



Attila Németh, *Epicurus On the Self*

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Attila Németh's engaging new study, *Epicurus On the Self*, analyzes Epicurus' notion of the self and its significance for our understanding of Epicurean ethics and philosophy of mind. Németh (= N.) seeks to show that, for Epicurus, the self began at the cradle. The process of developing as a desiring agent occurred largely through the *πάθη* and self-reflection. In order to accommodate the self as responsible agent, Epicurus held a «non-reductive physicalist position» (p. xiii and *passim*) on the relationship between the mind and its atoms. This self was constantly developing in relation to the external world, to causation – both internal, like bodily and mental states, and external, like social interactions – and to memory. The book thus aims to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Epicurean ethics and Epicurus' account of the psychological development of living beings.

N. draws primarily on the evidence of the fragments of Book XXV of Epicurus' *On Nature* (Περὶ Φύσεως), as published by Simon Laursen. These correspond to the following Herculaneum papyri, as N. groups them: *PHerc.* 419/1634/697, *PHerc.* 1420/1056, and *PHerc.* 1191. The *Appendix* on pp. 201–202 shows the way that these correspond to N.'s somewhat idiosyncratic relabeling. N. offers new translations of the fragments discussed and, occasionally, new readings. He also draws on related evidence from Epicurus, Lucretius, and — to a lesser extent — Philodemus, Diogenes of Oenoanda, Hermarchus, and Polystratus, as well as from non-Epicurean witnesses, such as Cicero and Alexander of Aphrodisias. N.'s analysis is in dialogue particularly with the work of Richard Sorabji on the self and of David Sedley, Tim O'Keefe, and Christopher Gill on Epicurean philosophy of mind.

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N. also attests to the influence of Gábor Betegh, Voula Tsouna, and James Warren.

The first chapter is the cornerstone of this study. It follows an introduction which situates N.'s interpretation of Epicurus' notion of the self in the context of Epicurean ethics. Chapter one treats that notion, as well as self-awareness. The first half of the chapter focuses on the last eight fragments from Laursen's edition of the early parts of book XXV (S. Laursen, *The Early Parts of Epicurus, On Nature, 25th Book*, «Cronache Ercolanesi» 25 (1995), pp. 5-109). N. takes these to concern self-reflective thinking and to advance a "thin" idea of the self, a collective way of conceptualizing what N. believes to be a being's mental and physical aspects. N. finds that these fragments indicate that Epicurus discussed two distinct but not mutually-exclusive or hierarchical kinds of self-awareness: the *pathologikos tropos* (ὁ παθολογικὸς τρόπος) and the *aitiologikos tropos* (ὁ αἰτιολογικὸς τρόπος). According to N., the *pathologikos tropos* occurs through the experience of affective states, like pleasure and pain, and the *aitiologikos tropos* through the interpretation of causality and one's role in it. These are also ways of explaining one's development. In this part, N. also considers the connection between αἴσθησις and πάθος. The second half of the chapter surveys a range of evidence, including from the later parts of book XXV (cfr. S. Laursen, *The Later Parts of Epicurus, On Nature, 25th Book*, «Cronache Ercolanesi» 27 (1997), pp. 5-82), concerning the nature and function of πρόληψις and memory; N. offers a new interpretation of the former (cfr. esp. p. 43). Through this chapter, N. also makes two broader claims relating these ideas to ethics. N. contends that the imperative of Socrates to know thyself was also operative in Epicurean philosophy and that, for Epicurus, these complementary ways of reflecting on and knowing oneself were necessary for scrutinizing one's beliefs and desires, and thus to achieving ἀταραξία.

The second chapter analyzes the account of responsible action in the later parts of book XXV as part of Epicurus' discussion of the *aitiologikos tropos*. Ultimately, N. rejects both the reductionist interpretation of O'Keefe and the anti-reductionist (or emergentist) position of Sedley and posits that Epicurus held a non-reductive physicalist theory of mind. In this context N. suggests that the controversial ἀπογεγεννημένα are temporary mental states, influenced by a variety of factors, including dispositions, beliefs, desires, and memories. For N., mental states are epistemologically non-reducible to their

constituent atoms and possess independent causal efficacy. They have downward causal efficacy over the atoms such that they transfer the cause to them and maintain the individual as a psychophysical whole; mental states are thus «the major causal factors for actions and dispositions» (p. 87). A swerve does not necessarily alter one's mental state. Our responsibility for these mental states translates into our responsibility for our natures and actions. For N. the swerve ensures this self-determination by both eliminating causal determinism and allowing for type dualism, i.e. both physical and mental causation, despite «Epicurus' token monism» (p. 98).

