on a subject, that is said to be of so much importance? In the third chapter of Genesis it is said, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 2:56 PM

As to pleasure, I don't get the impression that D'Holbach ties everything to pleasure and pain quite as clearly as does Epicurus, but I may be missing that in earlier chapters. Regardless of that, this chapter and book closing by D'Holbach clearly echoes [PD03](#) and [PDO4](#) in a way I would say is almost unmistakable:

[System of Nature - Part 1, Chapter 16](#)

As long as man desires the continuation of his being, he has no right to call himself completely unhappy; whilst hope sustains him, he still enjoys a great benefit. If man was more just, in rendering to himself an account of his pleasures, in estimating his pains, he would acknowledge that the sum of the first exceeds by much the amount of the last; he would perceive that he keeps a very exact ledger of the evil, but a very unfaithful journal of the good: indeed he would avow, that there are but few days entirely unhappy during the whole course of his existence. His periodical wants procure for him the pleasure of satisfying them; his soul is perpetually moved by a thousand objects, of which, the variety, the multiplicity, the novelty, rejoices him, suspends his sorrows, diverts his chagrin. His physical evils, are they violent? They are not of long duration; they conduct him quickly to his end: the sorrows of his mind, when too powerful, conduct him to it equally. At the same time nature refuses him every happiness, she opens to him a door by which he quits life; does he refuse to enter it? It is that he yet finds pleasure in existence. Are nations reduced to despair? Are they completely miserable? They have recourse to arms; at the risque of perishing, they make the most violent efforts to terminate there sufferings.

Thus because he sees so many of his fellows cling to life, man ought to conclude they are not so unhappy as he thinks. Then let him not exaggerate the evils of the human race, but let him impose silence on that gloomy humour that persuades him these evils are without remedy; let him only diminish by degrees the number of his errors, his calamities will vanish in the same proportion; he is not to conclude himself infelicitous because his heart never ceases to form new desires, which he finds it difficult, sometimes impossible to gratify. Since his body daily requires nourishment, let him infer that it is sound, that it fulfils its functions. As long as he has desires, the proper deduction ought to be, that his mind is kept in the necessary activity; he should gather from all this that passions are essential to him, that they constitute the happiness of a being who feels; are indispensable to a man who thinks; are requisite to furnish him with ideas; that they are a vital principle with a creature who must necessarily love that which procures him comfort, who must equally desire that which promises him a mode of existence analogous to his natural energies. As long as he exists, as long as the spring of his soul maintains its elasticity, this soul desires; as long as it desires, he experiences the activity which is necessary to him; as long as he acts, so long he lives. Human life may be compared to a river, of which the waters succeed each other, drive each other forward, and flow on without interruption; these waters, obliged to roll over an unequal bed, encounter at intervals those obstacles which prevent their stagnation; they never cease to undulate; sometimes they recoil, then again rush forward, thus continuing to run with more or less velocity, until they are restored to the ocean of nature.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 3:12 PM

This "Common Sense" appears to be an interesting collection of what is almost an extended set of "[Principal Doctrines](#)" or written as aphorisms somewhat like Nietzsche.

Here's one that I find helpful in explaining Epicurus' view of "chance," but it may go to far and be read to deny any swerve to atoms:

[Baron D'Holbach - Good Sense \(1-50\)](#)

Quote

§43. "What?" you will say, "is intelligent man, is the universe, and all it contains, the effect of chance?" No; I repeat it, the universe is not an effect; it is the cause of all effects; every being it contains is the necessary effect of this cause, which sometimes shews us its manner of acting, but generally conceals its operations. Men use the word chance to hide their ignorance of true causes, which, though not understood, act not less according to certain laws. There is no effect without a cause. Nature is a word, used to denote the immense assemblage of beings, various matter, infinite combinations, and diversified motions, that we behold. All bodies, organized or unorganized, are necessary effects of certain causes. Nothing in nature can happen by chance. Every thing is subject to fixed laws. These laws are only the necessary connection of certain effects with their causes. One atom of matter cannot meet another by chance; this meeting is the effect of permanent laws, which cause every being necessarily to act as it does, and hinder it from acting otherwise, in given circumstances. To talk of the fortuitous concurrence of atoms, or to attribute some effects to chance, is merely saying that we are ignorant of the laws, by which bodies act, meet, combine, or separate.

Those, who are unacquainted with nature, the properties of beings, and the effects which must necessarily result from the concurrence of certain causes, think, that every thing takes place by chance. It is not chance, that has placed the sun in the centre of our planetary system; it is by its own essence, that the substance, of which it is composed, must occupy that place, and thence be diffused.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2023 at 3:20 PM

This sounds like it was written explicitly for [Joshua](#) to cite on appropriate occasion!

§98. AN EASTERN TALE.

