

Episode Seventy-One - The Formation Of the World (Our Part of the Universe)

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2021 at 1:30 AM

Here's what I was probably remembering as to there being nothing in the letter to Herodotus (or the other letters) from Epicurus himself. This is from A.A. Long's "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism & Much of the World's History" (1980, pp. 22-23) which is something else, or maybe the

Up to the year 1879 it seems to have been generally assumed that human action is the only sphere of spontaneous or undetermined movement in the world of Epicurus.⁸ This is the significant exception to the strictly mechanical causation or necessary chain of events which is otherwise evident in phenomena. Human freedom was accounted for by an exceptional form of motion, the 'swerve' of atoms, and this 'minimal' deviation was also invoked to explain the 'theoretical' first contact between atoms from which worlds arise. These, in fact, are the only functions of the **swerve** which are mentioned explicitly in Lucretius, and no word from Epicurus himself on the swerve has been discovered.⁹ In the year I have just mentioned, M. Guyau published *La morale d'Épicure* in which he argued that Epicurus extended the function of the swerve to cover spontaneous happenings in the world now (pp. 72-102). At the time when he wrote, Guyau's attribution of spontaneity to nature was not accepted by most scholars.¹⁰ But the effects of his work are still apparent. In 1972 J. M. Rist wrote: 'there is a random element, an element of chance in nature, and Guyau was probably right in holding that Epicurus attributed it to the swerve of atoms' (p. 52).¹¹

But is there a 'random element, an element of chance in nature', as Epicurus conceives of the world?

In discussing this question it is most important to be clear about

* The standard criticism is that Epicurus introduced an inexplicable form of spontaneous movement in order to preserve human freedom, see the passages in Usener 281.

⁷ Cf. Solmsen (1951) p. 19.

⁸ See Guyau p. 86. For the same view in modern books, see De Witt p. 175 and Farrington p. 8.

⁹ Brieger's view that the swerve was only introduced by later Epicureans was effectively criticized by Giussani (i pp. 129 ff.) and has not been accepted by later scholars.

¹⁰ See the sound criticism by Zeller n. 5 pp. 421-2 and Hicks pp. 260 f.

¹¹ Bailey, who consistently attributed 'real contingency in nature' to Epicurus, was sceptical about Guyau's link between contingency and the swerve in 1928, p. 326. But in 1947 he found Guyau probably right (p. 840). Philod. *On signs* col. xxxvi.11 seems to have resolved his earlier doubts. This passage is discussed below, p. 86.

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