

CHAPTER 10

*Moral responsibility and moral development
in Epicurus' philosophy*

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I. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

For the purpose of this paper, I assume that if a person is morally responsible for an action, this is a necessary and sufficient condition for moral appraisal of that person for that action. For instance, if the action is morally wrong, moral blame is in order. Other morally relevant responses that are sometimes connected with moral responsibility are praise, pardon, shame, pride, reward, punishment, remorse.

I now introduce two quite different concepts of moral responsibility: one grounded on the causal responsibility of the agent for an action, the other on the ability of the agent to do otherwise. The one based on the agent's causal responsibility considers it a necessary condition for praising or blaming an agent for an action, that it was the agent *and not something else* that brought about the action. The question of moral responsibility becomes one of whether the agent was the or a cause of the action, or whether the agent was forced to act by something else. On this view, actions or choices can be attributed to agents because it is in their actions and choices that the agents, *qua* moral beings, manifest themselves.

The second idea of moral responsibility considers it a prerequisite for blaming or praising an agent for an action that the agent could have done otherwise. This idea is often connected with the agents' sentiments or beliefs that they could have done otherwise, as well as the agents' feelings of guilt or regret, or pride, for what they have done. Some philosophers consider the causal indeterminateness of the agent's decision to act as necessary to warrant that the agent could have done otherwise.

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Depending on what conception of moral responsibility a philosopher has, they will have to produce different reasons if they want to show that or how moral responsibility is preserved or integrated in their philosophical system.

With a concept of moral responsibility based on causal responsibility, philosophers have to show that agents themselves (and not something else) are the causes of their actions; and they have to determine what characteristics an agent needs to have in order to be the sort of cause of an action to which responsibility can be attributed.

With a concept of moral responsibility based on the agent's ability to do otherwise, philosophers will have to show that in their systems agents are in fact capable of acting or of deciding and acting otherwise than they do. In this first section I set out to show that our sources univocally suggest that Epicurus had a concept of moral responsibility based not on the agent's ability to do otherwise, but on the agent's causal responsibility.

There are only a few texts that provide information about Epicurus' concept of moral responsibility. The most important information comes from Epicurus' *On Nature* book 25. In this book Epicurus considers three different causal factors that are involved in human behaviour:

1. Our *original constitution* (*hē ex archēs sustasis*; sometimes Epicurus simply uses *archē*), or nature (*phusis*); i.e. the package of soul atoms we come with, and which in part differs from person to person.
2. The *environment* (*ta periechonta*); most commonly, the environment influences our behaviour via our perception of it; e.g. when I perceive that it is starting to rain heavily, I will open up my umbrella.
3. *Us ourselves*, or, as Epicurus also says, 'the cause from ourselves' (*hē ex hēmōn aitia*)¹ or 'that through ourselves' (*to di' hēmōn autōn*), etc.²

When our initial constitution and our environment together (i.e. nature and nurture, as it were) fully determine what we do, then our actions are the result of necessity.³ When we ourselves are causally involved in the actions, then they are not the result of necessity.

Epicurus takes the fact that we blame each other, and try to reform each other, as an *indication* that the cause of our actions lies in ourselves, or that the actions happen through ourselves:

¹ Cf. also Laursen 1997: 47.

² Τὴν ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ αἰτίαν; τὸ δι' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν; ἔχοντας ἐν ἑαυτοῖς τὴν αἰτίαν; τὸ ἐξ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πραττόμενον; ἢ ἐξ ἡμῶν γεννομένην <αἰτία> (Laursen 1997: 45; 697.4). With 'us' or 'we' Epicurus refers to human beings.

³ Long and Sedley 1987 (= LS) 20 C 2, Laursen 1997: 28.

(2) [And we can invoke against the argument that our behaviour must be caused by our initial constitution or by environmental factors] by which we never cease to be affected, [the fact that] we rebuke, oppose, and reform each other as if we have the cause also in ourselves, and not only in our initial constitution and in the mechanical necessity of that which surrounds and penetrates us^{4,5} (LS 20 C 2)

The concept of blame presupposes that the beings that are blamed were themselves causally responsible for their actions. It *makes no sense* to blame individuals for certain events, if those events came about through necessity, and the individuals were forced in bringing them about.⁶

Moreover, Epicurus thinks, we have a *preconception* that we are the causes of our actions

(8) . . . using the word ‘necessity’ of that which we call ‘. . . by ourselves’, he is merely changing a name; but *he* [i.e. Epicurus’ opponent] *must*⁷ *prove that we have a preconception of a kind which has faulty delineations when we call that which [comes] through ourselves causally responsible.*⁸ (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, 34.28 in Arrighetti 1973 (= Arr.), Laursen 1997: 37)

(4) . . . when he blames or praises. *But if he were to act in this way, he would be leaving intact the very same behaviour* [i.e. praising and blaming] *which we think* of as concerning ourselves, in accordance with* our preconception of the cause,*^{9,10}

A preconception is some kind of veridical general conception or true opinion that we have acquired empirically, by having repeatedly the same sort of perceptual experience.¹¹ Preconceptions are self-evident.¹² Epicurus, it seems, holds that we acquire the preconception of us as causes precisely through our observations that human beings, including ourselves, are praised and blamed for their actions. And given that Epicurus thinks we have such a preconception, and that all preconceptions are self-evident, we

⁴ Namely by means of perception, cf. Epicur. *Nat.* 25, Laursen 1997: 33, LS 20 C 1, quoted below.

⁵ (2) εσθήκει, ὧν οὐ . . . ἀπολειπέτα πάθη τοῦ γίνεσθαι, . . . νοθετεῖν τε ἀλλήλους καὶ μάχεσθαι καὶ μεταρρυθμίζειν ὡς ἔχοντας καὶ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ οὐχὶ ἐν τῇ ἐξ ἀρχῆς μόνον συστάσει καὶ ἐν τῇ τοῦ περιέχοντος καὶ ἐπεισιόντος κατὰ τὸ αὐτόματον ἀνάγκη.

⁶ Cf. LS 20 C 3.

⁷ I follow Laursen’s reading, Laursen 1997; ‘*’ indicates differences from the text in LS.

⁸ (8) . . . φ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν καλούμενον τῶι τῆς ἀνάγκης ὄνοματι προσαγορεύειν ὄνομα μόνον μετατίθεται * δεῖ δ’ ἐπιδῆσαι ὅτι τοιοῦτο τι ὡ μοχθηροῖ εἰσι τύποι προειληφότες τὸ δι’ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν αἴτιον καλοῦμεν, οὐτίδ . . .

⁹ I follow Laursen’s reading (cf. next footnote). However, I do not quite understand what it means. I hope it still means the same as what Sedley 1983 suggested, viz. that our observation of blaming and praising produces our preconception of us as causes of our actions.

¹⁰ (4) μεμφόμενος ἢ ἐπαινῶν ἀλλ’ εἰ μὲν τοῦτο πράττοι, τὸ μὲν* ἔργον ἂν εἴη καταλείπων ὃ ἐφ’ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν κατὰ* τὴν τῆς αἰτίας πρόληψιν, ἐννοοῦμεν*.

¹¹ Cf. D. L. 10.33.

¹² Cf. D. L. 10.33, ἐναργές.

can surmise that he thought it to be self-evident that we are the causes of our actions.

Two other passages from *on Nature* 25 suggest that what makes an action blame- or praiseworthy or exempted from blame and praise, is *not* the fact that it is a *physical event* of a certain kind, *but* that it has *causal factors* of a certain kind:

And if, on account of the cause which is now already out of itself, it actually goes to what is similar to the original constitution, and this is a bad one, then we censure it at times even more, but rather in an admonitory way . . .¹³ (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, 34.25 Arr., Laursen 1997: 31)

and:

(1) But many naturally capable of achieving such and such results fail to achieve them, because of themselves, not because of one and the same causal responsibility of the atoms and of themselves. (2) And with these we especially do battle, and rebuke them . . . because they behave in accordance with their disordered original nature, as we do with the whole range of animals. (3) For the nature of their atoms has contributed nothing to some of their behaviour, and degrees of behaviour and dispositions, but it is their developments which themselves possess all or most of the causal responsibility for certain things.¹⁴ (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, 34.21 Arr., LS 20 B 1–3, Laursen 1997: 19; tr. Long/Sedley 1987, modified)

Thus, if an action of a certain kind is caused by the initial constitution of a person, in response to the environment, then the person is – presumably – not to be reproached. Thus if, say, a toddler Tina throws a tantrum for not getting a toy, she is presumably not to be morally blamed. However if an action *of the same kind* is caused by Tina herself, and thus not by the initial constitution, then the person is to be blamed for it. For example, if Tina keeps having tantrums about trivia as an adult, presumably she *is* to be blamed for them.