At some distance from Bagdad, a hermit, renowned for his sanctity, passed his days in an agreeable solitude. The neighbouring inhabitants, to obtain an interest in his prayers, daily flocked to his hermitage, to carry him provisions and presents. The holy man, without ceasing, gave thanks to God for the blessings, with which providence loaded him. "O Allah!" said he, "how ineffable is thy love to thy servants. What have I done to merit the favours, that I receive from thy bounty? O Monarch of the skies! O Father of nature! what praises could worthily celebrate thy munificence, and thy paternal care! O Allah! how great is thy goodness to the children of men!" Penetrated with gratitude, the hermit made a vow to undertake, for the seventh time, a pilgrimage to Mecca. The war which then raged between the Persians and Turks, could not induce him to defer his pious enterprise. Full of confidence in God, he sets out under the inviolable safeguard of a religious habit. He passes through the hostile troops without any obstacle; far from being molested, he receives, at every step, marks of veneration from the soldiers of the two parties. At length, borne down with fatigue, he is obliged to seek refuge against the rays of a scorching sun; he rests under the cool shade of a group of palm-trees. In this solitary place, the man of God finds not only an enchanting retreat, but a delicious repast. He has only to put forth his hand to gather dates and other pleasant fruits; a brook affords him the means of quenching his thirst. A green turf invites him to sleep; upon waking he performs the sacred ablution, and exclaims in a transport of joy: "O Allah! how great is thy goodness to the children of men!"

After this perfect refreshment, the saint, full of strength and gaiety, pursues his way; it leads him across a smiling country, which presents to his eyes flowery hillocks, enamelled meadows, and trees loaded with fruit. Affected by this sight, he ceases not to adore the rich and liberal hand of providence, which appears every where providing for the happiness of the human race. Going a little farther, the mountains are pretty difficult to pass; but having once arrived at the summit, a hideous spectacle suddenly appears to his view.

His soul is filled with horror. He discovers a vast plain laid waste with fire and sword; he beholds it covered with hundreds of carcases, the deplorable remains of a bloody battle, lately fought upon this field. Eagles, vultures, ravens and wolves were greedily devouring the dead bodies with which the ground was covered. This sight plunges our pilgrim into a gloomy meditation. Heaven, by special favour, had enabled him to understand the language of beasts. He heard a wolf, gorged with human flesh, cry out in the excess of his joy: "O Allah! how great is thy goodness to the children of wolves. Thy provident wisdom takes care to craze the minds of these detestable men, who are so dangerous to our species. By an effect of thy Providence, which watches over thy creatures, these destroyers cut one another's throats, and furnish us with sumptuous meals. O Allah! how great is thy goodness to the children of wolves!"

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 3:26 PM

On Issues with "Imagination" ---

Frances Wright Chapter 16 A Few Days In Athens:

Man alone, the most gifted of all known existences, doubts the evidence of his superior senses, perverts the nature and uses of his multiplied faculties, controls his most innocent, as well as his noblest impulses, and to poison all the sources of his happiness. To what are we to trace this fatal error, this cruel self-martyrdom, this perversion of things from their natural bent? In the over-development of one faculty and neglect of another, we must seek the cause. ***In the imagination***, that source of our most beautiful pleasures when under the control of judgment, we find the source of our worst afflictions."

D'Holbach:

§109. All religious principles are the work of pure imagination, in which experience and reason have no share. It is extremely difficult to combat them, because the imagination, once prepossessed by chimeras, which astonish or disturb it, is incapable of reasoning. To combat religion and its phantoms with the arms of reason, is like using a sword to kill gnats; as soon as the blow is struck, the gnats and chimeras come hovering round again, and resume in the mind the place, from which they were thought to have been for ever banished. When we reject, as too weak, the proofs given of the existence of a God, they instantly oppose to the arguments, which destroy that existence, an inward sense, a deep persuasion, an invincible inclination, born in every man, which holds up to his mind, in spite of himself, the idea of an almighty being, whom he cannot entirely expel from his mind, and whom he is compelled to acknowledge, in spite of the strongest reasons that can be urged.

But whoever will analyse this inward sense, upon which such stress is laid, will perceive, that it is only the effect of a rooted habit, which, shutting their eyes against the most demonstrative proofs, subjects the greater part of men, and often even the most enlightened, to the prejudices of childhood. What avails this inward sense, or this deep persuasion, against the evidence, which demonstrates, that whatever implies a contradiction cannot exist? We are gravely assured, that the non-existence of God is not demonstrated. Yet, by all that men have hitherto said of him, nothing is better demonstrated, than that this God is a chimera, whose existence is totally impossible; since nothing is more evident, than that a being cannot possess qualities so unlike, so contradictory, so irreconcilable, as those, which every religion upon earth attributes to the Divinity. Is not the theologian's God, as well as that of the deist, a cause incompatible with the effects attributed to it? Let them do what they will, it is necessary either to invent another God, or to grant, that he, who, for so many ages, has been held up to the terror of mortals, is at the same time very good and very bad, very powerful and very weak, unchangeable and fickle, perfectly intelligent and perfectly void of reason, of order and permitting disorder, very just and most unjust, very skilful and unskilful. In short, are we not forced to confess, that it is impossible to reconcile the discordant attributes, heaped upon a being, of whom we cannot speak without the most palpable contradictions? Let any one

attribute a single quality to the Divinity, and it is universally contradicted by the effects, ascribed to this cause.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 3:27 PM

Denunciation of Deism in "[Good Sense](#)":

§118. The Deist exclaims: "Abstain from worshipping the cruel and capricious God of theology; mine is a being infinitely wise and good; he is the father of men, the mildest of sovereigns; it is he who fills the universe with his benefits." But do you not see that every thing in this world contradicts the good qualities, which you ascribe to your God? In the numerous family of this tender father, almost all are unhappy. Under the government of this just sovereign, vice is triumphant, and virtue in distress. Among those blessings you extol, and which only enthusiasm can see, I behold a multitude of evils, against which you obstinately shut your eyes. Forced to acknowledge, that your beneficent God, in contradiction with himself, distributes good and evil with the same hand, for his justification you must, like the priest, refer me to the regions of another life. Invent, therefore, another God; for yours is no less contradictory than that of theologians.

