

The Existence Of The Swerve Does Not Mean That "Anything Is Possible"

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2025 at 2:34 PM

This past weekend in our Sunday zoom we were discussing the implications of the discoveries of the "limits and boundaries" of things for which [Lucretius praises Epicurus near the beginning of the poem](#). At that time [Raphael Raul](#) brought up the excellent question of whether limits and boundaries are invalidated by the swerve. If so, and if "anything is possible" then the entire physics of Epicurus would be totally undercut and it would be nonsense to maintain that there are limitations on what can be and what cannot be, which is one of the key foundations established by atomism.

In response to this question I referenced several of the arguments contained in [AA Long's "Chance And Natural Law In Epicureanism"](#) which refute the idea that there is any contradiction. One argument I did remember was the Long argues that if Epicurus had really argued that the swerve makes everything indeterminate, then Cicero and Plutarch and other strong enemies of Epicurus would certainly have pointed out that obvious problem. The fact that extensive criticism from them survives, but that this criticism was not made by them, is a strong indicator that Epicurus was not interpreted in the ancient world as teaching that the swerve makes "anything" possible.

I can now add a cite to a passage from Lucretius that I think is directly on point. At this point in the poem Lucretius has not yet discussed the swerve, at which he makes the point that humans (and probably other higher animals) have some degree of freedom of action. But here the underlined section makes clear that no matter what might be said later, the limits and boundaries we observe in life produce predominantly regularity rather than indeterminacy.

The key sentence is: *"For if the principles of things could in any way succumb and be altered, it would now also be uncertain what can and what cannot arise, and how each thing has its power limited and its deep-set boundary stone, nor could such a long succession of generations in each species replicate the nature, habits, lifestyle and movements of their parents."*

I highly recommend the [AA Long article](#) to anyone interested in this issue.

[Quote from Lucretius 1: 503-598](#)

[Lucretius 1:503-98](#)

First, since we have found a vast difference between the twin natures of the two things - body, and the place in which everything happens - each must in itself be absolute and unmixed. For wherever there is the empty space which we call void, there no body

exists, while wherever body is in occupation, there the emptiness of void is totally absent. Therefore the first bodies are solid and without void... These can neither be dissolved when struck by external blows, nor be dismantled through internal penetration, nor succumb to any other kind of attack, as I proved to you a little earlier. For we see that without void nothing can either be crushed, broken or cut in two, or admit moisture, permeating cold or penetrating fire. These cause the destruction of all things, and the more void each thing contains the more it succumbs to internal attack from them. So if the first bodies are solid and without void, as I have taught, they must necessarily be everlasting. Besides, if matter had not been everlasting, everything would before now have been totally annihilated, and all the things which we see would have been regenerated from nothing. But since I have taught earlier that [nothing can be created from nothing](#) and that what has been generated cannot be reduced to nothing, there must be principles with imperishable body, into which everything can be dissolved when its final hour comes, so as to ensure a supply of matter for the renewal of things. The principles, then, are solid and uncompounded, and in no other way could they have survived the ages from infinite time past to keep things renewed... Furthermore, since things have a limit placed on their growth and lifespan according to their species, and since what each can and cannot do is decreed through the laws of nature, and nothing changes but everything is so constant that all the varieties of bird display from generation to generation on their bodies the markings of their own species, they naturally must also have a body of unalterable matter. For if the principles of things could in any way succumb and be altered, it would now also be uncertain what can and what cannot arise, and how each thing has its power limited and its deep-set boundary stone, nor could such a long succession of generations in each species replicate the nature, habits, lifestyle and movements of their parents. (L&S-THP)