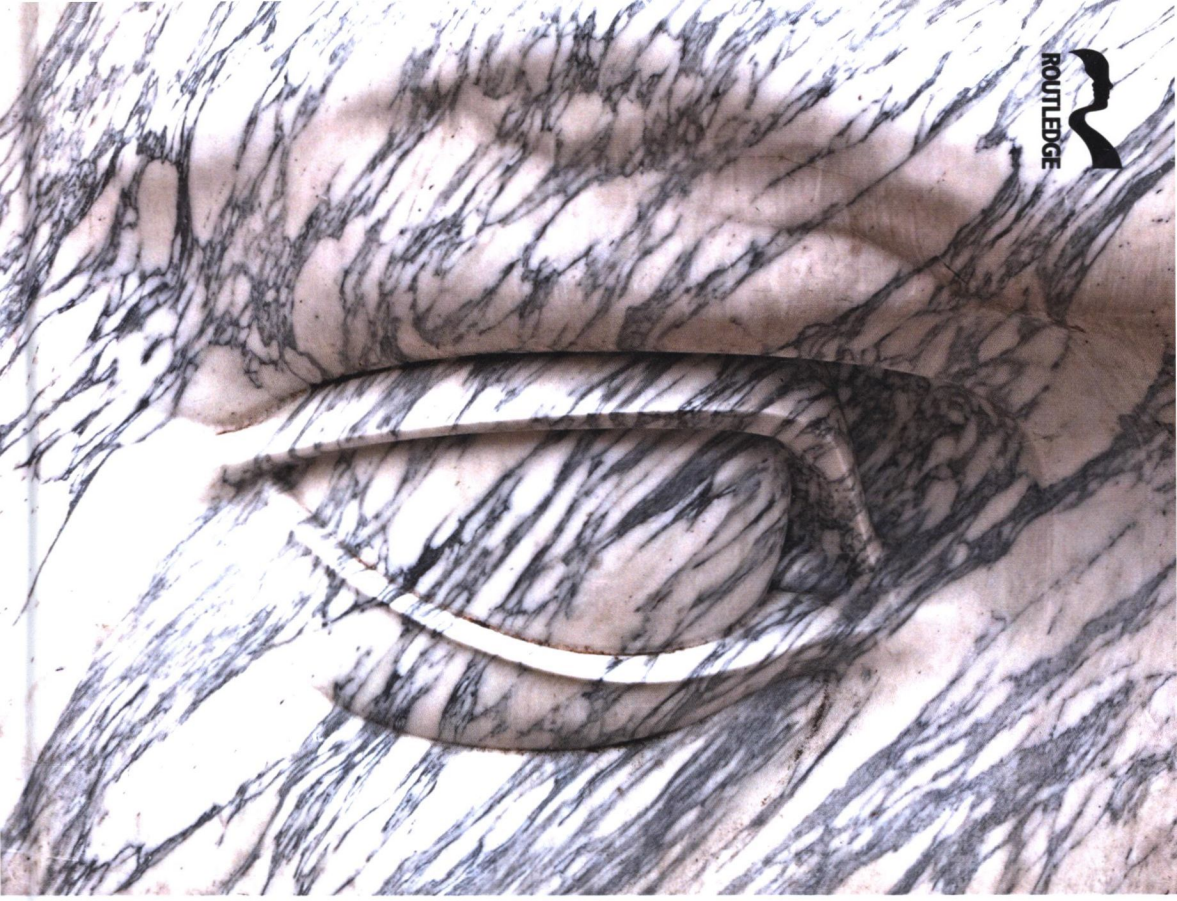

ROUTLEDGE

ISSUES IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

EPICURUS ON THE SELF

ATTILA NÉMETH

'Németh's book is an original and valuable contribution to our understanding of Epicureanism, exploring Epicurus' notion of the self in a comprehensive manner, throwing light on its many different aspects: physical, psychological, epistemic, moral, and spiritual. To my knowledge, this is the only published study to undertake and successfully accomplish such a broad task.'
Voula Tsouna, *University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*

Epicurus on the Self reconstructs a part of Epicurean ethics that only survives on the fragmentary papyrus rolls excavated from an ancient library in Herculaneum, *On Nature* XXV. The aim of this book is to contribute to a deeper understanding of Epicurus' moral psychology, ethics, and of its robust epistemological framework. The book also explores how the notion of the self emerges in Epicurus' struggle to express the individual perspective of oneself in the process of one's holistic self-reflection as an individual psychophysical being.