A good God, who does evil, or consents to the commission of evil; a God full of equity, and in whose empire innocence is often oppressed; a perfect God, who produces none but imperfect and miserable works; are not such a God and his conduct as great mysteries, as that of the incarnation?

You blush for your fellow-citizens, who allow themselves to be persuaded, that the God of the universe could change himself into a man, and die upon a cross in a corner of Asia. The mystery of the incarnation appears to you very absurd. You think nothing more ridiculous, than a God, who transforms himself into bread, and causes himself daily to be eaten in a thousand different places. But are all these mysteries more contradictory to reason than a God, the avenger and rewarder of the actions of men? Is man, according to you, free, or not free? In either case, your God, if he has the shadow of equity, can neither punish nor reward him. If man is free, it is God, who has made him free; therefore God is the primitive cause of all his actions; in punishing him for his faults, he would punish him for having executed what he had given him liberty to do. If man is not free to act otherwise than he does, would not God be most unjust, in punishing man for faults, which he could not help committing.

The minor, or secondary, absurdities, with which all religions abound, are to many people truly striking; but they have not the courage to trace the source of these absurdities. They see not, that a God full of contradictions, caprices and inconsistent qualities, has only served to disorder men's imaginations, and to produce an endless succession of chimeras.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2023 at 3:33 PM

Last comment in this series:

This "Table of Contents" of "Good Sense" is a very strong list of important statements on its own. It's hard to see how Epicurus would disagree with any of them except 80-85 as to free will (but unfortunately that's a big exception). The list is much longer than my clip of the first part below, so it's worth clicking through to skim it.

[Baron D'Holbach - Good Sense - Contents](#)

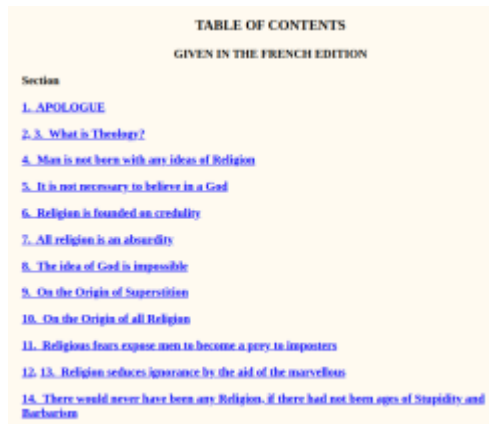


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Post by “Joshua” of December 16, 2023 at 3:34 PM

My father’s rejection of all that is called religious belief, was not, as many might suppose, primarily a matter of logic and evidence: the grounds of it were moral, still more than intellectual. He found it impossible to believe that a world so full of evil was the work of an Author combining infinite power with perfect goodness and righteousness. His intellect spurned the subtleties by which men attempt to blind themselves to this open contradiction. ... His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up factitious excellencies — belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind — and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtue: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it

depicts as eminently hateful.

-John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*

Post by “Joshua” of December 16, 2023 at 3:47 PM

That's a good source [Cassius](#), thank you! I've seen a few articles on the 'death of New Atheism' recently, but in reality this so-called New Atheism is not new at all; it is identical to the old atheism, and is sure to co-exist with religion until the extinction of the species.

Post by “Joshua” of December 16, 2023 at 4:04 PM

You know, the internet has given rise to an interesting and perhaps novel phenomenon. Christians and Muslims, each denying any contradictions in their own holy books, can now be found hunting up and parading the contradictions in the holy books of their adversaries.

You know that scene from *1984* during Oceania's Hate Week, when it is announced that the state is at war with Eastasia and allied to Eurasia? The crowd has just witnessed Eurasian prisoners of war being executed. Well it's like that. The only way to deny the contradictions that exist in both holy books is to willingly blind yourself to them. And, of course, to get angry when the contradictions are pointed out.

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2023 at 1:02 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems clear from this chapter that D'Holbach has deviated from Epicurus on the matter of "free will"

<http://www.ftarchives.net/holbach/system/a11.htm>

Last paragraph of that chapter:

Quote

The false ideas he has formed to himself upon free-agency, are in general thus founded: there are certain events which he judges necessary; either because he sees they are effects that are constantly, are invariably linked to certain causes, which nothing seems to prevent; or because he believes he has discovered the chain of causes and effects that is put in play to produce those events: whilst he contemplates as contingent, other events, of whose causes he is ignorant; the concatenation of which he does not perceive; with whose mode of acting he is unacquainted: but in Nature, where every thing is connected by one common bond, there exists no effect without a cause. In the moral as well as in the physical world, every thing that happens is a necessary consequence of causes, either visible or concealed; which are, of necessity, obliged to act after their peculiar essences. In man, free-agency is nothing more than necessity contained within himself.

