

Vergil's Bees and the Virtues of an Epicurean Collective (Georgics 4)

Vergil's *Georgics* was first published in 29 BCE, after nearly a century of devastating civil wars. As such, it is more than pastoral fancy in a how-to manual. Within its elegant hexameters, it also possesses a variety of insightful philosophical arguments, such as the benefits of hard work and the simple life of a farmer (*Geo.* 1.145; 4.125-148). Until recently, the philosophical content in some of Vergil's non-epic poetry has been under analyzed (Davis 2012). According to ancient biographies of Vergil, it is clear that he was an educated and avowed Epicurean, having learned from the Italian Epicurean Siro, in turn the student of the Graeco-Syrian Epicurean master Philodemus. When we read the Allegory of the Bees closely, we find a subtle discussion of the possibility, the benefits, and the failings of a collective society in the Epicurean tradition. In this paper, I will examine one of Vergil's philosophical moments in the *Georgics*—specifically the Allegory of the Bees in the middle of book four (lines 67-227)—and argue that Vergil constructs a careful discussion of the possibilities of a collective society, in the form of a beehive, and its ability to manage crises, according to Epicurean ethical doctrine. I will argue that he shows that a well-managed collective society is consistent with and beneficial within Epicurean thought, according to Epicurean doctrines on the limits of pleasures, justice, and friendship. I will further argue that he shows that this type of collective is only possible when all members are “Sages,” who have attained and behave consistently with Epicurean *ataraxia*, the state of painless tranquility, which allows for contentment with even the most spartan lifestyle, one without cultural artefacts.