Attila Németh is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary.

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My excitement for learning about Hellenistic philosophy goes back to a seminar by Mary Margaret McCabe on the ethics of the Hellenistic philosophers at University College London in early 1999. Although I had already been thrilled by the antagonism of ancient philosophers who attempted to rationalize their cosmos despite it always somehow remaining full of gods, an idea which was central to their lives, the deterministic implications of cosmic matter concerning human beings had never seemed so pressing before as it became for the Stoics and the Epicureans. The idea to write about Epicurus' conception of the self, however, appeared to me much later, when I was already doing my PhD at the Royal Holloway, University of London. It was ignited by Richard Sorabji's book, *Self: Ancient and Modern* (Oxford, 2006). Although Sorabji addressed the question of personal identity in his examination of the Epicurean Lucretius, he quite understandably did not include those fragments from Epicurus' *On Nature*, which are strongly concerned with the topic, and which I knew had been available but had never been discussed. My curiosity to comprehend them as fully as possible led me to write a dissertation on the subject, which was the seed of this publication: only a seed though because this book is not only a fully revised version of it, but it also includes a completely new and extensive discussion and interpretation of Epicurus' technical concept, the *prolêpsis*, an interpretation of his narrative ideas of the self, and a novel examination of his practice and theory of friendship, as well as a discussion of the Epicurean ideal of godlikeness in relation to the self and its literary implications, all of which were absent from my original conception of the subject.

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I dedicate this book to my friends and family because it is from them my *eudaimonia* springs. Let me express my gratitude first of all to my mother for her help and support, and most of all for her patience. I appreciate the encouragement and care of my wife, Hana, who has always reassured me in my pursuits. Our daughter, Kaede, has also been a wonderful source for the practising of Democritean cheerfulness.

Abbreviations

AP	*Palatine Anthology*
Alexander of Aphrodisias	
De Mixt.	*De Mixtione* (*On Mixture*)
Aristotle	
A. Po.	*Analytica Posteriora*
De An.	*De Anima* (*On the Soul*)
N. E.	*Nicomachean Ethics*
Phys.	*Physics*
Athenaeus	
Deipn.	*Deipnosophistae* (*Deipnosophists*)
Cicero (Marcus Tullius)	
Acad.	*Academica* (*Academics*)
De Fat.	*De Fato* (*On Fate*)
De Fin.	*De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (*On Moral Ends*)
DND	*De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of Gods*)
D. L.	Diogenes Laertius (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*)
Diog. Oin.	Diogenes of Oinoanda
Dox. Gr.	*Doxographi Graeci,* edited by Hermann Diels
Epicurus	
Ep. Hdt.	*Epistula ad Herodotum* (*Letter to Herodotus*)
Ep. Men.	*Epistula ad Menoeceum* (*Letter to Menoeceus*)
Ep. Pyth.	*Epistula ad Pythoclem* (*Letter to Pythocles*)
K. D.	*Kyriai Doxai* (*Principal Doctrines*)
S. V.	*Sententiae Vaticanae* (*Vatican Sayings*)
L&S	Long, A. A. and Sedley, D. N. (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., Cambridge

Lucretius

DRN	*De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*)
PHerc.	*Papyrus Herculaneum*

Philodemus

De Oec.	*De Oeconomia* (*On Property Management*)
De Mort.	*De Morte* (*On Death*)
De Piet.	*De Pietate* (*On Piety*)
De Poem.	*De Poemata* (*On Poems*)
De Sign.	*De Signis* (*On Signs*)

Plato

Alc.	*First Alcibiades**
Leg.	*De Legibus* (*On Laws*)
Phaedr.	*Phaedrus*
Theat.	*Theaetetus*
Tim.	*Timaeus*

* Plato (?)