I don't have my sources on hand and I'm currently at work. But the conclusion I had with most of my readings of these middle Enlightenment era figures from France and Germany is that the despite the enduring popularity of Lucretius and the increasing anti-clerical sentiment, the rise of this "billiard board" model can be attributed to the profound influence that Newton had on physics and mathematics. We see a general rise in the belief of mechanistic determinism among these Enlightenment Epicureans, most prominently in La Mettrie.

On another note, the "riddle" showing up in Holbach is interesting. I don't know when Laetius was properly introduced, but one of La Mettrie's peers in the court of Frederick the Great owned and cited his copy of Lives and Opinions concerning Epicurus. Perhaps a foggy timeline of Lucretius became conflated with Epicurus' own time.

Post by "Onenski" of December 20, 2023 at 3:22 PM

Thanks for this thread, [Cassius](#). I like and agree with D'Holbach, specially for his naturalism and skepticism of free will. Did you find something on the implications of determinism to moral life?

For example, contemporary proponents of free will skepticism (such as Derk Pereboom) recognize the elimination of desert and, therefore, the absence of justification of punishments,

rewards, guilt, resentment, gratitude and pride (which I honestly consider positive for human societies).

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2023 at 4:34 PM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

For example, contemporary proponents of free will skepticism (such as Derk Pereboom) recognize the elimination of desert and, therefore, the absence of justification of punishments, rewards, guilt, resentment, gratitude and pride (which I honestly consider positive for human societies).

I'm not familiar with Derk Pereboom or the general reference you're making. My personal view I'll admit is more "superficial" from the point of view of how an "average" person would look at it. My general view would be that a regular person would conclude that *If there's no impact you can have on something, then it makes no sense to try to change it.* To a regular unsophisticated person that would be a very damaging attitude to take.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 20, 2023 at 5:11 PM

[Onenski](#)

“Free will” can be a fraught concept. What is generally called “libertarian free will” (which might be what most people mean) is incoherent.

The term I learned in economics is “constrained choice” – which I suspect is closer to another version of free will called “compatibilism”: Yes we choose. But our choices are constrained by our resources, by circumstances and our own abilities – some of which are determined (e.g. by evolution), and some of which result from our own (past) choices.

And strict determinism would mean that our (under that principle, illusory) perception that we do choose is also determined. So it would seem to be a vicious circle: “Why do you think it’s all determined?” “Because I believe determinism is correct.” “Why do you think that?” “Because it’s determined ...”

Post by "Onenski" of December 20, 2023 at 5:13 PM

Thank you, Cassius.

Post by "Onenski" of December 20, 2023 at 5:19 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

"Free will" can be a fraught concept. What is generally called "libertarian free will" (which might be what most people mean) is incoherent

That's exactly the epicurean point of view, so far as I know, right?

I mean, Epicurus was not a compatibilist, he believed that we are free because the world is undetermined.

Post by "Pacatus" of December 20, 2023 at 5:23 PM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

That's exactly the epicurean point of view, so far as I know, right?

I mean, Epicurus was not a compatibilist, he believed that we are free because the world is undetermined.

I think Epicurus thought that some things are determined and some are not (e.g. the "swerve"). Some things are up to us and some are not. If nothing at all is causally determined, then it all becomes random.

Just thinking "out loud" here, but strict determinism and strict randomness would have the same problems (both epistemologically and ethically).

Post by "Pacatus" of December 20, 2023 at 5:34 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

I recall some old philosophical discussions of compatibilism that scrambled my brain. 😞 😬

Basically, I take its foundation to be that although some things are determined beyond our control (and affect the range of available choices in any situation), we are still ethically responsible for our choices because - within those constraints - we do choose (even if those constraints can be mitigating factors, ethically speaking).

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2023 at 5:41 PM

Let me add to the conversation that through all my years of reading Epicurus I have never failed to see how difficult this issue is for those who really want to explore its logical complexities.

At the same time, I've become more and more comfortable taking the position that I am not especially overwrought about the people who want to explore all its logical complexities. 😊

It seems to me that Epicurus was focused on developing a "real-world" frame of reference that can help most every normal person live a better life. From that point of view, there are definitely things that are within our control, while some other things are clearly not. There's a common sense line that doesn't take an advanced degree to figure out.

While we haven't developed the analogy too far yet, that seems to be also what Epicurus was doing with his "canon of truth." What is "real" in life to us is what are feelings and five senses tell us is real (and of course I'll include prolepsis in that as soon as we can be clear what it is). Now of course that kind of point of view is going to leave intellectuals aghast at the logical implications, but that's what matters to the normal person in life, and frankly the elaborate intellectual theories are of little or no use to normal people in unraveling those realities.

I've been thinking about some more general posts on this subject as we end the year but this is a good place to make the same point.