One last passage concerned with moral responsibility comes from the *Letter to Menoecus*:

[he says that some things happen by necessity,] others by chance, and others again because of us, since necessity is not accountable to anyone, and chance is an unstable

¹³ ἂν δὲ καὶ βαδίζῃ διὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἤδη αἰτίαν εἰς τὸ ὅμοιον τῆ ἐξ ἀρχῆς συστάσει φαύλη οὐση, ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐνίστε κακίζομεν, ἐν νουθητικῶ μέντοι μᾶλλον τρόπῳ . . .

¹⁴ πολλὰ δὲ καὶ τῶνδε καὶ τῶν[δε φ]ύσιν ἔχοντα ἀπεργαστικά [γ]ινεσθαι δι' ἑαυτὰ οὐ γίνεται ἀ[πε]ργαστικά (οὐ διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν αἰτία[ν] τῶν τε ἀτόμων καὶ ἑαυτῶν), οἷς δὴ καὶ μάλιστα μοχόμεθα καὶ ἐπιτιμῶμεν .[.] οὐντες κατὰ τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς [τ]αραχώ[δ]η φύσιν ἔχοντα, κα[θάρ]περ ἐπὶ τῶν πάντων ζῴων. [*οὐ]θὲν γὰρ αὐτοῖς συνήργηκεν εἰς ἕνια ἔργα τε καὶ μεγέθη ἔργων καὶ διαθέσεων ἢ τῶν ἀτόμων φύσις ἀλλ' αὐτὰ τὰ ἀπογεγεννημένα τὴν πᾶσαν ἢ τὴν πλείστην κέκτῃται αἰτίαν τῶνδὲ τινῶν, ἐκ δ' ἐκείνης ἕναι τῶν ἀτόμων κινήσεις ταραχώδεις κινούνται, οὐχὶ διὰ τατ[.] . . . π[ά]ντως [δ]ιὰ δὲ τῶν [παρεμ]π[ι]πτόν[των] . . . ἐκ τοῦ περι[έ]χοντος

thing to watch, whereas that because of us is without master, and culpability and its opposite are naturally attached to it. (Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 133–4)¹⁵

Here we learn that Epicurus distinguished between three types of events: those that happen by necessity, those that happen by chance, and those that happen because of us (*gignesthai par' hēmas*). He adds two pieces of information about the things that come to be because of us. First, they are said to be without master. By this I take Epicurus to mean that it is we who bring the events about and not something else; in particular not fate, which he called master (or rather mistress) just the sentence before. Second, the things that happen because of us are said to have praiseworthiness and culpability naturally attached to them. This suggests that they are precisely those things for which we can be held morally accountable. Taking the two points together, it – again – appears that I can be held *morally* responsible for something, when I am somehow *causally* responsible for its occurrence. And I assume that those things that come to be because of us (*gignesthai par' hēmas*) are those of which we ourselves are the causes.

There is, then, one element all these passages on moral responsibility have in common: they connect the concept of moral responsibility with us as *causal factors* of the things for which we are considered morally accountable. We thus need to see what it is that makes *us* the causes of our behaviour – as opposed to the mere combination of our initial constitution (or atoms) and our environment. In the surviving evidence, Epicurus never directly addresses this question, but his *On Nature* 25 gives some hints how he would have answered it.

If we are the cause of an action, this involves first, that we are not forced in bringing it about (LS 20 C 10, *Ep. Men.* 133); second, that we have an impulse (*hormēma*) or desire (*prothumia*) to perform that action; and third, that we act in accordance with that impulse or desire (LS 20 C 9–11). Fourth, the most important element seems to come from Epicurus' gloss on what it is that something comes to be because of us (*gignesthai par' hēmas*):

Hence at some point* it is unqualifiedly *because of (para)* us that the development comes to be now of this kind or that kind; i.e. the things which on account of the pores flow in of necessity from what surrounds us at some point come to be [of this kind or that kind] *because of (para)* us, or rather *because of (para)*

¹⁵ [ἃ μὲν κατ' ἀνάγκην γίνεσθαι λέγει], ἃ δὲ ἀπὸ τύχης, ἃ δὲ παρ' ἡμᾶς, διὰ τὸ τὴν μὲν ἀνάγκην ἀνυπεύθυνον εἶναι, τὴν δὲ τύχην ἄστατον ὄραν, τὸ δὲ παρ' ἡμᾶς ἀδέσποτον ᾧ καὶ τὸ μεμπτόν καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον παρακολουθεῖν πέφυκεν;

our beliefs from ourselves.¹⁶ (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, 34.26, Arr. LS 20 C 1, Laursen 1997: 32–3)

It seems (if, as I suggest we should, we understand the ‘or rather’ (*kai*)¹⁷ in the last sentence as epexegetic) that if something comes to be because of us, then it does so because of *our own beliefs (doxai)*.¹⁸ If this is so, we can infer several things about Epicurus’ concept of moral responsibility.

First, this suggests that if we are morally responsible for something (actions, characteristics), then we must *have* certain beliefs; and hence *be capable of* having beliefs; these requirements preclude very little children and some animals from being responsible for their behaviour, since they do not have beliefs. This squares with Epicurus’ view, as elsewhere attested, that wild animals are not to be held responsible for their behaviour.¹⁹

Second, our beliefs must be somehow causally involved in bringing about the actions and dispositions that ‘come to be because of us’. Now we know that, for Epicurus, beliefs are indeed causally involved in most of our behaviour.²⁰ By beliefs (*doxai*) Epicurus does not intend – or at least not primarily – that e.g. when I sit down, I probably think ‘I should sit down’ just beforehand. Beliefs (*doxai*) are not (just) volatile, momentary, thoughts of this kind, but are lasting, and firmly held by the individual; they make up a fundamental part of our mental dispositions; they underlie or are part of our dispositions to experience emotions, and they determine what kinds of desires we will have, and hence what we do. For example, if I believe that thunder is a form of divine punishment, then this will invoke certain fears in me, which in turn will make me tend to react in

¹⁶ ὥστε παρ’ ἡμᾶς π[οθ’]* ἀπλῶς τὸ ἀπύογεγεννημένον ἤδη γείνεσθαι, [τ]οῖα ἢ τοῖα, καὶ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ περιέχοντος κ[α]τ’ ἀνάγκην διὰ τοὺς πρό[ρους] εἰσρέο[ν]τα παρ’ ἡμᾶς π[ο]τε γει[ίνε]σθαι καὶ παρὰ τ[ᾶς] ἡμε[τέρας] [ἐ]ξ ἡμῶν αὐτ[ῶν] δόξ[ας] (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, Arr. 34.26, LS 20 C 1, Laursen 1997: 32–3). * This is Laursen’s reading.

¹⁷ Laursen’s tentative reading in papyrus 1056 is ἢ, which also supports an epexegetical interpretation.

¹⁸ Sedley has suggested to me that ‘happens (or comes to be) *depending on us*’ captures γείνεσθαι παρ’ ἡμᾶς better than ‘happens (or comes to be) *because of us*’. I disagree. I take the παρὰ in γείνεσθαι παρ’ ἡμᾶς in the general sense illustrated in LSJ C III 7, with possible alternative translations ‘happens on account of us’ ‘happens through us’ or ‘happens with us being the cause’. Phrases like ‘this happened depending on me’ seem to strain the English, and generally I believe that the use of παρὰ + acc. together with γείνεσθαι makes ‘depending on us’ a less desirable translation. In any case, I believe the causal reading I give to παρὰ + acc. is justified by the fact that this is the best reading for the grammatically parallel παρὰ τ[ᾶς] ἡμε[τέρας] [ἐ]ξ ἡμῶν αὐτ[ῶν] δόξ[ας] in the very same clause, in which, I believe, Epicurus must have used παρὰ in the same sense as in the immediately preceding παρ’ ἡμᾶς π[ο]τε γει[ίνε]σθαι καὶ.

¹⁹ Laursen 1997: 31.