Pliny (the Elder)

N. H.	*Naturalis Historia* (*The History of Nature*)

Plutarch

Adv. Col.	*Adversus Colotem* (*Against Colotes*)
De Frat. Am.	*De Fraterno Amore* (*On Brotherly Love*)
De Lat. Viv.	*De Latenter Vivendo* (*On Epicurus' Advice to 'Live Unknown'*)
De Tranq. Anim.	*De Tranquilitate Animi* (*On the Tranquility of the Mind*)
Non Poss.	*Non Posse Suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* (*That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible*)

Porphyry

Ad Marc.	*Ad Marcellam* (*To Marcellus*)

Sextus Empiricus

Adv. Math.	*Adversus Mathematicos*
P. H.	*Pyrroneion Hypotuposeon* (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*)

Seneca (Lucius Annaeus iunior)

Ep. Mor.	*Epistulae Morales* (*Moral Letters to Lucillius*)

SVF	*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta,* edited by Hans von Arnim
Us.	Usener (*Epicurea*, edited by Hermann Usener)

Introduction

Epicurus was a pragmatic thinker. He maintained that all speculation is worthwhile in as much as it helps to turn human suffering into pleasure, and, in fact, into a very special sort of pleasure: the absence of pain. Epicurus thought that the diverse constituent conditions and their consequent pleasurable affections are valuable only if they dispel pain and help the living being to attain a balanced, healthy and, therefore, tranquil condition.

Epicurus' hedonism was, indeed, unique. He pointed to the cradle and took infant behaviour as sufficient evidence to establish the cornerstone of his ethics, the thesis that every living being instinctively pursues pleasure and avoids pain. Although it seems far from evident what conclusions can be drawn from infant behaviour, Epicurus took the Cradle Argument to justify that humans are naturally motivated to pursue pleasure and to avoid pain and he built his normative theory around this idea, in accordance with the formal requirements of the ancient ethical traditions. Consequently, most modern discussions of his ethics have revolved around the relationship between how the descriptive and normative parts of his theory are compatible with each other, but there has been much less focus on the relationship between his conception of the psychological development of living beings and his ethics. The evidence is meagre and fragmentary, but it is available, and I aim to bring it back to life in the following examination. As a result, the controversial notion of the 'self' will emerge from the surviving fragmentary papyrus texts of Epicurus, which are at the heart of my discussion. Hence in this book I piece together the evidence available on the Epicurean conception of the self.

I shall start with the interpretation of the relevant papyrus fragments, telling the story of Epicurus' conception of self-awareness, developed through one's internal affections, as he argued. For Epicurus, self-awareness was a process that started at the cradle and continued through one's whole life. Other than creating one's emotional states, affections also help form one's linguistic competence, a set of pre-conceptions and conceptions. And most importantly – according to Epicurus' principles of epistemological methodology – affections are the criteria of truth along with perceptions and pre-conceptions or *prolêpseis*. For Epicurus, self-awareness, under the influence of the affections, was consequently essentially related to one's developing conceptions of what is of positive or negative

value. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, an epitome of his ethics, he took such a developed, desiring agent for granted, and he concentrated, in arguing for his normative theory, on the classification of human desires. However, in his major and most extensive work, *On Nature*, which consisted of thirty-seven books, he seems to have explained in detail the formative stages of one's conception of oneself as a desiring agent. This is where my investigation of the conception of self in his philosophy will start.

As will become clear, Epicurus maintained that the affective realization of oneself naturally goes hand in hand with its outward orientation, namely with an understanding of oneself in the midst of the person's causal network, i.e. in one's natural and social environment. This was a necessary implication since – as I will argue – Epicurus entertained a general sensationalist view according to which affections are not only the internal criteria for action, but are also the criteria of truth. What people conceive through their affections, therefore, is strongly connected with the external world; thus, how people conceive of their own agency depends naturally on the origin of their affections in the environment. Observing their social networks and contemplating the causal connections of the perceived phenomena through their own naturally acquired pre-conceptual and conceptual set, people can expand their understanding, and with the help of self-reflective thinking can attribute to their own agency the pre-conception of the cause, forming the idea of their own responsibility.[1] The reconstruction of this complex process is difficult because of the fragmentary state of the evidence, and it is further complicated by Epicurus' highly technical vocabulary, most of which requires careful interpretation. Consequently, in Chapter 1 I will have to divert my attention from Epicurus' ethics to its epistemological background. We shall learn, for example, the function of memory in thinking, which I will also investigate further in the following chapters. This digression is necessary in order to show how Epicurus built a philosophically tenable explanation of self-awareness, taking his cue from the phenomena, the foundation of his empiricist philosophy.