Speaking only for myself here (but that colors the way I work on and write about Epicurus) I think Epicurus' main focus was on helping regular people of normal intelligence be confident of a reasonable framework that addresses the major "big picture" questions of life and therefore helps them live most happily. Chasing down ever rabbit trail toward total logical completeness was not a major aspect of his project, and in fact the further you chase those issues down the more clear it becomes that it's actually damaging to look at and live life that way.

The two biggest practical starting point positions that outweigh all other considerations by far is (1) there's no gods or ideal forms to tell you what to do or punish you for doing wrong, and (2)

when you're dead your dead forever and there will be no future life of reward or punishment or rebirth or anything else. You get one shot at living life, and you want to live it as happily as you can. That's what Epicurus helps us do.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 20, 2023 at 5:48 PM

[Cassius](#)

That’s a good post, and I generally agree. But –

Just like Epicurus’ natural physicalism, a fundamental understanding of how (let alone if) we choose seems basic. Under strict determinism, those who (for example) follow Epicurus and those who follow (say) the Stoics are simply determined to do so – without any actual choice based on study and reflection.

The same for strict randomness: those who are Epicureans and those who are Stoics are just so – randomly (even if they think they have reasonably chosen).

So I do think these are important philosophical questions. (And, as I hope I have made clear, I reject both those polar extremes.)

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2023 at 6:17 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Under strict determinism, those who (for example) follow Epicurus and those who follow (say) the Stoics are simply determined to do so – without any actual choice based on study and reflection.

Right -- and Epicurus says exactly that:

VS09. Necessity is an evil, but [there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity](#).

VS40. 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.

So as I read and interpret his position, it is very important to be very firm: Hard determinism is bunk! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2023 at 6:42 PM

I think I (and if I recall we have here in the past) analogized this to the argument that was used to prove the motion is impossible.

If a particular logical argument seems to lead you in the direction of a position that you are absolutely sure of based on your senses and feelings and prolepsis is correct, then what you throw overboard is that logical argument, not your sensations and your feelings and prolepsis.

No need for hand-wringing -- you **must** trust your natural faculties in order to be able to continue to live. Anything that would lead you in another direction should be rejected out of hand.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 20, 2023 at 7:54 PM

[Cassius](#)

Yes! I only want to add that VS40 is employing deductive logic (here a kind of reductio ad absurdum) in a way that illustrates one of the things deductive logic is good at: illustrating incoherent thinking. However, it is possible to construct a valid deductive syllogism that leads to an empirical falsity (i.e. the syllogism is valid, but not sound).

Empirical arguments (e.g. from the senses, feelings and prolepseis) depend largely on inference from revealed facts: inductive logic. Although none of that was formalized in Greek thinking of the time, Epicurus seems (to me at least) to have been a kind of precursor on that path.

Post by “Onenski” of December 27, 2023 at 11:15 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

Thank you for your great comments, [Cassius](#) and [Pacatus](#) .

I recognize that one of the theses that Epicurus would not have renounced is precisely free will. And to deny it would be to move away from Epicurean philosophy.

Skepticism about free will, I think, is a personal position of mine, and it is perhaps the one that makes me wonder things like: if the study of nature pointed out that we do not have free will, would Epicurus accept it? Or couldn't it be that Epicurus was wrong about this question just as he was wrong about the size of the Sun? Or also, if what matters is practical life for ordinary people, then would it be valid for us to accept things like biases just because we feel it although they are unjustified?

There is a conflict (apparent or real), which D'Holbach recognized, between the study of nature and the belief in an exclusive capacity of human beings not to be subject to prior events, or just those that are convenient for attributing moral responsibility.

I recognize, Cassius, that for the moment it would be very hard for people to live without that belief. The same was said about the belief in God: that people would behave immorally, that one cannot trust in an atheist, or that life would become meaningless. One of my personal projects consists in thinking about a possible way of life that integrates free will skepticism and epicurean philosophy.

In any case, I don't want to be heterodox enough to say that Epicurus was wrong, or anything like that. I know that the purpose of the forum is to discuss Epicurean philosophy as closely as possible to its original sources, and that does not involve a defense of free will skepticism.

What may possibly be pertinent is to seek, over time, a stronger and more robust understanding of Epicurus' position vis-a-vis this kind of skepticism.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2023 at 11:58 AM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

Or also, if what matters is practical life for ordinary people, then would it be valid for us to accept things like biases just because we feel it although they are unjustified?

If when you say "bias" what you are talking about is "stereotypes" or "generalities" then I have had several discussions about this subject recently.

I personally relate this to issues of "statistics."

The nature of a generality is that it is "generally" true, even if exceptions exist. Working with them it is essential to recognize that generalities are "statistically more likely" while at the very same time you are affirming that "exceptions do exist."

Does the fact that exceptions exist nullify the beneficial uses of generalities? I would say clearly "no!" Generally speaking, we can expect the sun to rise in the east tomorrow. Does our firm conviction that the sun will one day explode (or something else bad will happen) mean that we should not plan to get up tomorrow morning? No.