²⁰ e.g. *Ep. Men.* 132; D.L. 10.149 = *Sent.* 30; see also Furley 1967: 202 and Mitsis 1988: 141.

certain ways to external factors like thunderstorms. We can thus understand why Epicurus thought that our beliefs play an essential role for our moral responsibility. (Switching to the level of atoms, we can describe this as follows: the atomic structure of our mind is in part determined by the beliefs we hold. For our beliefs *are* certain structures of the atoms in the mind which make it possible that certain external influences can enter our mind (and be thought, and reacted upon), whereas others cannot. For the latter there will be no pathways or channels of the right shape, that is of the shape that would be needed for it to be possible for them to enter the mind. I picture this process analogously to that of perception, as described by Epicurus.)

Third, it seems that the fact that Epicurus emphasizes that the beliefs are the agents' *own* beliefs (τ[ὸς] ἡμε[τέρου]ς [ἐ]ξ ἡμῶν αὐτ[ῶν] δόξ[ας]), implies at the very least that the agents must have *thought* the beliefs themselves, and that they must have *accepted* them in some way. However, presumably what Epicurus has in mind is something stronger. For instance, he may have envisaged a distinction between on the one hand beliefs that a person simply took over from others, without thinking them through, and on the other, beliefs that the person thought through, and then adopted as their own, on the basis of some rational grounds for the belief.²¹

Not all the details of Epicurus' conception of moral responsibility are then clear. But all passages connect the concept of moral responsibility with us as being *causally responsible* for the things for which we are morally responsible. There is no trace of a concept of moral responsibility which takes it to be a necessary condition that we (the same persons, in the same circumstances) are capable of deciding or acting otherwise than we do. On the contrary, it seems that Epicurus held that when we are the causes of our actions, then how we react to external stimuli at any given time will depend fully on us as we are at the time when we set out to act,²² i.e. on our overall mental disposition, including our beliefs, at that time.²³ That is, if in two situations my overall mental disposition were the same, I would in my actions necessarily react in the same way to the same external stimuli. There is – in this sense – no possibility for us to act 'out of character'.

²¹ Cf. the distinction between false assumptions (ὑπολήψεις ψευδεῖς) and προλήψεις about the gods, *Ep. Men.* 124; see also Mitsis 1988: 141, n. 27; cf. further 'if we do not grasp what the canon is, i.e. that which judges all things that come to be through beliefs, but irrationally follow the tendencies of the many, everything with respect to which we investigate will be lost' (Laursen 1997: 43–4; context and Greek in section 3 below).

²² At least nothing in the sources is incompatible with the assumption.

²³ See also Phld. *It.* 32 and cf. Annas 1992: 180–1 and Mitsis 1988: 141.

Let us now turn to the topic of moral development and its connection with moral responsibility.²⁴ I call an individual a ‘moral being’, if they can in principle be held morally responsible for at least some of their behaviour. We can then distinguish two different issues concerning moral development:

1. The development of someone from not being a moral being (i.e. not to be held morally responsible for anything) to their being a moral being (being held morally responsible – in principle – for something.) There is thus a conceptual connection between moral responsibility and moral development.
2. The development of a moral being from their present state to being morally better or morally worse (in some particular respect or overall); for Epicurus, the important case is that of becoming morally better, i.e. of moral improvement or moral progress.

2. MORAL DEVELOPMENT I: HOW DO WE BECOME MORAL BEINGS?

Our first question is ‘how do we become moral beings?’ or ‘what does our transition from the non-moral or pre-moral stage of our lives to the moral stage consist in?’ Following what I just said, we can also rephrase this question as ‘how do we become beings who are morally responsible for our behaviour?’ For philosophers who think that we are morally responsible for an action if we could have done otherwise, this question boils down to: ‘when and how do we become capable of doing otherwise than we do?’ For instance, such philosophers presumably do not consider toddlers as capable of doing otherwise (in the relevant sense), but consider 18-year-olds as having that capacity. (The question however, is, rarely asked in this fashion.) By contrast, for philosophers like Epicurus, who think that we are morally responsible for our actions when we ourselves are the *causes* of our actions, the question amounts to: ‘when and how do we ourselves become causally responsible for our actions?’²⁵ Roughly, Epicurus’ answer to this question appears to be this: we become causally responsible for our actions when our mind has developed to a point at which we are capable of consciously adopting, as our own, beliefs that do not square with our initial constitution, and can internalize these beliefs so

²⁴ One can talk about the moral development of individuals as well as of groups of people, such as societies or communities. In this paper, I am interested exclusively in the moral development of individuals.

²⁵ There is to my knowledge *no* evidence that Epicurus ever considered a question like ‘when or how do we become able to do otherwise?’ On the other hand, there is *some* evidence that he asked when and how we become causes of our actions.

that they in turn causally influence our actions. But let us proceed more slowly.

Let me first remind you of the very basics of Epicurus' ethics. In a nutshell, and ruthlessly simplified, it comes up to this:

The end (*telos*) which all human beings do and should aim at is a life of happiness (*eudaimonia*), above all in the form of tranquillity (*ataraxia*),²⁶ that is freedom from mental disturbance (*tarachē*). For Epicurus such happiness consists in pleasure²⁷ and the absence of pain. It is the task of ethics to aid us in achieving happiness.

The core of Epicurean ethics is a complex theory of desires, pains and pleasures, which enables us to grasp with our intellect which of all the many pleasures and pains to choose, and which to shun, so that we can attain tranquillity.²⁸

It turns out that as a matter of fact we can reach such tranquillity only if we are virtuous.²⁹ However, virtue is understood strictly as a means to the end pleasure.³⁰

So far Epicurus' ethics in a nutshell. Back to moral development.

First, what do we know about Epicurus' view of the mental constitution of human beings very early on, say, at birth?³¹ We have at birth two different kinds of atomic substructures in our mind: those which we all share, and those in which we differ. Our minds are all *equal*, for example, in so far as from birth we all aim at obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain.³² We do so instinctively, not as the result of deliberation, since we cannot deliberate yet.³³ Our minds *differ* from each other, for instance, in that we have different emotional tendencies, different dispositions for experiencing certain emotions, and for behaving accordingly. Thus, in terms of atoms, if we have more fire-like atoms in the nature of our mind, we get angry more easily; if we have more air-like atoms in the nature of our mind, we are more easily afraid; and if there is an abundance of breath-like atoms, we are naturally calm.³⁴ These tendencies are morally relevant, since

²⁶ *Ep. Men.* 128, 131. ²⁷ e.g. *Ep. Men.* 129. ²⁸ e.g. *Ep. Men.* 127–32.

²⁹ *Ep. Men.* 132; D.L. 10.140.

³⁰ D.L. 10.138. As we take medicine for the sake of health, so we choose the virtues on account of pleasure and not for their own sake.

³¹ *Lucr.* 3.344–7: *anima* and body are combined already in the mother's womb.

³² Cf. D.L. 10.137, the so-called 'cradle argument'.

³³ Cf. D.L. 10.137, 'naturally and without reason' (φυσικῶς καὶ χωρὶς λόγου); also *Cic. Fin.* 1.30.

³⁴ '(4) The mind also has that kind of heat which it takes on when it boils with anger and the eyes shine with a fiercer flame; it has plenty of cold wind, the companion of fear, which excites fright in the limbs and rouses the frame; and it has that state of the still air which is found in a tranquil chest and in a calm face. But there is more heat in those with fierce hearts and angry minds which easily boil over with anger. A prime example is the lion, which regularly bursts its chest with roaring

they later co-determine how successful we will be when trying to achieve tranquillity.

Next, how does the mind develop from birth to adulthood? Lucretius writes:

Furthermore, we perceive that the mind is born jointly with the body, grows up jointly with it, and ages jointly with it. For just as infants walk unsteadily with a frail and tender body, so too their accompanying power of mental judgement is tenuous. Then when they have matured to an age of robust strength, their judgement is greater and their mental strength increased.³⁵ (Lucr. 3.445–50)

This passage suggests a *gradual* development of the mind, starting in early childhood, leading to a more fully developed intellect and capacity for reasoning at the onset of adulthood.