In the later fragments of *On Nature* XXV, Epicurus turned to account for the possibility of responsible agency in the framework of his atomist physics, to show how the concept of a responsible agent was compatible with his atomism. There is no scholarly agreement about whether he was successful, or indeed about how he set about doing this, or even what exactly he wished to achieve in this part of his work. These fragments have been at the forefront of debates concerning his philosophy of mind. I will survey only the two strongest competing interpretations in detail because they represent diametrically opposed positions and thus examining them together provides the best insight into the issue. Tim O'Keefe, on the one hand, attributes a reductionist position to Epicurus' philosophy of mind. David Sedley, on the other, thinks Epicurus had a non-reductionist philosophy of mind, even allowing for the mental to have non-physical instantiations, which may activate patterns of atomic motion that, due to the swerve, are physically possible ones. Both interpretations are compatible with some understandings of human responsibility. However, are they really compatible with Epicurus' texts? I re-examine the fragments in detail and find

both competing interpretations unsatisfactory: reductionism fails to explain the irreducible causal faculty of oneself, for which Epicurus clearly argues, while emergentism will prove to be too extravagant, because Epicurus does not allow for non-physical causation as Sedley must. Hence I will argue that Epicurus took a non-reductive physicalist position in his philosophy of mind.

In Chapter 3, I will connect the early and the later fragments of *On Nature* XXV to justify the independent philosophical work achieved by Epicurus' concept of the self expressed by the reflexive pronoun *heauton* in some of the fragments. As will become clear from my analysis, the self in Epicurus denotes, in my understanding, the essential and accidental qualities of an individual living being based on the person's particular state of mental and bodily character. These comprise, on the one hand, one's awareness of one's distinctive psychophysical self based on his own affections, memories and present conditions; on the other, of his conception of himself in the cosmos as an individual human being in a particular social network. These features are acquired through a person's psychological development, which creates an individual conception of oneself as a unified psychophysical being in harmony with its continuous self-awareness, partially due to one's physical make-up. This self-awareness also leads the person to the understanding of his or her own responsible agency. The conception of the self thus acquired does the job of accounting for personal identity over time (see Lucretius on memory in: *DRN* III 843–64). All these questions will be examined in detail during the course of my analysis of the difference between animal and human selves and their narrative creation as detectable in the surviving papyri.

But, one might reasonably ask, what indicates in these texts that Epicurus had a conception of the 'self'? What conception of self does the Greek reflexive pronoun *heauton*, used regularly by Epicurus, designate? Does this pronoun really pick out *a* conception of the self? Some scholars have even questioned if the ancient philosophers had a notion of the self at all.[2] Their scepticism, I think, has already been sufficiently refuted.[3] The various accounts of ancient philosophers, studied *inter alia* by Richard Sorabji, have shown how diverse the usage of the Greek pronouns (the tokens of our English word 'self') can be in the ancient parlance – the personal pronouns 'I', 'you', 'we' in general, or the reflexive pronoun *heauton*, meaning 'oneself', or the pronoun *autos* used in an emphatic way meaning 'someone him-/herself' or even 'one's true self'. These accounts have also made it clear how much these pronouns express the strong interest of the ancients in the individual person, especially from the individual's point of view. Yet it would truly not be sufficient to attribute a conception of the self to Epicurus just on the strength of some fragmentary evidence in which he recurrently uses a reflexive pronoun, even if he most likely applies it in some sense of 'selfhood' in *On Nature* XXV. But if we take into account his entire philosophy, which advocates hedonism based on one's psychophysical 'well-being' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) attained by one's self-reflective rational considerations, the central position of the self in his account becomes unquestionable. The goal (*telos*) of Epicureanism was – very much in the vein of the ancient ethical

tradition – to understand one's own nature and transform it (of course, in Epicurus' case, this was in harmony with his teachings, which offered the possibility of a perfect human life, no less valuable than that of the gods (see *DRN* III 322)). An individual conception of one's self is essential to such an ethics.