In the case of free will, Epicurus is being very clear that some things are determined while others are not. Both are affirmed to be true. Depending on what you choose to look at, the fact may be that *most* things are determined in some way, and what we have firm control over is a much smaller subset. But it can still be true that both categories exist, and I don't see that we should let one overwhelm the other, any more than we should let the perfect be the enemy of the good. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 27, 2023 at 4:00 PM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

Skepticism about free will, I think, is a personal position of mine, and it is perhaps the one that makes me wonder things like: if the study of nature pointed out that we do not have free will, would Epicurus accept it?

Can I assume that if I were to say: "There is no such thing as free will" that this means that I am not actually choosing anything and that everything always is predetermined by forces outside of my conscious mind? Such that we are saying that what appears to be free will is just an illusion? Or can we say "free will" = an individual's ability to choose.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In the case of free will, Epicurus is being very clear that some things are determined while others are not. Both are affirmed to be true.

Here is an example: I drink a large cup of tea. I then need to go pee. There is something in my mind which is registering pleasure and pain sensations throughout my body, and it is also balanced by my awareness of mental thoughts. Perhaps I am sitting with friends and I want to hear someone finish a story so I sit and wait till the end, and then excuse myself. But maybe I am fed up with hearing a story, so I leave before the end. There are millions of insignificant

events that can't possibly be predetermined. As we become more aware of how to skillfully deal with pleasure and pain, it actually increases our ability to freely choose.

I have more thoughts on this but perhaps I will add more later 😊

Post by “Pacatus” of December 27, 2023 at 4:06 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Can I assume that if I were to say: "There is no such thing as free will" that this means that I am not actually choosing anything and that everything always is predetermined by forces outside of my conscious mind?

Including believing and saying “There’s no such thing as free will.” Or that there is. Or believing that Epicureanism is a better philosophy than Stoicism, and why; or vice versa.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Or can we say "free will" = a individual's ability to choose.

For me, that’s just what it is -- even in the face of constraints that limit our choices and how we are able choose.

Post by “Don” of December 27, 2023 at 4:30 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

There are millions of insignificant events that can't possibly be predetermined.

The predetermined nature of all our choices is exactly what the current crop of the "no free will" crowd says. Their contention is that if we knew the position of every atom and the physical laws that pertained to them, it would be possible to accurately know what would happen next ad infinitum. Just because we don't know how to do that yet doesn't negate the "fact" that there's no free will.

Here are some videos to react to...

<https://youtu.be/vCGtkDzELAI?feature=shared>

<https://youtu.be/3O61I0pNPg8?feature=shared>

<https://youtu.be/HYWiiWpcCIM?feature=shared>

Post by “Pacatus” of December 27, 2023 at 4:35 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Their contention is that if we knew the position of every atom and the physical laws that pertained to them, it would be possible to accurately know what would happen next ad infinitum.

Would that entail that there is no randomness in the system? That every event is perfectly predictable?

Now I want to hear from [Martin!](#) 🤔 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of December 27, 2023 at 5:45 PM

Aren't emergent properties a form of randomness? Or do they fall under the idea of "if we knew enough about everything, we would see how they actually emerged"?

Does "if we knew enough about everything, then we would see how x" mean that as we learn more we will have more free will?

Post by “Onenski” of December 27, 2023 at 6:34 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Can I assume that if I were to say: "There is no such thing as free will" that this means that I am not actually choosing anything and that everything always is predetermined by forces outside of my conscious mind?

For me, another way to see it, [Kalosyni](#) ,

is that the fact that you believe in free will has an explanation that goes beyond your control. It means that you grew up in a certain context, with some genes, certain hormones, that you've had certain experiences, live in a certain cultural context, etc. that explain why you have that belief.

It doesn't mean that you are like a puppet that it's controlled by someone else, it means that even your desires and beliefs are the product of a chain of events prior to you. It also means that there's not a Self above your body who can make choices: you are your body and this body it's immerse in a natural world with laws and different levels of explanation.

It also means that we, human beings, don't have a very special ability, which suspiciously other animals don't have, to make choices out of nothing. Even our small choices have their context and explanation.

Unfortunately, debate on free will tends to focus on very local choices, not in the history of how your intention was formed. For some people is more important to prove that I made certain choice freely, without see any context of my history, than to see what brought me here to choose that thing.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Would that entail that there is no randomness in the system? That every event is perfectly predictable?

There's an important nuance to make. There can be unpredictability even under deterministic processes. In chaotic systems, which can be understood under deterministic functioning, we can't predict the results, but that doesn't mean they are random.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Aren't emergent properties a form of randomness?

That also apply to emergent complexity.

For relevant purposes randomness present in quantum mechanics it's not strong enough to produce relevant consequences to the functioning of neurons (which can be the first level of explanation of human behavior).

I've read these things in Sapolsky's book *Determined* (another recent book about this is Kevin Mitchell's *Free Agents*, this was suggested by [Godfrey](#) last Wednesday).

As I said up, I think this neuroscientific discussion can be enriching for epicurean philosophy, because as it's understood in the debate, Epicurus was a libertarian about free will. That means that, arguably, Epicurus thought that a deterministic world is incompatible with free will. But between those two options he defends the existence of free will, which imply that we live in an indeterministic world (that's why he defends the swerve).