There is some evidence that Epicurus thought some of our mental development to be necessitated by the initial constitution of our minds – both concerning developments based on elements shared by all humans, and developments based on elements that differ across individuals. Thus in *On Nature* 25 he writes:

But if in the mind the first constitution expels something from the development, this sort of thing not being developed from necessity *all the way* to these particular things; but on the one hand to the point where it has come to be a soul, or rather a soul which has a disposition and motion of such a size, this sort of thing being developed *from necessity* from these sorts of things; and on the other hand to the point . . . (34.24 Arr., Laursen 1997: 28, my emphasis, text continued below)³⁶

We may perhaps think of these necessitated developments as a kind of genetically directed ‘maturing’ of the mind. (Thus in this way it is determined that an individual develops a soul, and that that soul has a disposition and motion of a particular size.) We can imagine that with age our minds unfold to greater and greater complexity (in the combination of the atoms), and this means that we acquire more and more capacities and dispositions.

and groaning and cannot contain the billows of rage in its chest. But the cold mind of stags is more windy, and quicker to rouse through their flesh those chilly gusts which set the limbs in trembling motion. The nature of cattle, on the other hand, is characterized more by calm air. Neither does ignition by the smouldering brand of anger ever over-excite it and cloud it with blind darkness, nor is it transfixed and numbed by the icy shafts of fear. It lies midway between stags and fierce lions. (5) Likewise the human race.’ (Lucr. 3.289–307, LS 14 D 4–5)

³⁵ Praeterea gigni pariter cum corpore et una / crescere sentimus pariterque senescere mentem. / Nam velut infirmo pueri teneroque vagantur / corpore, sic animi sequitur sententia tenuis. / Inde ubi robustis adolevit viribus aetas, / consilium quoque maius et auctior est animi vis.

³⁶ Κάν κατὰ διάνοιαν δέ τι ἐκβιάζεται ἡ πρώτη σύστασις τοῦ ἀπογεγεννημένου, μὴ ἐξ ἀνάγκης μέχρι τῶνδὲ τινῶν ἢ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ τοιοῦδε ἀπογεννωμένου ἀλλὰ μέχρι μὲν τοῦ ψυχὴν γενέσθαι ἢ καὶ τοσαυτῆνὶ διάθεσιν καὶ κίνησιν ἔχουσιν ψυχὴν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ τοιοῦδε ἀπογεννωμένου ἐκ τῶν τοιοῦτων, μέχρι δὲ . . . (text continued in n. 49 below)

For instance, we all learn how to speak (a complicated business);³⁷ we all develop some 'preconceptions' (e.g. of horses and cows);³⁸ we all learn to reason.³⁹ Despite genetic pre-programming, these ongoing differentiations of our minds still mostly require certain environmental conditions in order to be realized: if we perceived nothing, we would not obtain any preconceptions of things; and if no one around us spoke a language, nor would we.⁴⁰ The dispositions we develop will at least in part vary from person to person, owing to the differences in our initial constitutions – and this will be so even when the environments are similar. Moreover, all these developments take a certain time – thus we won't learn how to speak before the approximate age of one; and we won't learn how to reason properly before adolescence.⁴¹ In this context, Epicurus considers time and age as causes;⁴² that is – I take it – as factors we can use rightly in explanations in answer to questions like 'why can't she speak yet?' 'she's not yet one.'

In addition, differences in the environment will influence us in such a way that different individuals turn out differently, even where their initial natures do not vary significantly; thus, only when we perceive kangaroos, will we obtain a preconception of kangaroos, and only when people around us speak Greek, will the language we learn as a child be Greek.⁴³ Moreover, Epicurus is known to have recommended that one should watch over the young, so that they do not develop maddening desires.⁴⁴ Thus he thought that different external influences on children make them develop different desires. Thus, before reaching the age of morality, education and environment generally are factors that will influence our chances to become moral.

Epicurus' recommendation to watch over the young also exemplifies that there is one very important way in which the environment may have an influence even on our pre-moral mental development: Once we can speak and start having thoughts, we will be able to, and will indeed, take in the views or beliefs of other people around us, in particular of parents, teachers, peers. Thus we are likely to take in the views that death is bad and to be feared, that the soul is immortal, that there is punishment in the afterlife, and more such nonsense. We will initially take these views in without questioning them, and will unreflectively internalize them; they will determine our desires and fears, and how we react to new, incoming influences, just as our preconceptions will. Thus if I have been told and

³⁷ Inferred from Lucr. 5.1028 ff. on the origin of language.

³⁸ Inferred from D. L. 10.33.

³⁹ Lucr. 3.445–50, quoted above, LS 19 B. ⁴⁰ Again inferred from Lucr. 5.1028 ff., LS 19 B.

⁴¹ e.g. Lucr. 3.445–50, quoted above. ⁴² Cf. Laursen 1997: 28–9 and 42–5.

⁴³ Cf. Mitsis 1988: 147. ⁴⁴ *Sent. Var.* 80.

now believe that thunder and lightning are a form of divine revenge, and I have a predominantly air-like mind, this will invoke fear of thunderstorms in me, and I will behave accordingly.

So our mental development is a rather complicated affair. But however complex our mind becomes, before we are *ourselves* the causes of our actions, for Epicurus, everything we become and do is a function of hereditary and environmental factors. That is, we are fully determined or necessitated by a combination of those two factors.⁴⁵ And as long as this is so, we cannot be held morally responsible for our behaviour.⁴⁶

How do we have to envisage the transition from this pre-moral stage to that of us as moral beings (i.e. as causal factors of our actions)?

We can assume that Epicurus believed that we all have the innate potential for becoming moral beings. For first he thinks that we can all morally improve (a point I will get to later). And second, he seems to think that one of those features of mental development that we all share is that of becoming a cause of our actions.⁴⁷ For this, as I said earlier, we need to have 'our own beliefs', and these have to be causally relevant for what we do.⁴⁸

Epicurus implies also that we need to reach a certain age or stage of maturity, a stage at which our mind has developed a sufficient complexity, in order for it to be possible that we are causes ourselves (this is the continuation of the text from *On Nature* 25 quoted above):

. . . on the other hand, to the point where [it has come to be] this kind of soul or that, this sort of thing being developed not from necessity, or rather this sort of thing being developed not by necessity whenever there is advancement in age, but from itself being able – or [from] the cause which comes from itself – [to develop? to become? to bring about?] something else as well . . . (34.24 Arr., Laursen 1997: 28)⁴⁹

In this passage internal necessitation and lack thereof do not concern individual actions or volitions, but what a person's soul *comes to be like*. The emphasis is on the non-necessity of mental development, and in particular on the fact that we ourselves (or the cause from ourselves) are causally responsible for the *changes in our soul*, and that *these changes* are not necessary.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ LS 20 C 2; also Laursen 1997: 28. Our development is necessary as long as we aren't causes ourselves.

⁴⁶ LS 20 C; and inferred from Laursen 1997: 28. ⁴⁷ Laursen 1997: 43–5; also 28.

⁴⁸ LS 20 C 1; also Laursen 1997: 43–5; LS 20 B 5–7 (Laursen 1997: 22).

⁴⁹ . . . μέχρι δὲ τοῦ τοιανδὶ ψυχῆν ἢ τοιανδὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἀνάγκης τοιοῦδε ἀπογεννωμένου ἢ οὐκ ἐπειδὴν προβῆ γέ τῆ ἡλικία τοιοῦδε ἀπογεννωμένου κατ' ἀνάγκην ἀλλ' ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ δυναμένου καὶ τῆς ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ αἰτίας καὶ ἄλλο . . . (34.24 Arr., Laursen 1997: 28, text continued from n. 36 above).

⁵⁰ Cf. Bobzien 2000: section 6.

One fragmentary passage from *On Nature* 25 seems to suggest that we become causes ourselves at the moment when there is in us a certain development that differs qualitatively from (what is there in) the atomic structure of our mind, and we make this new development part of our 'nature' or mind, as it were.

(5) In this way whenever something is developed which takes on some distinctness from the atoms in a way that pertains to judgement⁵¹ – not in the way as from a different distance – he receives the causal responsibility which is from himself; (6) and then he immediately imparts this to his first natures and somehow makes the whole of it into one. (7) That is why those who cannot correctly make such distinctions confuse themselves about the adjudication of causal responsibility. (Epicur. *Nat.* 25, 34.22 Arr., LS 20 B 5–7, Laursen 1997: 22; tr. Long and Sedley 1987, modified)⁵²

What exactly this means, I do not know. But it seems to me that R. W. Sharples is right, when he says about this passage:

The obvious, indeed inevitable way of interpreting this in the atomic context is to say that we, by thought and effort, can modify our character, and hence also the atomic structure of our minds . . . the downwards causation in the passage . . . may thus relate to the process by which we modify our characters, and not to the explanation of free choice by volition causing atomic swerves.⁵³

Regarding the details, I believe Epicurus' idea could have been something like this: we ourselves become causes at the moment at which we – consciously – identify with an incoming idea or thought which is not in keeping with the beliefs we have so far taken in from our environment 'unthinkingly', as it were, and in accordance with the original nature of our mind. More precisely, when we identify with this new thought, we incorporate it into our mind, and thus change our mental dispositions; as a result, from then on our actions can be caused by behavioural dispositions that are at least partially the result of our identifying with something that was not part of our original constitution.⁵⁴ (Earlier in *On Nature* 25, Epicurus mentions

⁵¹ Or 'in a discriminating way'.

