

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

Post by "Don" of February 26, 2024 at 11:53 PM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

Even if someone decides that they disagree so firmly with a key Epicurean tenet that they just can't see calling themselves an Epicurean

I don't \*think\* this is directed at me, but I'm going to use that as a jumping off point anyway to expand on my comments about the swerve on the public thread. I stand by my assertion (my dogmatic assertion) that there is no such thing as "the swerve" because atoms don't act like Democritus and Epicurus thought they did. [The Standard Model](#) doesn't leave a place for "the swerve" although, like I said, a rough analogy can be made to overlay it on indeterminacy at the quantum level... but the overlay certainly doesn't fit well.

However, I also do not see the swerve as a "key Epicurean tenet." It's barely mentioned in the extant texts. There's Lucretius and Cicero, and I don't think Cicero relates the swerve to free will, just the impossibility of uncaused action on the part of atoms.

## [Quote from Cambridge](#)

"Lucretius presents the most extended consideration we have by an Epicurean of the swerve and freedom ([DRN II 251-93](#)). It comes immediately after his argument that the swerve must exist in order for atoms to collide. Atoms naturally fall straight downwards, and they also move because of collisions and entanglements with other atoms. However, there is a third cause of atomic motion, a random swerve to the side by one spatial minimum, which saves us from what Lucretius calls the "decrees of fate". "

However, if we want to explore "how" the swerve functions within the system of Epicurean philosophy: Lucretius talks about the swerve at the atomic level, but then goes into talking about horses at the starting gate of a race. This excerpt from Lucretius doesn't satisfy me:

## Quote

But that man's mind itself in all it does  
Hath not a fixed necessity within,  
Nor is not, like a conquered thing, compelled  
To bear and suffer,- this state comes to man

From that slight swerovement of the elements  
In no fixed line of space, in no fixed time.

A random swerovement seems unlikely to lead to the ability of a "man's mind" to make a choice. If the description here is correct, our choices are random - which seems to me to possibly be worse than determined. If choices are random like the swerve, how could one be held responsible? How could praise and blame be attached to them? We would have no more control over them than random coin flips or rolls of the dice. **\*\*Maybe\*\*** by analogy.... atoms can swerve "on their own", humans can make choices "on their own"... but I don't see how the random swerve can be the mechanism of free choices.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Incremental advances in "scientific" textbooks do not upend basic philosophical conclusions about the nature of life and death, and yet I agree that Epicurus would be the first to accept and incorporate new discoveries.

I fully agree. My contention is that those "basic philosophical conclusions" that make up Epicurean philosophy include (but aren't limited to):

- The universe is material in nature, made of particles and space.
- There are no gods to provide benefit or punishment. We're on our own.
- Pleasure is the "thing" to which all other "things" point.. The endpoint of all actions if asking "Why do you do that?" is pleasure.
- Things like virtue, honor, knowledge, etc. are instrumental ways to achieve pleasure but they aren't the endpoint.
- We live finite lives. Wishing for eternal living wishes one's life away. Live in the here and now, plan for the future but don't be constrained by it, remember pleasant memories of the past, work to make pleasant memories in the future. This life is all we have.
  - We don't exist. We exist. We exist no longer. No reason to fret.

BUT... when it comes to making pronouncements about atoms and physics, we leave the specific details in the past and work with what we have now. Talk of "atoms and void" is certainly acceptable shorthand for a material universe. But if we insist on atoms falling "straight down" and randomly swerving the minutest distance, we will fail to translate Epicurus's core true meaning into a modern vernacular. We cannot be constrained to interpret the philosophy as if we are living in a world 2,300 years old or even 1,900 years old. My contention is that we do Epicurus's insight and foresight and genius a disservice if we do that. I truly believe his philosophy is evergreen and THE most applicable to a modern world, in contrast to the Stoics and their Logos (conveniently left out by modern followers of that philosophy). I think we can re-interpret and update some of Epicurus's terminology and physics and understanding of "how things work" without losing any of the vitality and applicability of his philosophy.