Kevin Mitchell defends that the brain has evolved to work in an indeterministic way so that it can make choices that permits an adaptation to a very changeable world (like a quantum computer). Sapolsky, on the other side, defends that human behavior works in a deterministic way, so we're not morally responsible of what we do.

See you later, guys! 😄

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2023 at 7:28 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Aren't emergent properties a form of randomness? Or do they fall under the idea of "if we knew enough about everything, we would see how they actually emerged"?

That would **not** be my understanding Godfrey. Emergent qualities would arise from the attributes of the atoms and void which make them up in a mechanistic way. There is no function assigned to the swerve of the atom other than free will and bringing atoms together to form worlds in the first place. Sedley thinks the swerve was only developed later in response to the need to respond to the hard determinists.

It's been a long time since I read it but I always recommend the Long article on this -- Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism, the basic thrust of which is to argue that virtually everything in the Epicurean universe IS determined except for the free will of intelligent animals, which is the one place that the swerve "breaks through" into observability. If the swerve were constantly making many things random then the whole basis of atomism would implode because atomism would not be able to explain the regularity that we do see.

File

[Long: "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism"](#)



Long: "Chance and Natural Law In Epicureanism"



Cassius

June 28, 2019 at 8:52 AM

are possible within members of a given species. De Lacy recognizes that there are Epicurean equivalents to natural laws, but I believe Epicurus' restrictions on indeterminate occurrences were much tighter than De Lacy suggests. In particular, he seems to me to lay too much weight on the totally indeterminate and unpredictable 'swerve' of atoms, when he argues that this is responsible for variations within limits, such as the fact that a child sometimes resembles the mother, sometimes the father, sometimes even a grandparent (Lucret. iv.1209-1232).⁸ The swerve of atoms, by definition, is the beginning of a new movement at no determinate time or place (Lucret. ii.218 ff., 251-60); it breaks or interrupts any antecedent set of causes. If Epicurus supposed that the manifold varieties within an animal species were due to the swerve of atoms, he permitted a measure of indeterminateness or purely spontaneous happenings in the world, which made his system appallingly vulnerable to attack by those who looked to the gods as guarantees of order in nature. The atomic swerve was much criticized by opponents of Epicureanism, but never on this obvious ground.⁹ De Lacy, however, is not alone in assuming that Epicurus accepted into his explanation of natural phenomena an element of sheer contingency or indeterminateness. This

If the general line of argument in this paper is sound, Epicurus confined the verifiable evidence of the swerve in nature to 'free' animal behaviour. It is worth noting that his denial of necessity to propositions of the form 'Either Hermarchus will be alive tomorrow or he will not' is illustrated by an example referring to man.⁴⁹ Epicurus was most anxious to free human actions from necessity. But in other respects he developed the model of a world which conforms to natural law. The *foedera naturae* are probably identical to the *foedera fati* except in the case of *libera voluntas*.⁵⁰ If Epicurus was to let nature explain all phe-

nomena and thus discharge gods and final causes from any place in the world, he could make only the most minimal concession to spontaneous or purely contingent events. The atomic swerve is *neque plus quam minimum*, and I conjecture that the scope of its operation in the world is equally minimal. At least it does not have power to counter the *uisitatae aevi leges* and undermine the powers of nature, which are offered in place of the dominion of gods to those ignari *quid quaerit esse,*

Post by "Pacatus" of December 27, 2023 at 7:41 PM

To my (likely limited) knowledge, **strict** libertarian free will entails that our agency (decisions/actions) are *so unconstrained* that, in any exact same situation, one could have *always* chosen differently. This implies that both exogenous circumstance and endogenous circumstances (e.g., my state of mind, education, ability to observe and analyze) are the same, and yet I could have chosen differently in any and every case. Now, if all those circumstances are strictly determinative, then the only way I could have chosen differently is if my choices are

random. That is why I reject strict libertarian free will (again, as I understand it). I don't see Epicurus as a strict free-will libertarian.

That does not mean the only alternative is strict determination. Some constraints (both exogenous and endogenous) may be determinative, others not. In some cases, in some ways, I might have been able to choose otherwise. In some cases, not. Some constraints might be sufficiently determinative as to present mitigating circumstances (ethically); others not so much.

So, I take a kind of middle ground about questions of what could be and what might have been possible.

Post by "Godfrey" of December 28, 2023 at 12:49 AM

When we make choices using whatever degree of free will that's available to us, the effects of those choices form "ripples" in the deterministic fabric. These ripples then determine subsequent events up to the point at which free will occurs in those events. And so on, ad infinitum.

What are the philosophical implications of this? Or are there any? I suppose hard determinists would say that there's no free will available to us, so there are no implications. But if we do have any amount of free will, it seems to me that, over infinite time, the amount of free will would increase exponentially.