⁵² (5) οὕτως ἐπειδὴν ἀπογεννηθῆ τι λαμβάνον τινὰ ἑτερότητα τῶν ἀτόμων κατὰ τινὰ τρόπον διαληπτικόν, οὐ τὸν ὡς ἀφ' ἑτέρου διαστήματος, ἰσχύει τὴν ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ αἰτίαν, (6) εἶτα ἀναδιδῶσιν εὐθύς μέχρι τῶν πρώτων φύσεων καὶ μίαν πως ἄπασαν αὐτὴν ποιεῖ*. (7) ὁθεν δὴ καὶ οἱ μὴ δυνάμενοι κατὰ τρόπον τὰ τοιαῦτα διαιρεῖν χειμάζουσιν αὐτοὺς περὶ τὴν αἰτιῶν ἀπόφασιν. *Laursen 1997: 22.

⁵³ Sharples 1991–3: 186.

⁵⁴ This is then a quasi-empirical proof that it is not our original nature. Another passage (LS 20 B 1–4, Laursen 1997: 19–20, in fact just before the one quoted) deals with the point that, once we are causes ourselves, even if the behaviour is the same as that of our original nature would have been, we are responsible, since we (not our original nature) are the cause. Generally, thus it would presumably suffice, if we *were capable of* incorporating 'alien' elements into our mind, whether or not we actually do so.

that at some point in our life we become able to ‘think ourselves by means of ourselves’.⁵⁵ So it is tempting to assume that only when we are able to ‘think ourselves by means of ourselves’ will we be able to have beliefs that are our own – not just absorbed ‘unthinkingly’, from others.)⁵⁶ At that point, thus, the disposition is no longer – fully – the result of internal and external necessity, but in part the result of conscious, rational influencing. When, then, someone acts from such a disposition, *they* are the cause of the action, and no longer ‘the atoms’, i.e. those of their initial constitution. Of course nothing guarantees that the incoming thoughts we identify with are correct – they, too, may be based on cultural prejudice. Equally, if we rethink some of our culturally induced beliefs, nothing prevents us from ending up retaining false beliefs, or replacing false beliefs by false beliefs.

In another passage in *On Nature* 25 – which is rather badly preserved – Epicurus may refer to the same kind of development:

And the same thing was both generated as permanent and was a kind of seed, as I say, leading from the origin[al nature] to something else, and when this is present, we think or form beliefs . . . and there is much that [happens] with [our] nature helping, and much [that happens] when [our] nature is not helping, and there is something that [happens] when our nature is rearranged by us. (34.31 Arr., Laursen 1997: 44–5; context and Greek in section 3 below)

This passage – at least as I have reconstructed it following Laursen – suggests that all human beings, at some point, reach a developmental stage at which they start thinking and forming opinions.⁵⁷

Epicurus seems to assume then that – in the normal course of events – at some point during the process of their growing up every person reaches this stage of development where they start ‘thinking for themselves’. Yet, it is unclear whether the quoted passages describe a unique event in a person’s life, or a gradual process in which a person changes or confirms their beliefs one by one upon reflection over a longer period of time. If this is a unique event, we may consider our becoming moral beings as instantaneous. If it is a gradual process, Epicurus could have thought that we become moral

⁵⁵ Laursen 1995: 46–7: ἐν [ἐ]αυτῷ κατὰ τὸ ὁμοιον καὶ ἀδιάφορον ἑαυτὸν [ὁ] ηῆσεται διανοεῖσθαι.

⁵⁶ Laursen himself suggests in Laursen 1995: when we ‘think ourselves by means of ourselves’ we have the mental faculty of ‘subsequent reasoning’ (45–6); ‘this makes it possible to realize one’s real goal (τέλος)’ (46); ‘reason is acquired by time . . . at a comparatively late stage, we acquire the capacity for a reasoned consideration of our state as a whole’ (47), but then, strangely, continues the last sentence thus, ‘that is, we become moral philosophers’. In my view, it is much more likely that at that point we have become adult, rational beings.

⁵⁷ The end of the passage suggests the possibility that we ourselves rearrange the atoms in our minds, which plausibly could be our changing our dispositions as a result of our adopting new beliefs – see also section 3 on this point.

beings when we ourselves become causes of something for the first time (since we then have the capacity for becoming causes ourselves); or else, our becoming morally responsible could itself be a gradual process. This last possibility seems to me the most exciting, as it seems both a very modern idea, and to come closest to the truth.⁵⁸

3. MORAL DEVELOPMENT II: HOW CAN WE BECOME
MORALLY BETTER?

Let us assume that we are now moral beings (as opposed to pre-moral beings). How can we then *develop* morally according to Epicurus? In particular, how can we become morally better?

Theories of moral responsibility based on the agent's ability to do otherwise tend to spend little time on the question of moral development. When they deal with it, they may connect measures for moral improvement with an agent's freedom of decision in two ways: (i) Agents need to be given a maximum of relevant information for mental storage that they can make use of at times when they have to make a moral decision. Relevant information here covers anything that enables them to find out what the morally right thing to do is. (ii) Agents need to strengthen their will – or whatever it is that decides freely – so that in a situation of choice, in which they know what the right thing to do is, they will actually decide to do the right thing, instead of satisfying some adverse more immediate desire.

By contrast, theories of moral responsibility that are based on the agents *qua* rational agents as the cause of their behaviour tend to display substantial interest in the question of moral development. There is one simple reason for this: if the assumption is that how a person acts or reacts in a given situation depends fully on that person's mental dispositions at the time, then moral improvement becomes a question of how one can alter one's mental dispositions in such a way that one will react in the morally right way to external stimuli. This is the only possible way of getting oneself to act differently or better than one tends to do at present. For there is no way of 'deciding or acting out of character' at the very moment one has to decide what to do: one's decision is a function of the overall state of one's mind.

In line with his concept of moral responsibility, this is the approach to moral development Epicurus took. He believed that, in order to make moral progress, one has to change one's mental dispositions:

⁵⁸ Remember that Lucretius, in the passage quoted above, describes the development of our rationality as if it were gradual.

. . . Likewise the human race. Even though education may produce individuals equally well turned out, it still leaves those *original traces of each mind's nature*. And we must not suppose that faults can be completely eradicated, so that one person will not plunge too hastily into bitter anger, another not be assailed too readily by fear, or the third type not be over-indulgent in tolerating certain things. There are many other respects in which the various *natures and consequently the behaviours* of human beings must differ, but I cannot now set out their hidden causes, nor can I find enough names for all the shapes of primary particles from which this variety springs. But there is one thing which I see I can state in this matter: so slight are *the traces of our natures which reason cannot expel from us*, that nothing stands in the way of our leading a life worthy of the gods.⁵⁹ (Lucretius 3.307–22, tr. Long and Sedley 1987, modified, my emphasis)

The relevant points in this passage are these: the initial nature of a human mind includes certain morally relevant dispositions, which are present in different people in various strengths. Through education peoples' minds can develop in such a way that these differences are by and large evened out. The reason is that by the use of our intellect we can modify our mental dispositions to a large extent. This passage corroborates the assumption that the Epicureans worked with a model of disposition-dependent agency on several counts. First, it makes it clear that Lucretius took a person's mind to include that person's character dispositions (3.309). Second, it implies that Lucretius thinks that one's nature determines one's behaviour; and third, that in order to change one's behaviour, one has to change one's nature, that is, the nature of one's mind, by the use of one's intellect.

