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# Epicurean Prolepsis

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For those of you, dear members of the SAGP, who are not in a position to examine what I have already written on prolepsis ("Epicurean Semantics," in press) nor to go through the draft of the longer work I am writing on that subject, I have prepared an abbreviated summary of my views, an outline of the most important points, which once committed to memory will be an aid to your understanding my lecture in Philadelphia on December 29th. We require a comprehensive grasp of the topic, more than an examination of details.

There are precious few texts which can provide reliable information about Epicurean prolepsis. From what has survived of Epicurus' own writings there are just three examples of prolepsis, which are mentioned but not discussed, in connection with our knowledge of the gods, of justice, and of time --with the last being a case where a prolepsis is said not to be relevant. In book 28 of the Peri Physeos there is a mention of the epistemic role of prolepsis, but the context is fragmentary and interpretation difficult. And in the theoretical section opening the Letter to Herodotus scholars generally agree that prolepsis is being discussed, but that term is conspicuously absent from the discussion. Among Epicureans, Lucretius provides no discussion of prolepsis in the epistemic section of book 4 nor does he give us any examples of prolepsis, unless we translate 'notitia' in that way, which policy cannot be adopted uniformly or without prejudicing the question. The helpful Diogenes of Oenoanda is not helpful here. And Philodemus raises more difficulties than he solves, because Philodemus is an apologist for Epicureanism in the debates with the Stoics and is consequently prone to using Stoic vocabulary, which is especially

evident in his Rhetorica and De Signis.

The Stoics' own doctrine of prolepsis as part of their elaborate conceptual psychology infects the doxographical literature, as well as the judgment of some scholars who accept the Stoicized reports of Epicurean prolepseis to conclude that the two schools in this case made use of the same conceptual device. On the face of it that is most unlikely, given the differences between the two theories of psychology and knowledge, the one being elegantly elaborate and the other spartanly simple. When one thinks of the details of Stoic theory -- phantasia, katalepsis, koinai ennoiai, lekta-- together with the subtleties of their physics and logic --in particular their logic of conditionals-- one can fathom the distance between the Stoa and the Garden and appreciate that intellectually the Epicureans were always seen as country cousins. Indeed the most sophisticated reports of Epicurean doctrine come from Stoicized sources, from Cicero to Sextus.

What these same sources say about Epicurean prolepsis is always from a Stoic perspective, even when the author (Diogenes Laertius, Cicero) is trying to be fair. Diogenes Laertius' report of Epicurean prolepsis is painfully groping, looking for the right Stoic expressions to describe the device: "By prolepsis they mean a kind of katalepsis or right opinion or concept or universal thought ( =consensus omnium ) stored in the mind --that is, the memory of a frequent appearance from the outside." (D.L. X 33) Diogenes' examples should be no less suspect: "As soon as man is spoken of, straightaway due to prolepsis his typos too is thought of ( noeitai ) with the sensory faculties leading the way." The expression 'noeitai' arouses my suspicions as does the ensuing sentence: "What primarily underlies every word is

evident and we should not have started out to seek what is sought had we not already recognized it." What seems evident to me is that Diogenes is trying to redeem his clumsy, anachronistic account by aping two lines from the Letter to Herodotus and in doing so to subvert the doctrine, substituting 'word' for 'utterance' and suggesting that prolepsis initiates investigations, as it does for the Stoics, where Epicurus is talking about settling disputes, obviating further apodeixis by providing the necessary evidence.

Cicero, in my view, is a much more careful historian of philosophy and indeed a good philosopher, but what he says about Epicurean prolepsis has difficulties of its own. I have no quarrel with his remark that Epicurus was the first to use the word prolepsis nor even that this prolepsis informs us that the gods are blessed and immortal. After all, Epicurus says much the same thing about the gods in his Letter to Menoeceus (123-124). Furthermore, Epicurus says that the truth about the gods is a koine noesis, and Cicero reports that accurately enough. But unfortunately Epicurus does not tell us how such a koine noesis might be derived from a prolepsis. Listening to Cicero would have us believe that the Epicureans derive their information concerning the character of the gods from a universal consensus, natural intuitions ("insitas eorum vel potius innatas cognitiones"), information which is stamped on the mind ("eadem insculpsit in mentibus ut eos aeternos et beatos haberemus" De Nat. Deor. I 43-45). And Cicero goes on to maintain that it is the universal nature of this consensus which makes it necessarily true. For my mind there is too much Stoicism in Cicero's account to allow me to accept this testimony lock, stock, and bagel, especially when one considers that Cicero glosses over the difference

between apprehension of the gods' existence, using the mind as a sixth sense --what Epicurus calls epibole tes dianoias-- and recognition of the gods' character, which I take to be the role of prolepsis. In short, we can only make selective use of the testimonies of Diogenes Laertius and Cicero, not to mention the others. What we select to accept requires an independent understanding of the Epicurean doctrine.

We do not even know what role prolepsis is supposed to play in Epicurean theory, though sources agree that role was discussed in Epicurus' Canon. The criteria listed by Diogenes and Cicero are threefold, consisting of aisthesis, prolepsis, and pathe --though Epicurus only used the word kriterion to refer to the sense faculties. But this threefold division is more like a troika, with each of the three going off in a different direction. It is not a criterion of truth, because the pathe are hitched up as vehicles for choice and avoidance. And aisthesis is represented as the criterion for knowledge, although Epicurus himself listed both aistheseis and pathe as having this role. According to Diogenes and Cicero, then, Epicurean prolepsis has neither a judgmental role to play, which they say is the job of aisthesis, nor an ethical role to play, the job of the pathe.