Other than a sense of agency v nihilism, what are the practical implications of this debate? I tend to get brain freeze thinking about this 😬

Post by "Martin" of December 29, 2023 at 3:32 AM

Quote

Quote

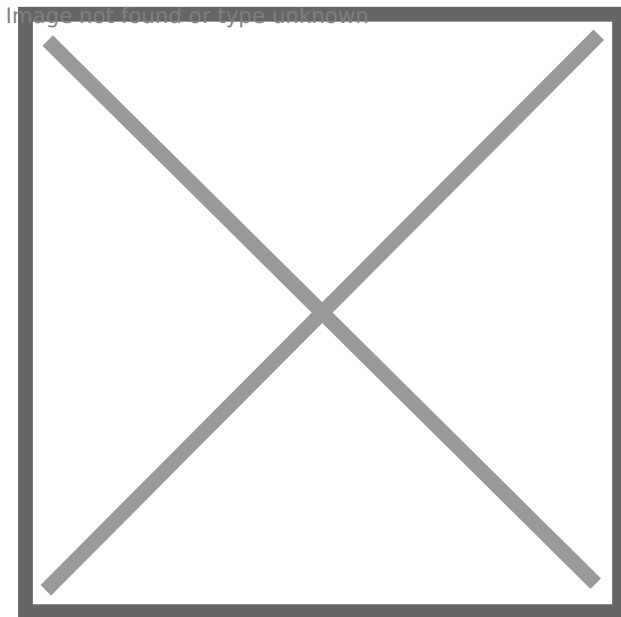
[Quote from Don](#) *Their contention is that if we knew the position of every atom and the physical laws that pertained to them, it would be possible to accurately know what would happen next ad infinitum.*

Would that entail that there is no randomness in the system? That every event is perfectly predictable?

Now I want to hear from [Martin!](#) 🤔

Here is a slightly expanded version of my lost comment from yesterday:

In classical mechanics, there is no principal lower limit to the error with which we can know positions and speeds of bodies like there is in quantum mechanics. However, the error will never be reduced to 0. The residual error will propagate to large errors with time. That means events in the far future are not predictable. Therefore, even the simplistic "billiard board" model does not support hard determinism. E.g. the trajectory of Earth can be predicted some million years ahead (if there is no collision with a huge rogue celestial body) but not hundreds of millions of years:



[How far ahead can we predict solar and lunar eclipses?](#)

The solar system is non-integrable and has chaos. The sun-earth-moon three-body system might be chaotic. So, how far into the future can we predict solar...

physics.stackexchange.com

Hard determinism means that even the distant future is entirely determined by what happens now or has happened in the very distant past. That means all information about the future state of an isolated thermodynamic system is contained in the present state. Increase in entropy means increase of the information needed to completely describe the system. If the complete information has already always been there, entropy does not increase, in contradiction to what we observe for sufficiently large isolated systems.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

The concept of free will makes sense for a supernatural soul but does not fit well into a materialistic world.

Instead, agency is a better concept. It works whether the materialistic world is deterministic or not. In a deterministic world, any moment of the distant past completely determines the action which an individual takes, but it is still impossible to accurately predict the action because the complete information of the past is impossible to gather, and the consequences are impossible to calculate. Without hard determinism, indeterminacies at the microscopic level add their influence on the present such that the predetermination by the past is weaker the further that past is in the past. The indeterminacies accumulate to increase variation of the outcome the further ahead the future under consideration is. This increases the variation in the observed output and would reduce but not prevent probabilistic success of predictions.

The indeterminacies at the microscopic level do not constitute a kind of materialistic soul as emergent property. My agency is derived from the past and - if there is no hard determinism - by the outcome of ongoing indeterminacies. These indeterminacies may add to the options to choose from and thereby enhance agency.

Anyone can predict that I will eventually get up to eat something, but no one can predict the second in which I will do that, and prediction of my choice of food is possible with only probabilistic success. The more complex the action to be predicted is, the lower are the chances of prediction.

Further progress in the development of artificial intelligence might eventually show whether complexity of a deterministic artificial neural network is enough to produce some kind of consciousness and meaningful pioneering creativity.

My best guess is that intentionally adding indeterminacies to the network enables or at least facilitates the ability to come up with genuinely new ideas.

Post by “Cassius” of December 29, 2023 at 3:35 AM

Thank you for reposting that Martin!

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 30, 2023 at 8:10 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3594-paul-thyry-baron-d-holbach-mirabaud-french-german-sympathizer-with-some-epicurea/>

When we make choices using whatever degree of free will that's available to us, the effects of those choices form "ripples" in the deterministic fabric. These ripples then determine subsequent events up to the point at which free will occurs in those events. And so on, ad infinitum. ...

...

...Other than a sense of agency v nihilism, what are the practical implications of this debate?

In the 3rd video (by the School of Life) that [Don](#) posted above in post 36, it brings up "Defeatism vs. Aspiration". (I did not like that Stoic story about human beings being like "dogs tied to an unpredictable cart" because it doesn't illuminate anything about how we actually navigate or problem solve).

Thinking further, our competence and skill in life comes about through our belief in our ability to affect things, change things, learn things, and problem solve -- these all require a strong feeling of agency (or "free will").

There is a 12-step AA Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

For our own Epicurean purposes this could be rephrased:

May I know and put skillful effort into what I need do. May I make peace with that which is beyond my sphere of influence. And may I have the wisdom to discern the difference between what I can and cannot change.

(This could be said many different ways).