Epicurus' ethical end was in line with the principal schools of ancient philosophy, all of which, as Tony Long puts it, raised the simple question of what to make of oneself in an ontological as well as in a practical and normative sense.[4] On the one hand, you need to get to know yourself in order to see your place in the cosmos. First you evaluate your nature in order to be able to understand the means by which you can take care of yourself, as Socrates taught Alcibiades in harmony with the Delphic imperative to Know Thyself (Plato (?) *Alc.* 124a–b). Only by understanding his true character and his related social status could Alcibiades have arranged his political career in a way that would help others.[5] Aristotle's ethical theory can be considered along these lines as well in light of his *ergon* argument in Book 1 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*: first we need to identify the human function so we can define the best form of human life. Ancient ethics, thus, seems to take on a twofold aspect: a descriptive and a normative part. Both parts are normally supported by some elaborate metaphysics, which lend a natural foundation to ancient theories and are the framework on which a normative ethics can be built.

But in so far as one defines oneself in relation to the world, starting from one's own perspective, applied ethics naturally requires a common ground for both the descriptive and normative components of an ethical theory. That ground is the subjective and individual conception of the self. As was the case with the Epicureans – as we will see clearly from Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* – self-introspection took its cue from the observation of one's own desires and from the scrutiny of the ways to achieve their satisfaction. This necessarily focuses on the individual's current conditions. For Epicurus the only direct and objective ground for the evaluation of one's bodily and mental states was the person's pleasurable and painful bodily and mental affections (*pathê*). Consequently, to form a conception of oneself one first needs to understand how one's current disposition is related to the satisfaction of one's desires – whether pleasurably or painfully – and then one needs to evaluate one's own disposition, by comparing how much one's desires conform to Epicurus' threefold classification of desires, the basic building blocks of his normative theory (*Ep. Men.* 127–8 and *K. D.* 29). That such self-evaluation was not possible for the Epicureans without social relationships is clearly shown by how essential friendship and the teacher–pupil relationship were for them. It would have been impossible for the individual to apply Epicurus' normative theory without a community of friends – the idea simply being that one cannot judge *objectively* the value of one's pleasurable or painful conditions in the light of an ethical theory. Of course, as a simple egoist you could decide and act in correspondence with the desires you find worth satisfying, and keep satisfying them on a regular basis, yet you may be completely mistaken concerning their natural value. Your consequent pleasures may be pleasurable *qua* pleasures, but they may not be at all worthy of choice, lacking the support of Epicurus' ethical theory as a

standard. It is essential to recognize what this implied for anyone who wished to become an Epicurean: in so far as he was willing to subscribe to the Master's tenets, leading a life along egoistic principles was no longer any help, since by joining the Garden, Epicurus' school in Athens, one had to accept the criticism of the other Epicureans in order to accomplish the Epicurean natural *telos* by the constant adjustment of one's value judgements in harmony with Epicurus' teachings. You may, for example, consider fulfilling your desire for some Lesbian wine an imperative when longing for some, without recognizing that your natural desire for wine includes a non-necessary aspect, i.e. that the wine should come from Lesbos. And if you had a desire for wine merely to quench your thirst then you would have needed to admit that in such a case the desire is not even natural, since water would suit your intention much better, given the dehydrating effect of wine. And you may also drift constantly between your home and country residences believing that it is your circumstances which provide you with a tranquil life, without realizing that it depends first and foremost on the internal dispositions of your body and soul (see *DRN* III 1053–75), recognitions that could be brought to life with the help of an Epicurean community.[6]

But if the ethical end depends so much on the conditions of body and soul, where does the concept of the self come in? Is it not just a convenient explanatory term, a 'modern shortcut' for summarizing Epicurus' ideas? Did Epicurus really need such a concept at all to explain hedonic psychophysical 'well-being'?