The last sentence of the Lucretius passage suggests that our original nature cannot be expelled completely, but that most of it can. This expelling can only consist in some change of the *dispositions* (or atomic structure) of our mind. In support of this assumption, Diogenes Laertius' report of Epicurus' view that 'someone who has once become wise never again takes on the opposite *disposition*'⁶⁰ implies that in order to become wise, and that is morally good, one has to change one's mental disposition. Accordingly, the major part of Epicurus' ethics is geared to the development of the

⁵⁹ Sic hominum genus est. Quamvis doctrina politos / constituat pariter quosdam, tamen illa relinquit / naturae cuiusque animi vestigia prima. / Nec radicitus evelli mala posse putandumst, / quin proclivius hic iras decurrat ad acris, / ille metu citius paulo temptetur, at ille / tertius accipiat quaedam clementius aequo. / Inque aliis rebus multis differre necessest / naturas hominum varias moresque sequaces; / quorum ego nunc nequeo caecas exponere causas / nec reperire figurarum tot nomina quot sunt / principiis, unde haec oritur variantia rerum. / Illud in his rebus video firmare potesse, / usque adeo naturarum vestigia linqui / parvula quae nequeat ratio depellere nobis, / ut nil impediatur dignam disdegere vitam. (my emphasis).

⁶⁰ τὸν ἀποξυγνόμενον σοφὸν μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα; (D.L. 10.117). Cf. also the passages in *Nat.* 25 about changing or developing one's disposition (διάθεσις).

individual's behavioural dispositions. Since the end to which all human behaviour should be above all directed is above all tranquillity (*ataraxia*), it follows that, in order to improve one's behaviour, one has to try to develop one's mind in such a way that one's emotions, desires and actions will become conducive to attaining tranquillity.

With regard to the opportunities for moral improvement, there is variation across individuals. Epicurus starts out with the optimistic belief that everyone can morally improve⁶¹ and get to a life of true pleasure and tranquillity,⁶² and that it is never too late to start trying to morally improve.⁶³ However, moral improvement will not be equally easy for everyone, nor will the development be of the same kind. The starting situations of individuals can vary quite significantly, as is clear from the Lucretius passage on fire-, air- and breath-like atoms.⁶⁴ At the point when people have become moral beings, some of them will be closer to a life of tranquillity, others further away. This will depend (a) on the education and external influences they have been exposed to up to then, and (b) on the fact that their natures are different in morally relevant ways. Thus it will be more difficult for someone with a very irascible nature to get to the *right degree* of irascibility, than for someone of a calmer nature. But both can succeed.⁶⁵

A passage in a letter by Seneca confirms that Epicurus considered the question whether humans and their natures are susceptible to moral improvement, and shows that he distinguished three types of human beings with respect to their moral progress:⁶⁶

1. Some people's nature is such that they can acquire tranquillity by their own impulse and efforts. (Apparently, Epicurus was thought to fall in this class.)

⁶¹ *Ep. Men.* 122. ⁶² *Lucr.* 3.320–2.

⁶³ 'Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young or weary in the search of wisdom when he is old; for no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul.' Μήτε νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν, μήτε γέρον ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν οὔτε γὰρ ἄωρος οὐδεὶς ἐστιν οὔτε πᾶρωρος πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν ὑγιαίνειν, etc. (*Ep. Men.* 122).

⁶⁴ *Lucr.* 3.289–307, quoted in section 2. ⁶⁵ *Lucr.* 3.307–22.

⁶⁶ *Sen. Ep.* 52.3–4: (3) Quosdam ait Epicurus ad veritatem sine ullius adiutorio exisse, fecisse sibi ipsos viam. Hos maxime laudat, quibus ex se impetus fuit, qui se ipsi protulerunt. Quosdam indigere ope aliena, non ituros, si nemo praecesserit, sed bene secuturos. Ex his Metrodorum ait esse; egregium hoc quoque, sed secundae sortis ingenium. . . . Ne hunc quidem contempseris hominem, qui alieno beneficio esse salvus potest; et hoc multum est, velle servari. (4) Praeter haec adhuc invenies genus aliud hominum ne ipsum quidem fasticiendum eorum, qui cogi ad rectum conpelli que possunt, quibus non duce tantum opus sit, sed adiutore, et, ut ita dicam, coactore. Si quaeris huius quoque exemplar, Hermarchum ait Epicurus talem fuisse. Itaque alteri magis gratulatur, alterum magis suspicit; quamvis enim ad eundem finem uterque pervenerit, tamen maior est laus idem effecisse in difficiliore materia.

2. Others (want to do the right thing – *velle servari* – but) need some moral role-model, as it were, ‘to show them the way’ – which way, once they have found it, they will follow faithfully. (Metrodorus was placed here.)
3. Others again need someone to actively encourage them and perhaps even to force them along. (Hermarchus is an example of this case.)

Epicurus does not doubt that individuals of all three types can morally improve.⁶⁷

How then do we have to imagine the mental process of moral development in detail? We know that the mind of adult human beings (or of moral beings) encompasses their individual ‘initial constitution’ or nature,⁶⁸ preconceptions, and also a set of beliefs that are *their own* in the sense that by means of them the individual can become causally responsible for their behaviour. The mind further includes some conception of the end (*telos*), namely that it consists in pleasure.⁶⁹ The person’s set of beliefs will determine their emotions and desires,⁷⁰ and it will ordinarily include true and false beliefs, and among the false ones what Epicurus calls empty beliefs, i.e. beliefs that are counterproductive to reaching tranquillity – such as beliefs about vengeful gods.⁷¹

Moral improvement will then consist in the main in restructuring⁷² a person’s system of concepts and beliefs, in the light of the end (*telos*), and in strengthening the new, true beliefs, and thus aligning the accompanying habits.⁷³ False and empty beliefs will have to be first identified, and then measures will have to be taken so that the person gives them up and replaces them by true beliefs.⁷⁴

Epicurus was aware of the fact that my simply pointing out to myself (or having it pointed out to me) that a belief of mine is incorrect will not make me abandon it. Just saying to myself: ‘the belief that death is an evil is false’ is unlikely to suffice to change that belief and the desires and emotions tied to it. One obvious reason for this should be the fact that we do not have

⁶⁷ Did Epicurus distinguish more than these three types? Possibly. Could they all morally improve at least to some degree? Most probably yes; see *Ep. Men.* 122 and below.

⁶⁸ Cf. also *Lucr.* 3.289–322.

⁶⁹ *Cic. Fin.* 1.55, LS 21 U 1; *Cic. Fin.* 1.29–39, LS 21 A 4. Some Epicureans hold that this preconception of pleasure is understood by mind and reasoning.

⁷⁰ *Men.* 132.

⁷¹ D. L. 10.144 = *Sent.* 15; D. L. 10.149 = *Sent.* 29–30; *Porph. Marc.* 31, 34 8P = 239 in Arrighetti: 1973:567.

⁷² κατακοσμουμένης, Laursen 1997: 45; μετακοσμήσει, LS 20 C 10, Laursen 1997: 39.

⁷³ συνεθίζειν (accustom oneself to, make it a habit) *Ep. Men.* 124, 131; μελετᾶν (train, exercise oneself, practice) *Ep. Men.* 122; ‘Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us’. Συνέθιξε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον, followed by reasons for the why we should believe this. *Ep. Men.* 124.

⁷⁴ See e.g. *Ep. Men.* 124.

beliefs in isolation, but that our beliefs are interconnected in complicated ways. Changing one's beliefs about something will thus take some time; and it will usually involve a plurality of causal factors.

Epicurus seems to have given some thought to the question what different causal factors can be involved in moral improvement, as (yet another) fragmentary passage from *On Nature* 25 suggests (the information most relevant here is found after the first lacuna):⁷⁵

But often both [the considerations of the end itself and the origin(al natures)?] actually are equally causally responsible, even without the ones having been attracted by the others, or without [the ones] being attracted [by the others] and forcing many such things to happen because of time and age and other causes. Hence both the consideration of the end itself and the origin[al nature] were causally responsible, but we were, too. The [causal factor] from us was the perception⁷⁶ of the fact that if we do not grasp what the canon is, i.e. that which judges all things that come to be through beliefs, but we irrationally follow the tendencies of the many, everything with respect to which we investigate will be lost and excess . . . (lacuna of *c.3* words⁷⁷). And the same thing was both generated as permanent and was a kind of seed, as I say,⁷⁸ leading from the origin[al nature] to something else, and when this is present, we think or form beliefs . . . and there is much that [happens] with [our] nature helping, and much [that happens] when [our] nature is not helping, and there is something that [happens] when our nature is rearranged by us; but there is also something that [happens] when [our nature] itself leads the way (lacuna of *c.3* words) [not only] matured, but also because the things which flow in from the environment take the lead to improvement, and do not merely follow . . .⁷⁹ (Laursen 1997: 43–5)

⁷⁵ I provide the context, since I refer to individual phrases from that context below.

