

Thoughts about Humean Compatibilism

Post by “SimonC” of January 28, 2022 at 6:01 PM

[Quote from Hume's Enquiry, 73-76](#)

For what is meant by liberty, when applied to voluntary actions? We cannot surely mean that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other.

[...]

The only proper object of hatred or vengeance is a person or creature, endowed with thought and consciousness; and when any criminal or injurious actions excite that passion, it is only by their relation to the person, or connexion with him. Actions are, by their very nature, temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour, if good; nor infamy, if evil. The actions themselves may be blameable; they may be contrary to all the rules of morality and religion: But the person is not answerable for them; and as they proceeded from nothing in him that is durable and constant, and leave nothing of that nature behind them, it is impossible he can, upon their account, become the object of punishment or vengeance. According to the principle, therefore, which denies necessity, and consequently causes, a man is as pure and untainted, after having committed the most horrid crime, as at the first moment of his birth, nor is his character anywise concerned in his actions, since they are not derived from it, and the wickedness of the one can never be used as a proof of the depravity of the other.

To summarise the above the way I see it:

- To say that an action is freely chosen by me means simply that it is an action that is consistent with my desires, personality etc.
- It is actually a good thing that the universe is deterministic according to Hume, since that means it is possible to make observations on peoples behavior to learn about their personality.
- In a universe with a strong, perhaps dualistic, free will, a moral person could commit a crime and still remain a moral person. To claim otherwise is to claim that a moral person has something in him that prevents him from being immoral or that a person that has committed a

crime is no longer a moral person, *which is conceding that actions are in some sense deterministic.*

Question 1. Why is determinism bad?

From what I understand Epicurus thought that determinism was extremely bad and was very clear in distinguishing himself from Democritus on this matter. It is better to believe in supernatural gods than in determinism and all that.

I guess I don't see what is so bad about determinism. The way I see it we control our brains (and will) the same way that a christian may claim to "control their soul" - the question does not entirely make sense but you would probably describe that it acts according to certain principles given by god (or nature) and according to individual personality. Much like the brain. The christian does not need to posit a "soul-soul" or a "soul-soul-soul" etc to conclude that they have free will, so why not just stop at the material instead?

Question 2. Why is the swerve good?

I'm unclear about whether the swerve is Epicurus or Lucretius, but it is implied by Lucretius to ensure that humans have free will. This I have difficulty accepting. After all it is not "me" who is controlling the way the atoms swerve - that would be dualism - so in what way does the swerve improve my liberty? If atoms hitting each other at, let's say, 90 degree angles is not enough for free will, why should atoms hitting each other at 91 degree angles be so?

The swerve does get rid of the predictability of the universe. Perhaps this is what Epicurus was worried about? That it would be difficult to insist we have free will if "fate" is true.

Post by "Matt" of January 28, 2022 at 6:11 PM

I in no way wish to derail this thread...but when I first read it I saw "thoughts about human cannibalism." ☐☐

Post by "Cassius" of January 28, 2022 at 6:37 PM

Simon it's been my observations that extremely deep conversations about free will rarely lead many people to change their minds, but I do think it is useful to be clear about Epicurus' position and I think we can help there:

[Quote from SimonC](#)

- In a universe with a strong, perhaps dualistic, free will, a moral person could commit a crime and still remain a moral person. To claim otherwise is to claim that a moral person has something in him that prevents him from being immoral or that a person that has committed a crime is no longer a moral person, which is conceding that actions are in some sense deterministic.

I think Epicurus would disagree with this, because I think this implies that "crime" and the definition of a "moral person" are somehow absolute. I have no difficulty thinking that people who commit crimes can still be a moral person. I consider myself a moral person, and I speed on the highway on a fairly regular basis. It's simply not consistent with the Epicurean perspective on justice or on the nature of the universe to get hung up on moral absolutes.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

I guess I don't see what is so bad about determinism.

I think a large part of the answer here is that Epicurus was a very practical person and not as concerned about satisfying logicians as he was in helping ordinary people. He seems to have thought (and I would agree) that it is extremely damaging to a normal person's hope for happiness for them to come to believe that they are the slaves of any kind of fate whatsoever and that they can have no effect on their futures no matter what they do. Of course there are indeed things that cannot be changed: death, and the fact of no life after death. But there are plenty of things that normal people can do during their lives to live more happily, and hamstringing them with complicated philosophical views that - despite what they perceive - they have no control over their futures is not a very constructive way to go, from that perspective.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

The swerve does get rid of the predictability of the universe. Perhaps this is what Epicurus was worried about? That it would be difficult to insist we have free will if "fate" is true.

I would say "not at all." Epicurus held that most of the universe is indeed deterministic, and that it is in only limited circumstances relevant to us, such as in the existence of agency in higher animals, that it "breaks through" so as to effect us. I highly recommend the AA Long article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" for a discussion of this aspect of the swerve.

Post by "Don" of January 28, 2022 at 6:42 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

it is extremely damaging to a normal person's hope for happiness for them to come to believe that they are the slaves of any kind of fate whatsoever and that they can have no effect on their futures no matter what they do.

To the best of my understanding, this is part of Daniel Dennett's position with regards to free will.

Post by “Joshua” of January 28, 2022 at 7:31 PM

Determinism makes shipwreck of "choice and avoidance", for one thing. And I agree with Cassius on the moral question; there are no "moral people", by any reasonable definition of morality. Actions can be moral or immoral, *according to convention*; people are just people.

"Then why punish them?"

I don't think we should punish perceived immorality--I think the law should intervene in case of harm, defined broadly enough to mean harm done to persons, property, institutions and governments. Fringe cases to include harm to one's self, harm to reputation, harm where consent is not considered to be possible...etc.

With all of the above to be determined, in Epicurus' view, by human convention.

Is this solution perfect? Naturally not. No thing human ever is!