Yes, I will argue, he did, even if we do not find a definition of the self in his writings, and perhaps such a definition never even existed, which is very likely given Epicurus' lack of interest in definitions in general. Yet this does not discount the possibility of a conceptual framework for the self. The double aspect of his ethical end – the dependence of one's well-being on the conditions of both one's body and soul – and the psychophysical holism of his ethics strongly points to the place of selfhood in Epicurus' theory. For Epicurus the self was not only one's intellectual and moral commitments: he did not identify the true self singly with the soul, but included all aspects of the human condition, most importantly from an egoistic 'I' perspective.[7] It is from his holistic conception of a person's own disposition that his conception of the self takes its cue, through such observations, for example, as that one's own causal power in the world is dependent on both bodily and mental conditions. According to Epicurus' hedonism, one should make choices and avoid things with the help of a hedonic calculus, constantly taking into account bodily and mental conditions and constantly referencing one's individual psychophysical self.[8] Without an 'I' perspective that brings all these factors together such a calculus could not work, since it is *my* psychophysical condition that must be reflected on in harmony with a normative theory in order to carry out a consequent action. That is to say, the hedonic calculus is applied in relation to *me* or to my *self*.[9]

It is also an important aspect of the Epicurean self that this 'I' or rather 'my *self*' has to be identical over time for the calculus to work. Without any memories of the interactions between my psychophysical self and the world, I have no

basis to calculate an appropriate action since a momentary conception of the self simply would not be sufficient.[10] Not even Epicurus' normative ethical theory would suffice on its own as a canon for the calculation to work since its *telos* is strongly connected to one's individual psychophysical condition, implying personal identity over time. As Sorabji has pointed out concerning Lucretius' idea of *palingenesis*,[11] the fact that we lack a memory of our former assemblies is not a sufficient reason to think that we need not be concerned about our future reassemblies either, especially if we take into account the asymmetrical nature between concerns for the future and the past, the former being 'typically an object of concern in a way that the forgotten is not'.[12] Consequently he finds Lucretius' other solution to the problem more adequate, interpreting lines 861–3 of *DRN* III in harmony with lines 677–8 of *DRN* III that it is the uninterrupted retention of memory, in the sense of the possibility to exercise retained memory, which is the necessary condition for personal identity. This is very much in harmony with the kind of personal identity necessary for the hedonic calculus to work and this is the kind of conception of the self that surfaces in the fragments of *On Nature* XXV. There we come again into contact with the part memory plays in reference to the Epicurean natural *telos*, and it only makes sense to interpret memory as playing a part in one's personal identity and consequently being an indispensable part of one's self.

Take the famous example of Epicurus counterbalancing his extreme pains on his last day with the remembrance of his past conversations, as mentioned in a letter to Idomeneus, one of the major figures of his school (D. L. X 22). In order to compensate for his pain, Epicurus needed memories of his own, which implies both that the person who lived those memories was the same as the person suffering in the present, and that memories build one's personal identity and one's conception of one's psychophysical self. In this particular example it is mental pleasure, which counterbalances bodily pain – both of which are felt by the very same person. Such an operation would not be possible, nor could it be important, if one identified oneself only with the soul, since (e.g. on a Platonic view of the body as the prison of the soul in the *Phaedo*) one would rather look forward to death in a case such as this one. But Epicurus chose to optimize his present condition by remembering past circumstances, and even if it sounds somewhat counter-intuitive or even counter-experiential that it is possible to compensate one's excruciating sufferings so easily, he inadvertently pointed towards some necessary elements of his concept of the self.

His idea of self-reflective thinking in accordance with both the *pathologikos tropos* and the *aitiologikos tropos* (the manners dealing with being affected and with the causes of things, respectively) in the early parts of *On Nature* XXV will also make clear how broad his concept of the self was: he found it important to also absorb into it the opinion of others. Fortunately, my analysis, unavoidably conjectural owning to the fragmentary nature of the evidence, is corroborated by some other fragmentary papyri: writings of the first-century BCE Epicurean Philodemus, whose work *On Frank Criticism* describes the constantly corrective methodology of the teacher–pupil relationship in the Garden which also