

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

Post by "Cassius" of February 22, 2024 at 10:29 AM

Quote

....Now, in *Determined*, Sapolsky takes his argument all the way, mounting a brilliant (and in his inimitable way, delightful) full-frontal assault on the pleasant fantasy that there is some separate self telling our biology what to do.

Determined offers a marvelous synthesis of what we know about how consciousness works—the tight weave between reason and emotion and between stimulus and response in the moment and over a life. One by one, Sapolsky tackles all the major arguments for free will and takes them out, cutting a path through the thickets of chaos and complexity science and quantum physics, as well as touching ground on some of the wilder shores of philosophy. He shows us that the history of medicine is in no small part the history of learning that fewer and fewer things are somebody's "fault"; for example, for centuries we thought seizures were a sign of demonic possession.

Yet, as he acknowledges, it's very hard, and at times impossible, to uncouple from our zeal to judge others and to judge ourselves. Sapolsky applies the new understanding of life beyond free will to some of our most essential questions around punishment, morality, and living well together. By the end, Sapolsky argues that while living our daily lives recognizing that we have no free will is going to be monumentally difficult, doing so is not going to result in anarchy, pointlessness, and existential malaise. I nstead, it will make for a much more humane world.

I underlined two statements for comment:

(1) As I understand it Epicurus would certainly not assert that there is "some separate self telling our biology what to do." Epicurus is much more like "we are the sum of our biology and that sum has the ability to make choices affecting its life."

(2) "Making for a much more humane world" always seems to be at the bottom of attacks on free will, with the goal of nothing being anyone's "fault." In other words, this debate is usually driven by ethical issues rather than simply wanting to know more about "natural science." Where there is no "fault" and no "credit" there can be no praise and blame, which are essential to an Epicurean understanding of the workings of people in society. As Fernando brought up in our discussion last night, there is always the question of the fact that different people have different feelings of pleasure, and it is essential to think about how to reconcile what we think

are the requirements of our feelings vs those of others.

Does the Epicurean want to fly to the stars for the pleasure of doing so, or does the Epicurean prefer to stay home where he is safe? Does the Epicurean who wants to fly to the stars stay home so that he can devote his resources to feeding and clothing people on the other side of the world who he's never met?

My view is that the answer to those questions from an Epicurean viewpoint has to start with the premise that there is no supernatural god, and there is no Platonic ideal, that gives every person the same answer to such questions. Not only is there no right and wrong course that every Epicurean / wise person should follow in every situation, the real heart of the matter is seeing why it is *wrong* to even consider the possibility that there *might be* inflexible and absolute ethical commandments for all persons, all times, and all places.

As also was stated yesterday, Epicurean philosophy doesn't consist of or lead to a set of "Ten Commandments." The way the [Principal Doctrines](#) are written is much different than those alleged tablets from Mount Sinai. Epicurus tells us what "is" about pleasure and pain, and then we have to go about applying it to our own circumstances.

And liking certain things (and "praising" them) and disliking other things (and "blaming" them) is what pleasure and pain are all about.