

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

Post by "Cassius" of February 24, 2024 at 4:48 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

but I don't see how the "swerve" - by definition a random event if I understand - can lead to a macro level volitional "choice" exercised by an free agent on the individual level.

You won't find a detailed explanation in those papers either, any more than Epicurus' atomism allowed him to be a nuclear physicist. As I gather the situation, the swerve operates on determinism in the same way that atomism operates on religion and "[he who says that nothing can be known knows nothing](#)" operates on skepticism. These positions provide a plausible perspective on specific challenges so we can live our lives productively while never knowing a complete "explanation" of all the mechanisms involved in any of them.

The religionists and the radical skeptics and the hard determinists don't have the evidence to establish their conclusions with certainty either, but they happily insist on superficially persuasive arguments which have real impact on real people who swallow them. And it appears that Epicurus held that it's not valid to retreat into "agnosticism" on any of these. Doubt and uncertainty on basic questions of life don't lead to happy living, they lead to passivism and nihilism and other unpleasanties.

If you adopt those views (religion/skepticism/determinism) then you go through life under the sway of people who generally use those religious / skeptical / determinist viewpoints to promote specific social conclusions.

At the end of your life you're dead and no more aware of whether the religionists / skeptics / determinists were right than when you started, but you have accepted viewpoints of others which are not what you yourself could validate through your own experience. You've lived your life (if you lived it at all) in practice without gods telling you what to do, in fact acting as if knowledge is possible, and in fact as if you had choices about the decisions you made. But all the while, if you accepted their claims, you lived under the sway of people who told you that your practical perspectives were unreal.

It seems to me that Epicurus was saying that the best course is just to reject the pretensions of religion, skepticism, and determinism in the first place, and live with the faculties that Nature gave you.

The burden of proof on the issues is not on Epicureans, who are living as nature provided using the faculties nature provided. The burden of proof is on the religionists, skeptics, and determinists, and Epicurus' arguments provide real-world observations that contradict their assertions. Nothing comes from nothing - the supernatural gods are refuted. Those who allege nothing can be known contradict themselves - skepticism is refuted. You can cite the swerve or simply say that it is not necessary to "live with necessity" because at the very least we can exit life when it ceases to please us - determinism is refuted. Each issue comes down to having confidence in the faculties that nature gave us vs imagining that there are "logical" proofs that can invalidate our practical experience. Epicurus says to go with practical experience.

Letter to Pythocles:

First of all then we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky, whether they are dealt with in connection with other doctrines or independently, than peace of mind and a sure confidence, *just as in all other branches of study.*

[86] *We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.*