The third chapter considers jointly the early and later parts of book XXV and makes two main arguments. The first is that humans and animals develop different kinds of selves, because the latter are not rational and thus not capable of self-reflection; hence N. supports the interpretation that Epicurus identified the causality of animal ἀπογεγεννημένα – and the actions which follow from them – with their dispositions or constitutions, not with themselves as morally responsible agents, subject to praise and blame. The second is that our memories accumulate and link our experiences and beliefs about our causality as well as make possible extended rational self-reflection; this results in a third conception of self: the narrative self, a sense of our personal identity over time.

According to N. (cfr. p. xviii), chapter four is an attempt to evaluate his interpretation of Epicurus' tripartite conception of the self on the basis of the evidence in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. It is largely devoted to Lucretius' account of the swerve in the context of his discussion of atomic motion more generally. N. holds with the view that Epicurus derived the theory of the swerve from the experience of free will (*libera voluntas*) and then incorporated it into his cosmology. This unfixed element freed both the mind and the universe from causal determinism. It also offered an explanation for the existence of all atomic collisions and volitions, without being identical to or a necessary cause any of them. On this basis, N. suggests retaining the manuscript reading of *res* (over *mens*) at DRN II 289, with *res ipsa* referring to the atom itself. N. concludes by considering the implications of this interpretation for the inter-entailment of logical and causal determinism.

The fifth chapter explores the self in light of the evidence for the practices of Epicurean friendship, in the Garden and in other Epicurean communities, such as Philodemus' circle. N. purports that Epicurean friendship was essential to self-awareness, critical to an

accurate evaluative conception of oneself, and ultimately constituted an extension of the self. Community members' moral evaluation of each other – conveyed through such techniques as good-willed, frank criticism and the sharing of self-reflections (particularly by benevolent teachers) – led to the improvement of all. Such things fostered a life of both virtue and pleasure, which N. takes to be inter-entailing. N. also contends that true Epicurean friendship goes further in having a basis in love (φιλία, *amor*), as rational emotion, between people with a «harmony of mind» (p. 175). Knowing thyself and being a good Epicurean required others. Even after his death, Epicurus was that quintessential other, against whom one could compare oneself. In the *Epilogue*, N. extends such considerations to the quasi apotheosis of Epicurus and the other founding members of the Garden. Along these lines, N. concludes that Lucretius' literary engagement with Epicurus functioned as a kind of virtual community and friendship, whereby one working independently could still enjoy the relationships necessary to flourish as an Epicurean self.

The major contribution of the volume is, of course, N.'s interpretation of Epicurus' "self" as an interdependent tripartite conception: the self-in-relation-to-the-external world, the self-as-causal agent, and the narrative self. N. has certainly advanced the debate on self-perception, with respect to both self-awareness and self-evaluation. Also noteworthy are N.'s analyses of the mechanisms of πρόληψις and memory, which, for N., are key especially to the development of the self-as-causal agent and the narrative self. N.'s translations of the fragments of book XXV will also bear consideration by anyone working on these issues. On these merits alone, one will find considerable value in the book.

Less persuasive are some of N.'s particular arguments and the methodology behind them. These arguments predicated on the assumption of dogmatism within the school (cfr. e.g. p. 176); N. seems to view all Epicureans as necessarily consistent with Epicurus, unless an ancient witness like Cicero specifies otherwise. Thus, for example, because Hermarchus and Polystratus (although to a lesser extent) deny reason (λόγος) to animals, N. assumes the same of Epicurus and Lucretius. However, as Sedley has shown, there was in fact variation within the Epicurean school, especially on matters not explicitly set out by Epicurus (cfr. D. N. Sedley, *Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World*, in M. Griffin-J. Barnes (eds.), *Philosophia Togata*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, pp. 97-119). The result of presuming consistency

is that N. argues that Epicurus must have believed that humans and animals had different kinds of selves, with different mechanisms of causal responsibility. N. argues this despite his interpretation of the Cradle Argument: that both human and animals selves begin from the same point in the same way. Similarly, N. argues that Lucretius must be describing two types of *libera voluntas*, a rational sort for humans, and an irrational sort for animals. But Lucretius twice identifies it as one thing (*haec [voluntas]*, *DRN* II 255, II 256), which allows each of us to pursue pleasure, and explicitly attributes it to all living creatures (*per terras ... animantibus*, *DRN* II 255).

Overall, *Epicurus On the Self* is an important contribution to scholarship on Epicureanism. It will be essential reading for scholars of Epicurean philosophy of mind and the history of the idea of the self. It will also be useful for those working on Hellenistic psychology and ethics more generally. One also hopes that it will be a stimulus to further research on the papyri themselves; new technologies and improved imaging techniques will no doubt enhance our ability to read these texts and further refine our understanding of what this seminal philosopher thought about the development of the self in the world.

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