⁷⁶ For this perception to become the causal factor *from us*, we must somehow have adopted it, retained it, made it our own (see above, section 2). Perhaps Epicurus' use of ἐπαίσθησις instead of the simple αἴσθησις hints at that fact?

⁷⁷ Some phrase expressing the general idea that excess will follow or will be the result or will reign would make sense here.

⁷⁸ ὡσπερ ληρῶ would translate roughly as 'as I keep ranting about'. However, I just don't believe this is what Epicurus intended to say at this point. Maybe, he wrote ὡσπερ λέγω, 'as I say', referring to 'seed', which is Epicurean terminology, in which the word is used metaphorically; or, perhaps, in Hellenistic times the meaning of ληρῶ had been watered down, so that it sometimes simply meant 'I say'.

⁷⁹ . . . νον πολλάκις δὲ καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἀμφοτέρα κέκτηται μὲν αἰτίαν καὶ μὴ συνεπεσπασμένα τὰ ἕτερα ὑπὸ τῶν ἐτέρων μηδὲ συνεπισπώμενα καὶ βιαζόμενα παρά τε χρόνους πολλὰ τῶν τοιοῦτων συνπίπτειν καὶ ἡλικίας καὶ ἄλλας αἰτίας, ὅθεν καὶ τὸ τοῦ τέλους αὐτοῦ ἐπιλόγισμα εἶχε μὲν καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τὴν αἰτίαν εἶχομεν δὲ καὶ ἡμεῖς. ἦν δὲ τὸ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐπαίσθησις τοῦ "εἰ μὴ ληψόμεθα τίς ὁ κανὼν καὶ τὸ ἐπικρεῖνον πάντα τὰ διὰ τῶν δοξῶν περαινόμενα ἀλλ' ἀκολουθήσομεν ἀλόγως ταῖς τῶν πολλῶν φοραῖς, οἰχίσηται πάντα καθ' ἃ διερευνώμεθα τι καὶ ὑπεροχὴ . . ." [lacuna of *c.3* words] τὸ δ' αὐτὸ καὶ αἰδίων ἐγεννήθη καὶ σπέρμα ἦν τι ὡσπερ ληρῶ, ἐξ ἀρχῆς πρὸς ἕτερον ἀγωγόν, παρόντος δὲ τούτου νοοῦμεν ἢ δοξάζομεν . . . πολὺ δὲ αὐτὸ ἐστὶν μὲν ὁ συνεργούσης τῆς φύσεως, ἐστὶ δ' ὁ οὐ συνεργούσης, ἐστὶ δ' ὁ κατακοσμουμένης ὑφ' ἡμῶν, ἐστὶ δὲ καὶ αὐτῆς προηγουμένης τι [lacuna of *c.3* words] ἐπαυξόμενον ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐπεισιόντα τὰς καθηγεμονίας εἰς τὸ βέλτιον*, οὐ μόνον τὰς συνακολουθήσεις λαμβάνοντα * The reading of εἰς τὸ βέλτιον ('to the better') is uncertain.

First, Epicurus seems to think that in some cases of moral improvement one's original nature (or constitution) functions as a causal factor, in others it does not.⁸⁰ One way this nature can be influential may simply be that the nature of a person's mind 'matures', or develops further.⁸¹ Then, presumably, our natural instinct to pursue pleasure may be helpful for adopting the belief that we should pursue pleasure.⁸² By contrast, if someone who is by nature very irascible wants to reduce their irascibility, *that* aspect, of their nature will not be of much help.

Epicurus equally seems to acknowledge that we ourselves may restructure our nature (and thus, I assume, some of the atoms in our mind) up to a certain point.⁸³ This should mean that certain of our beliefs which we have adopted as our own, and which make up 'us' as causes,⁸⁴ are used in order to get rid of certain *other* beliefs – beliefs which we took in either unreflectively from others, in accordance with our initial nature,⁸⁵ or as the result of inaccurate reasoning.

For example, if I have many air-like atoms in my soul, I will have readily embraced the views that the gods use lightning to punish sinful mortals and hence I fear thunderstorms; but now my newly acquired beliefs about the true nature of the gods allow me to get rid of some of those views. For this method to work, presumably I will first have to come to realize the true nature of the gods, for example that they have better things to do than being concerned with earthly events. Then, I have to realize that if this is so, the gods will not waste their time hurling lightning. However, in order actually to lose my fear of thunderstorms, I will have to thoroughly convince myself that there are no grounds for having it.⁸⁶ For this I may have to rehearse the arguments against the existence of vengeful gods repeatedly, and as many such arguments as possible, and especially so, when the clouds get darker. I will also have to cultivate a replacement set of true beliefs, which, if firmly held, will provide me with the dispositions and desires needed to reach tranquillity.

Finally, Epicurus also acknowledges environmental impacts on our moral development; as we have seen earlier, not many people will be able to

⁸⁰ Laursen 1997: 45, 'there is much that [happens] with [our] nature helping, and much [that happens] when [our] nature is not helping'.

⁸¹ Laursen 1997: at the end of 45, 'matured', 'grown' (ἐπαυξόμενον). ἐπαυξάνω also occurs at [5] VIII 8; [34.27] 8; [34.31] 31 Arr. Cf. also Epicurus calling times and ages 'causes' just before, Laursen 1997: 43.

⁸² Cf. 'the consideration of the end itself', Laursen 1997: 43.

⁸³ Laursen 1997: 45, 'and there is something that [happens] when our nature is rearranged by us'.

⁸⁴ See above, section I.

⁸⁵ Cf. Laursen 1997: 43, 'we irrationally follow the tendencies of the many'.

⁸⁶ βέβαιος ('firm'), Epicur. *Ep. Hdt.* 63; *Ep. Pyth.* 85; *Sent.* 40; Laursen 1997: 46–7, κατανοεῖν, see below.

restructure their belief system all by themselves.⁸⁷ Most people need some help from outside. They *may* realize that the end is a life of pleasure, which takes the form of tranquillity,⁸⁸ and that they are not in its possession, and somehow do not succeed in getting there. In order to succeed, they have to change their environment. For example, they could join the Epicurean school, and receive the required guidance which will help them to shed their empty beliefs, and replace them by a set of true beliefs; in this way they may establish new dispositions, and come closer to a life of tranquillity. Note that education of this kind constitutes a special way in which the environment has an influence on us.

As we have seen earlier,⁸⁹ for Epicurus, ordinarily our reactions to external influences will be determined either by our nature or by ourselves *qua* causes,⁹⁰ and our overall mental dispositions will not change as a result of our reactions to our environment. (For instance, if I have many air-like atoms, and hear a thunderstorm coming, then I will get frightened, and hide under a blanket, say. But my dispositions won't change. Next time there's a thunderstorm I'll be under the blanket again.)

The special case on the other hand is one in which environmental influences can also 'take the lead to the better', as Epicurus says.⁹¹ In particular, we should assume from what else we know about Epicurus' ethics that if we are externally influenced by *teaching*, we can get rid of ingrained false beliefs, and can, by thus changing our dispositions, also change our behaviour. Thus if someone provides me with a convincing scientific explanation of thunder, I may eventually stop being frightened; hence not go into hiding any more.

Moral development, whether self-caused or triggered by others, consists thus primarily in the change of one's mental dispositions, in particular one's beliefs. There is a passage in *On Nature* 25 which suggests that Epicurus may have made an attempt at explaining such a process on the atomic level of the mind. (This passage is rather lacunose in character and its first two sentences are fragmented, but the text is still full enough to offer some interesting information.)

. . . of [speech] sounds and thinking and thoughts and representations of the everlasting or non-everlasting disturbance or happiness in the soul [being/is/are?]

⁸⁷ Sen. *Ep.* 52.3–4.

⁸⁸ Perhaps even there help is required in some cases? Remember the third category of people in the passage from Seneca's letter.

⁸⁹ Above, in Section 1. ⁹⁰ LS 20 C 1.

