

Complete in Himself, Smooth and Rounded: Self-Sufficiency in Horace's *Sermones* 2.7

I examine Horace's treatment of the problem of self-sufficiency in *Serm.* 2.7, where Horace's slave, Davus, exercises the license afforded by the Saturnalia to critique his master's character. The Stoic paradox that only the wise man is free through his self-sufficiency informs Davus' argument. There are broadly two opposing approaches we may take in responding to the philosophical content. On the one hand, some find that Horace's moralizing is trivial and serves literary or political ends (Armstrong 1986, Mayer 2005, Rudd 1993). Under this view, Davus' occasional failures to transmit Stoic doctrines is humorous but there is no further philosophical substance beneath it. On the other hand, we may concede that Davus is a *doctor ineptus* who incorrectly espouses philosophical doctrine, but we may still find that in him lies a strand of genuine moral criticism. This approach represents an attitude towards the philosophical content in Horace's satires which recognizes it to be at least partly sincere, if deceptively so (Moles 2007, Muecke 2010, Kemp 2010). I pursue this latter way of approach.

In this paper, I argue that on the issue of self-sufficiency Davus, despite our expectations, turns out to be a competent and novel critic. I focus in particular on his description of the Stoic sage as round. He says that the wise man is self-contained, smooth and rounded, so that all external objects and fortune do not affect him. Commentators note that Davus echoes the statement in Plato's *Timaeus* that the sphere is the perfect shape, but they neither explain why the Stoics appropriated this idea for their metaphysics nor credit Davus with originality in reapplying the idea as a fitting ethical metaphor. First, I establish that the Stoics adopt this Platonic notion when they claim that the cosmos is a sphere due the shape's containment of its parts and self-sufficiency. Second, I show that opponents to Stoicism mocked this position by reducing it to the claim that god is rotund, perhaps overweight. At first glance, Davus' comment is thus humorous

for its misapplication of Stoic physics, and Horace is clearly drawing upon a tradition of laughing at the Stoic god as round.

In the final part of this paper, I additionally argue that Davus' (mis)use of Stoic physics is entirely appropriate for the ethical problem at hand. In becoming a metaphor for the wise man, the image of the spherical cosmos impels consideration of the role and cost of self-sufficiency in human (as opposed to divine) life. Are relationships, which are seemingly fundamental to human life, to be valued as good, instrumentally good, or preferred indifferents? The Stoics had no simple solution to the problem. Such a consideration, though Stoic in origin, is also relevant to an Epicurean audience who may find that many social relations are straining and so result in anxiety. Upon further inspection, Davus' metaphor for the wise man thus does more than produce the same old laughs. I suggest that Horace, whether the poet or a persona, is at a loss in choosing between his current lifestyle and the model offered by Davus, which is indicated by his inability to respond to Davus' critique. I therefore conclude that *Serm. 2.7* shares features not just of comedy and mock diatribe but also of Epicurean poetry which seeks to engage in ethical practice through the disclosure of faults, self-criticism, and moral reflection (Sider 2004).

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