

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

Post by "Onenski" of September 27, 2022 at 10:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If you reduce everything to atoms and motion in a straight line, people think that that would lead to a totally mechanistic result, and so a straight line materialist such as Democritus would conclude that everything is in the grip of an iron "fate" that allows no room for personal decisions whatsoever. Cicero made this argument against Epicurus in criticizing the swerve as a departure and regression from Democritus.

I hope to add something to the discussion by bringing up the difference between determinism and fatalism.

I don't think that Democritus' position imply that there's no room for personal decision, but I recognize that Epicurus could have understood so. Those who do think that we can't change our future whatever we do are the stoics. (They even talk frequently about Providence.)

Democritus was a determinist, stoics were fatalist. What's the difference? A determinist thinks that every event, including our decisions, is determined by previous states of the universe (out of our control). Every thought, decision and action is determined by too many factors (a good example is in the book "Behave" by Robert Sapolsky), but we don't know all of them. However, determinists consider our agency as part of the causes in the world. Whatever we do has consequences in the world. So, there's room for personal decisions. The future is unknown for us, but we are part of the causes that determine it.

(The practical implications, by the way, include the elimination of retrospective moral responsibility, that is: we're not responsible for what we've done, but we are for what we're going to do).

Fatalist, on the other hand, think that the future is pre-established. Whatever we do, that future won't change. We can decide and act, but it doesn't matter. So, it's like not having personal decision at all.

Now, by the way, I've never understood how the swerve can give us freedom. How random and subtle movements of the atoms can make macro-organisms to have the power of decision and action? Maybe you've discussed this in another thread, but I don't find it 😊

I agree with @Nate on how the quote from the Letter to Menoeceus suggests a compatibilist position of Epicurus. However, the postulation of the swerve as the source of our freedom would imply that Epicurus is a hard incompatibilist (that is, either the world is deterministic or we are free and responsible; and he takes the latter; so the world is indeterministic).

As I said, it's confusing to me. 😞

I know that we should not apply some modern labels to ancient philosophers, but I think in this case it's relevant. 😊
What do you think?