⁹¹ If the – uncertain – reading 'to the better' or 'to improvement' (εἰς τὸ βέλτιον) is correct. Laursen 1997: 45, 'but there is also something that [happens] when [our nature] itself leads the way (lacuna of c.3 words) [not only] matured, but also because the things which flow in from the environment take the lead to improvement' (context and Greek above).

the cause for hunting down, little by little, the principle, or canon or criterion. For these things lead to the consideration of the criterion, and from the criterion it[self] . . . perception . . . considera[tion] . . . to the investigation little by little of the things I mentioned earlier. For these things furnished each other with their cause and use⁹² and each thought coming in immediately pulled along in turn the other thought, at first coming in little by little and flowing out again quickly, then being understood more and more, in part because of the natural cause of the growth and of loss of fluidity,⁹³ in part because of that [cause] which comes to be from ourselves.⁹⁴ (Laursen 1997: 46–7)

I very tentatively suggest that one idea underlying this gap-ridden passage is as follows: when other people say something to us (i.e. something that can be thought), very fine atomic structures enter our mind from outside and leave it again,⁹⁵ being thought by us only briefly, while they were there; and at first they may leave hardly a trace in the mind. But this may happen repeatedly with the same sort of thought, and thus the thought can be understood better each time. It will be connected with other thoughts, which ‘pull them along’ as Epicurus puts it, so that when we think one thing, we think another also (i.e. some sort of association theory of learning). In part owing to ourselves as causes (perhaps as focusing on it, or connecting it with other thoughts that are our own already), the new thought is, it seems, eventually anchored in the mind, and becomes part of it (by leaving a durable impression, and thus having changed the atomic structure of the mind permanently).⁹⁶ The thought has thus become a belief of ours, and at the same time our behavioural dispositions have changed.⁹⁷

⁹² i.e. one makes use (takes advantage of) the other.

⁹³ Or loss of flaccidity: the idea may be that when the soul gains in firmness and structure, because more and more (hopefully correct) thoughts are being adopted and integrated as beliefs, the more easily a new thought is interconnected with these and retained and understood.

⁹⁴ . . . φόφων τε καὶ νοήσεων καὶ ἐπινοημάτων καὶ φαντασμάτων καὶ τῆς αἰωνίας κατὰ ψυχὴν ὀχλήσεως ἢ εὐδαιμονίας ἢ μὴ αἰωνίας τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦ θηρεύειν τὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ κανόνα καὶ κριτήριον καὶ κατὰ μικρόν. ταῦτά τε γὰρ εἰς τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν τοῦ κριτηρίου ἦγεν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ κριτηρίου αὐτ. . . ἐπαισθα[±5/6 ἐ]πιλογί . . . εἰς τὴν κατὰ μικρόν ὄντερ ἐνπροσθεν εἶπα διερεῦνθαι. ἀλλήλοις γὰρ ταῦτα τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ χρεῖαν παρείχοντο καὶ ἐναλλάξ ἐκάτερον παρεντίπτον ἐπεσπάσατο εὐθύς τὸ ἕτερον ἐπινοήματα κατὰ μικρόν πρῶτον ἐγγεινόμενον καὶ ταχέως ἐκρέον, εἶτα μᾶλλον μᾶλλον κατανοούμενον, τὰ μὲν διὰ τὴν φυσικὴν αἰτίαν τῆς ἀπαυξήσεως καὶ ἀπαλλάξεως πλαδαρότητος, τὰ δὲ διὰ τὴν ἐξ ἡμῶν γεινομένην καὶ . . .

⁹⁵ Atoms are not mentioned in so many words in the passage. However, Epicurus’ talk of thoughts ‘coming in’ (i.e. into the soul, which consists of atoms) and ‘flowing out’, and of ‘growth’ and ‘loss of fluidity’ suggest that atomic structures are at issue (cf. also *Lucretius*, 3.510–16). This is in any case what we would expect in line with Epicurus’ materialist view of the soul – except perhaps adherents of Sedley’s emergentist interpretation of Epicurus’ psychology (e.g. Long/Sedley 1987: vol. 1, 109–11), an interpretation to which I have provided an alternative above in section 2 and, in more detail, in Bobzien 2000.

⁹⁶ Cf. also *Ep. Pyth.* 85, ‘firm belief’ (πίστιν βέβαιον).

⁹⁷ Cf. also *Lucretius*, 3.510–16 for the possibility of change of our mind: such change involves either adding or taking away atoms, or changing the structure of the present atoms.

It is in this light, I suggest, that one has to understand the method of philosophizing and teaching philosophy in the Epicurean school. The practice of memorizing the canon of Epicurean philosophy by repeating it again and again to oneself and others,⁹⁸ is on this interpretation in no sense a 'mindless' enterprise. The repetition is meant to increase one's understanding of new beliefs (especially those that are incompatible with the ones one has so far held) and thus to increase the firmness with which one holds those beliefs (they have to make a 'lasting impression' in the mind, quite literally).⁹⁹ Similarly, the Epicurean practice of producing a number of different arguments to prove the same point becomes comprehensible in this way. (Recall the twenty-nine or so proofs for the mortality of the soul in Lucretius, book 3.) For the new beliefs have to be integrated and harmonized with one's other beliefs – and here different arguments for them will lead to connections with different beliefs. All this is needed, since only if one firmly holds the new beliefs will they be able to result in a change of one's desires and emotions, and thus lead to a change in what actions one tends to perform.¹⁰⁰

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me finally return briefly to the subject of moral responsibility. From what we have seen about Epicurus' ideas of moral development and moral progress, it is clear that at any time the state of an adult human's moral dispositions is *only in part* the result of their own critical restructuring of their mind. We are not causally responsible for the initial constitution of our mind, but this constitution will determine, for instance, whether our moral progress will be faster or slower, effortless or arduous. Similarly, we are not causally responsible for the surroundings we find ourselves in initially, nor are we *ever completely* causally responsible for our environment; but this environment, too, will be a causal factor in our moral development. Consequently, both our nature and our past and present environment will – indirectly – *co-determine* what sort of *actions* we perform, and hence also whether we should be blamed or praised for our actions. Thus not only will the calm-natured offspring of a family of Epicureans growing up within

⁹⁸ Cf. e.g. Epicur. *Her.* 35–6.

⁹⁹ The many repetitions in Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* may be intended to serve the same purpose.

¹⁰⁰ For the importance of reason in the process of moral improvement cf. e.g. Lucr. 3.321, 'reason' (*ratio*); Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 124–5, 'correct understanding' (γνώσις ὀρθή); 132, 'reasoning' (λογισμός) and D. L., 10.117 and 120.

a circle of Epicurean friends have a much smoother and shorter path to a life of tranquillity than the fire-natured, irascible youth who grew up in a society that indulges in luxury and fervently teaches religious superstition; the latter will also be likely to deserve blame for a much larger proportion of their actions.

This is a fact about which we find no sign of worry in Epicurean writings, nor, as far as I am aware, in any other philosophical writings from antiquity.¹⁰¹ Epicurus simply seems to accept that blame is attached to those actions of moral beings of which they are themselves the main causal factor, regardless of how far the overall disposition of their mind is a result of their rational reflection and belief, and how far the result of necessitating factors.¹⁰² The agents can be blamed for their actions, because they were not in any sense forced to bring them about and because the actions are not the outcome of a 'mindless' co-operation of nature and nurture; rather they result from the agents' own beliefs, which in turn determine their desires and emotions.

What is, however, important here is the fact that, for Epicurus, ethics does not have the function of developing or justifying a moral system that allows for the effective allocation of praise and blame. The function of ethics – and in fact of the whole of philosophy¹⁰³ – is rather to give *everyone* a chance to morally improve; that is, a chance to understand that in order to reach true happiness, one has to learn to distinguish between pleasures conducive to that end and pleasures distracting from it; and in the course of this, to give up prejudicial and irrational beliefs which one has unthinkingly absorbed from the social surroundings one lives in. Epicurean ethics is thus exclusively forward-looking. It takes praise and blame for actions as in principle justified, based on the rationality of the agent. But praise and blame are not themselves a topic of ethics.¹⁰⁴ Human failure is taken into account only as a starting point for moral progress towards a life of happiness and tranquillity.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Bobzien 1998: section 6.3.6.

¹⁰² He does, though, make the interesting distinction between 'respect' one should have for people who approach tranquillity with difficult starting positions, and congratulations to those who had it easy; cf. Sen. *Ep.* 52.4.

¹⁰³ Sext. Emp. *Math.* 11.169; Epicur. *Pyth.* 85; *Sent.* 11–13.

¹⁰⁴ The role of the swerve is not to justify moral praise and blame for individual actions, but to make it possible that our mental constitution, and in particular our beliefs, can change in response to environmental influences; see Bobzien 2000.