

There Is No Necessity To Live Under the Control of Necessity

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For our most comprehensive outline of this topic, see the discussion thread and outline for Episode 257 of the Lucretius Today podcast at the link below:

[Lucretius Today Episode 257 - Fate, Necessity, Determinism](#)

1. Explanation

- During the brief span of life that is available to us there are no supernatural commandments to follow, and it is necessary for us to act wisely to identify the best life available to us. Therefore Epicurus held that there could be nothing more demoralizing than to think that we have no power over our actions and our future. Epicurus therefore singled out two belief systems as particularly false and harmful. The first falsehood is "Determinism" - the view that due to fate, supernatural forces, or even a purely mechanistic understanding of nature of atoms, we have no control whatsoever over our lives.
- Epicurus realized that Determinism is not only damaging, but demonstrably false. Against such mechanistic views of the universe Epicurus advanced not only the physics of "the swerve of the atom," but he also pointed out the self-contradictory nature Determinism. Epicurus cited this self-contradiction when he wrote: "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." (VS 40) And as a practical matter, Epicurus pointed out that we do clearly have control over the supreme choice in life: we have the ability to end our lives at any time, so nothing can compel us to *continue* to live under necessity.
- Epicurus held that if we have the power to make this most important decision in life, we also have the power to control many other lesser aspects of life. Deterministic or fatalistic beliefs are poisons that must be avoided at all costs, so Epicurus wrote "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."

2. Citations

1. Epicurus' Vatican Saying 9
 1. Bailey: "Necessity is an evil, but there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity."
2. Epicurus' Vatican Saying 40
 1. Bailey: "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."
3. Epicurus to Menoeceus Line 133

1. Bailey: "[133] For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill 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. [134] 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. [135] 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.

3. Notes

1. Major Implications:
 1. "Hard determinism" is observably wrong because we can control when we exit life.
 2. This is not an invitation to conclude that suicide is a proper course because necessity rules our existence, but to the contrary an affirmation that the fact that we have the power to end our lives is an example of how necessity does not rule every aspect of our existence, implying also that not only life and death but many decisions of lesser importance are also under our control.
2. *Find out more in our [Physics Forum](#)*
3. [Discussion Forum](#)