

Feedback From A User

Post by "Cassius" of January 19, 2020 at 4:02 AM

[Quote from JLR](#)

Here's another question that has been nagging me: how can The Swerve account for our volition? If all of reality is atoms and void it is difficult to understand how I seem to be able to change my mind at will? If my thinking is subject to the swerve of the atoms, how is it that I seem to be controlling my choices? Is this an illusion of choice? Am I somehow controlling the movement of atoms when I choose?

I agree with Josh and will try to add a little more, but this is such a huge subject that there is a separate subforum for it here: ["Free Will" - Freedom of Choice Within Limits And Bounds vs. Determinism](#)

The first think I would focus on is the part of the question "how can the swerve **account**..." I don't think that the swerve "accounts" for free will as much as it "allows" for free will. There is no explanation offered for the mechanism of the swerve in Lucretius, and it is strictly a logical deduction of the "it must be" variety in order to explain how atoms began bouncing rather than continuing in straight lines in the first place, plus as you say accounting for the fact that we observe that we do have some degree of agency / control over our actions.

There really is no attempt to explain a precise mechanism other than to relate speculations about atoms of "soul" or "spirit" being particularly smooth and light and relating atomic aspects like that to particular dispositions of particular animals.

Two things that come to mind to suggest for further reading would be AA Long's "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" article, which I think is significantly insightful to observe that we need to be careful about how much impact to give to the swerve. The part that has stuck with me is that we need to remember that most things DO in fact operate "mechanically" and that the swerve is so slight that it only "breaks through" in rare occasions (such as allowing for free will and getting the universe started). Long observes I think correctly that the swerve cannot be operating to make everything indeterminate, or else it would destroy the rest of the Epicurean system, which is based on observing that regularity in nature arises from regular movements of atoms rather than from gods or ideal forms.

Another thing that is deep is I think best summarized in Frances Wright's A Few Days in Athens Chapter 15 where she observes that the implication of Epicurean philosophy is that we much reach and base conclusions on observations WITHOUT attempting to resolve every link in the chain back an infinite distance. [Check out the argument here](#) - it is probably best to read the full chapter, but especially the part that begins "'I apprehend the difficulties," observed

Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend."

So that's the most I can offer at the moment, other than this argument from Thomas Jefferson, which I think is consistent:

Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820: [\(Full version at Founders.gov\)](#)

... But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It's crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, **I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.'** I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void, or nothing, or immaterial space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need. I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism* of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.

At what age of the Christian church this heresy of *immaterialism*, this masked atheism, crept in, I do not know. But a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it. He told us indeed that 'God is a spirit,' but he has not defined what a spirit is, nor said that it is not matter. And the ancient fathers generally, if not universally, held it to be matter: light and thin indeed, an ethereal gas; but still matter. Origen says 'Deus reapse corporalis est; sed graviorum tantum corporum ratione, incorporeus.' Tertullian 'quid enim deus nisi corpus?' and again 'quis negabit deum esse corpus? Etsi deus spiritus, spiritus etiam corpus est, sui generis, in sua effigie.' St. Justin Martyr '{to Theion phamen einai asomaton oyk oti asomaton—epeide de to me krateisthai ypo tinos, toy krateisthai timioteron esti, dia toyto kaloymen ayton asomaton.}' And St. Macarius, speaking of angels says 'quamvis enim subtilia sint, tamen in substantia, forma et figura, secundum tenuitatem naturae eorum, corpora sunt tenuia.' And St. Austin, St. Basil, Lactantius, Tatian, Athenagoras and others, with whose writings I pretend not a familiarity, are said by those who are, to deliver the same doctrine. Turn to your Ocellus d'Argens 97. 105. and to his Timaeus 17. for these quotations. In England these Immaterialists might have been burnt until the 29. Car. 2. when the writ de haeretico comburendo was abolished: and here until the revolution, that statute not having extended to us. All heresies being now done away with us, these schismatists are merely atheists, differing from the material Atheist only in their belief

that 'nothing made something,' and from the material deist who believes that matter alone can operate on matter.

Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind. A single sense may indeed be sometimes deceived, but rarely: and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. They evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms. **I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.** I am sure that I really know many, many, things, and none more surely than that I love you with all my heart, and pray for the continuance of your life until you shall be tired of it yourself.

Edit: Also, if someone were going to devote themselves to fleshing out arguments in favor of how human consciousness and free will arise from atoms, I would study the arguments collected and made by Jefferson's friend [Thomas Cooper](#). I have found Cooper's "[The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism](#)" to be particularly interesting in dealing with my Christian upbringing. But again, this is philosophy, not an explanation of the workings of the brain.