

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

Post by "Martin" of February 26, 2024 at 5:13 AM

Quote

In order to improve the account on the swerve I thought about the following argument. It is important to identify the flaws in it, possibly [Martin](#) or [DavidN](#) can help us.

1. Assumption: The swerve is the basis for sustaining free will (leeway freedom a.k.a. the capacity to have done otherwise).

[...]

Here you go:

1 - 11 seem to be OK. What might be fishy does not show up within 1 - 11.

"12. Events can have multiple effects and be caused by multiple events (as pointed out by DavidN). Besides, scientific reasoning tell us that the same event has the same cause(s): if a phenomenon happens in certain circumstances by events A, B, C, we will expect that in the same circumstances under the same events A, B, C, we will have the same phenomenon."

Anyone trying to reproduce a chemical reaction can tell you that it is sometimes not like that because in addition to the known A, B, C, there may be unknown events D, E, F, which combined with A, B, C give a different result because D, E, F have changed while A, B, C have not.

"13. The swerves are unpredictable and their effects are unpredictable as well (for 2 and 4)"

Some effects are predictable: The existence of the swerve enabled in Epicurus' physics the formation of compounds.

"14. If the swerve occurs continually and unpredictably (for 11 and 13), it would be less probable that the same circumstances for a phenomenon repeat (Considering 12). It seems that there will be new circumstances continually and there would be new and different events continually."

This seems to be OK.

"15. The basis for regularities and laws in nature is the repetition of phenomena."

This seems to be OK.

"16. The swerve doesn't permit to explain regularities in nature (for 14 and 15). (From this we can conclude that human behavior is impossible, but let's consider more things.)"

This statement is wrong. We can arrange apparent irregularities in a systematic way and find and explain regularities. In the quantum physical analog, this is expressed in the Ehrenfest theorem: The laws of classical physics for classical quantities are usually valid for expectation values of the corresponding quantum mechanical quantities. (This is my dumbed down version.)

"17. Free Will is the basis for moral responsibility (if a person acts freely, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control (in a strong sense, as the capacity to have done otherwise, the leeway sense). (For 1)"

The argument in 17 is mixing und blurring different perspectives. Free will and moral responsibility are words of idealism meant for an I identified as a supernatural soul different from the body with which it is only temporarily associated. In Epicurus' philosophy, the soul is not an independent entity on its own but an organ of the living being. In the materialistic context, the meaning of free will and moral responsibility is different. If we do not change the words, we hide the change in definition. With the change in definition, the logic becomes invalid.

We can try to reformulate 17 with the analog words. For free will, agency is an established choice. For moral responsibility, we might choose accountability. With the new words, we might state:

17'. Agency is the basis for accountability (if a person acts, she's responsible for her action). A person can't be responsible for something beyond her control.

E.g., I usually do not cause outbreaks of volcanoes. An outbreak of a volcano will not give me remorse, and no one can reasonably hold me accountable for it.

However, an action which I carry out and which results in unpleasant consequences may give me remorse, and I may be held accountable for it, irrespective of how much leeway I had to do otherwise.

"18. Human behavior is under the unpredictable effects of the swerves (for 8 and 13), so we can imagine at least the following scenario: James intends to do A in order to have certain effects. The swerve can produce events between the intention to do A and the action A, and between the action A and its intended effects. So, sometimes he has success in his intention (he does A), sometimes the action doesn't occur (because there are unpredictable events that produce other events different to James intention), and sometimes the action A has different effects than those intended by James.

He needs lucky to act and to have the effects he wants."

The swerve may increase the options James has to choose from. It is his choice which option he chooses and not merely a random outcome.

"19. If human choices are not the outcome of their will, their behavior is beyond their control and they're not responsible of it. If the outcomes of actions are beyond reasonable control of

the agents, then they're not morally responsible for them (for 17 and 18)."

19 falls apart because it depends on 17 and 18, which have been shown to be invalid.

"20. If agents are not responsible of their actions, then they don't have free will (for 17)."

20 is wrong because agents are always responsible for their actions in Epicurus' philosophy as expressed in 17'.

"21. Agents don't have free will (for Modus tollens of 19 and 20) [Modus tollens is an inference that say that if we have the conditional "If A then B", it is equivalent to "if not B then not A". So if we have "Not B". Then we infer "not A"]"

This is invalid because 19 and 20 do not hold.

"22. Given that 21 is the product of assuming 1 and leads to it's negation, there's a contradiction."

There is no contradiction because 21 is invalid.

"23. If an assumption leads to a contradiction, then we should conclude that it's false. So, the swerve is not the basis for free will."

The contradiction does not exist. The swerve can be the basis for free will/agency as described in the comment to 18.

"Probably you have the impression that determinism is one of the "Four Horsemen", but if you think carefully on a strong indeterminism, you may want to include it as well."

Strong indeterminism would lead to counterproductive skepticism and is foreign to Epicurus' philosophy.