

**ATTILA NÉMETH:****Epicurus on the Self. Issues in Ancient Philosophy**

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The book is a revised and expanded version of the author's PhD at the University of London. Németh aims to show that Epicurus' notion of the self is intimately linked to the notion of agency, which marks it off from the concurrent Stoic theories where the true self is centred in the act of choosing in the right way (*proairesis*). The examination of the fragments from *On Nature* XXV leads him to a distinction between two ways of achieving self-knowledge; the one is through the affections (*pathé*) that include sense-perceptions, while the other draws on the notions we acquire by observing other agents. On discussing the relation between self and agency, the author held a version of non-reductive physicalism: agents are physical throughout, being made up of atoms, but they have the power to act as a cause. He locates this causal power in the products of atomic motions, which he interprets as being occurrent mental states, as kind of emergent phenomena. The soul can act as a cause because it is endowed with properties that arise due an arrangement of the atoms. Of course, it does not make the soul as a fully independent causal power, and the interesting question is whether Epicurus's atomism allows for a causal independence for such composite entities as the soul is. The possibility of reductionism is still in the background and cannot be dismissed so easily. At any rate, in this account, the same mental phenomena can be realized in different atomic arrangements with the restriction that the numerical difference does not imply difference in type.

The author also argues that Epicurus adopted a narrative theory of selfhood, in which the self is actively created by weaving together different components such as memories. The basic text to refer to is Plutarch's *De tranquillitate animae*, a Platonist tractate, where we read that memory is essential for genuine selfhood. The text gives support for a reading of fr. 16 of *On Nature* XXV in which Epicurus explains that we do not hold animals responsible, as we weave together the products [i.e. their occurrent mental states] with their original constitutions. It may imply that responsibility depends on the narratives we tell about ourselves. As a consequence, human identity is based on one's memory of oneself in relation to the surrounding social, cultural and natural environment. The central passage suggesting that memory constitutes a psychological link for personal identity is Lucretius III 843 – 861 where

the poet discusses the possibility of personal renaissance by way of the reassembly of our atoms in the same arrangement. Famously, Lucretius rejects the assumption that sheer reassembly of our atoms is sufficient for personal survival since the memory of what was ours has been interrupted.

Lucretius also serves the basis for Németh's discussion of the Epicurean notion of agency. The Roman poet develops it in connection with the atomic swerve (II 216 – 293), a spontaneous motion which has not been mentioned in Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*. Against other interpretations, Németh argues that the swerve does not have a causal role in human agency. He claims that it is only a precondition for agency insofar as it breaks the causal chain that links the events in nature. If the events in the world were causally fated it would be impossible to act freely – and thus to be engaged in moral education – in the way Epicurus wants us to do. The argument aims to show that Epicurus introduces the swerve in order to allow for a cosmology which is open to ethical outcomes; he offered a physics which catered for ethical concepts such as Lucretius' *libera voluntas*. It does not mean, however, that our action comes directly from the swerve. Our actions arise from our present dispositions indirectly. As Epicurus says in *On Nature* XXV, the development of our character is not physically predetermined, which implies that our character does not turn on our atomic constitution, but it is up to us. It is an attractive interpretation even if one may ask more detailed explanation of how the inevitably physical, i.e., atomic features of our moral character can initiate events, i.e., actions that are somehow independent of the movements of the atomic ingredients.

The discussion of the Epicurean notion of friendship, a highly important issue in Hellenistic philosophy in general, shows the similarities with Aristotle's thesis (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX) according to which the friend is another self. The new emphasis in Epicurus is that friendship is maintained through commemorative practices in a similar way to maintaining friendship when a friend is absent.

The book is a welcome addition not only to the literature on the Hellenistic philosophy of mind, but also on ethics. It is densely argued with important conclusions.

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