

Episode Twenty-Four: The Swerve Part One: As A Producing Force of Nature

Post by "Cassius" of June 17, 2020 at 3:35 PM

As we discuss the swerve there is much of interest in this Sedley article on Determinism:

1. The Swerve

A few facts are, I hope, uncontroversial enough to be set out without defence. Epicurus inherited Democritus' atomic system, but modified it in a number of respects. In particular, he so vehemently objected to its rigidly deterministic laws as to postulate a minimal 'swerve' (παρέγκλισις) in the motion of atoms, occurring at no fixed place or time — a doctrine which does not feature in his meagre surviving writings but is nonetheless amply attested as his; and defended on his behalf by Lucretius (II 216-93). The swerve (a) enables atoms falling through space at equal speed in parallel lines to collide occasionally and initiate cosmogonic patterns of motion; and (b) somehow or other serves as a necessary condition for the behavioural autonomy of animate beings — a power often identified as 'free will'.

During the podcast, Martin and I in particular discuss Sedley's contention as to when the swerve was developed in Epicurus' thinking (early or later) as referenced here:

στυλίου (Lucretius II 216-217).

I do not propose to expend much discussion on the swerve's cosmogonical function (Lucretius II 216-42), which I suspect to be a problem dreamed up with a preconceived solution in mind. Chains of atomic collisions in extra-cosmic space could have quite adequately been explained by the lateral intrusion of one or more atoms from elsewhere, despatched, say, by the break-up of a nearby world. The question of how such collisions ever started in the first place would not arise, given the infinity of past time and past worlds. That is, indeed, the view strongly implied by the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Letter to Pythocles*,⁴ the physical epitomes which Epicurus wrote when he had already worked out his main cosmological views in Books I-XIII of his *On nature*. Since these two works also contain no hint of the swerve doctrine, the likelihood is that it was his later work on psychology, apparently in the closing books of the thirty-seven book magnum opus, that led him to the innovation, and that it was only then grafted onto the existing cosmological scheme.⁵

File

[Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"](#)



1983 Paper which is the one of the best treatments of Epicurus' view of the Free Will / Agency / Determinism issue available.



Cassius

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1599-episode-twenty-four-the-swerve-part-one-as-a-producing-force-of-nature/?postID=7980#post7980>

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