So, what is the role prolepsis is supposed to have in the Epicurean Canon? If the Epicureans were Stoics the answer would be easy enough, since the Stoics divided philosophy into three parts --adding logic to the parts recognized by the Epicureans: natural philosophy and ethics. Our sources are emphatic that the Epicureans did not give logic a separate status. But regarding the Stoics, Diogenes Laertius reports that some divide logic into two parts. One is called peri kanonon kai kriterion and consists of the phantasiai, while the other constitutes to horikon,

definitions which are the work of common notions, Stoic ennoiai. To a Stoicizing historian this might seem to be the role of prolepsis in the Epicurean troika, but it couldn't be, since the testimony is adamant that the Epicureans denied the value of definitions. Furthermore, the Canon which is said to provide this troika is also said not to have an independent status, independent of natural philosophy.

It is a real possibility, then, that the troika listed by Diogenes and Cicero has been Stoicized, and that whatever trichotomy may be present in Epicurus' Canon concerned a threefold division of perceptual evidence, consisting of the evidence of the sense faculties ( aistheseis ), the evidence of the experience of pleasure and pain ( the pathe ), and something else. Diogenes even suggests what this something else might be and Epicurus confirms it: the sixth sense, epibole tes dianoias, where the mind itself is sensitive to especially fine atomic images which penetrate it and trigger recognitions. At this point, Epicurean prolepsis as a separate criterion, in the Stoic sense, seems to disappear from Epicurus' Canon.

With astonishing unanimity, scholars put prolepsis back into the Canon and into a pivotal role by reading it into Herodotus 37-38, where Epicurus prefaces his arguments on natural philosophy with a discussion of his theory of evidence. The word prolepsis is missing from the discussion, but this might possibly be an inconspicuous omission, if one agrees with Sedley's suggestion that Epicurus had not yet invented the word, since the only mention of the term in the Letter to Herodotus at #72 could easily be a later addition. And in the passage in question the term proton ennoema seems to be a convenient standin. What is most compelling about this interpretation is that Cicero, Sextus, and Diogenes

Laertius, among others, all make a claim about Epicurean prolepsis which is echoed in this passage: namely, that having a prolepsis is necessary for conducting any empirical investigation or answering any problem of natural philosophy:

First of all, Herodotus, it is necessary to grasp what underlies our utterances [ ta hypotetagma tois phthongois...dei eilephenai ], so that by referring to them we may have a means of judging our opinions, inquiries, and problems, and not give endless demonstrations which leave everything undetermined or use empty utterances. For the primary thought for every utterance must be seen [ anagke gar to proton ennoema kath' hekaston phthongon blepesthai ] and there be no need of further proof [ apodeixeos ], if we are to have a point of reference for inquiries, problems, and opinions. Wherefore it is necessary to keep a close watch over our perceptions [ aistheseis ], that is to say over our current apprehendings (whether they be mental or any of the sense organs) [ tas parousas epibolas eite dianoias eith' hotou depote ton kriterion ], as well as over our present feelings [ ta hyparchonta pathe ], so that we may be able to infer what awaits confirmation and what is not evident. (Her. 37-38, von der Muehl)

Without arguing in detail, let me simply point out that if what turns out to be prolepsis is being discussed here, prolepseis are not exclusively what underlies our utterances. The primary bit of information, or proton ennoema, for every utterance must encompass more than prolepsis in any case.

What underlies our utterances is to settle questions of natural philosophy, rather than initiate them. The first part of this passage

does not present an Epicurean answer to the paradox of inquiry, but rather an answer to the question of what settles investigations: namely, the point of reference which our utterances are about. And the second half of the passage tells us how to find that point of reference by listing the trichotomy which Epicurus mentions elsewhere: the five sense faculties, the sixth sense, and the feelings of pleasure and pain. It is the empirical evidence derived in this way which will put an end to demonstrations, which will decide questions, which will give reference to our utterances, and most importantly will itself not need demonstration, because, as Epicurus was notorious for saying, perceptual evidence is always true.

Now we do not even need to read prolepsis into this passage to make good sense of it. And in any case, the Stoic role for prolepsis, which is analogous to that of the ennoiai, the initial concepts which provide a starting point for inquiry along the line of their definitions, defining what it is one is looking for, this Stoic use of prolepsis is not what Epicurus is talking about in this passage. Defined concepts won't answer empirical questions. Consequently, if prolepseis are included in our passage, then their role is clearly an evidential one, providing some reference point about the nature of things, in the way that aisthesis does. Like aisthesis, then, prolepseis must make claims about the world, not just provide concepts with which to make those claims, something the Stoics were quite concerned about, the Epicureans not.

Epicurus' own examples support the point that prolepseis are evidential claims. As we have seen, one such prolepsis is that the gods are blessed and immortal. When Epicurus makes this claim in Menoceus 123-124, he contrast prolepseis with false judgments about the character of the gods. And when he mentions the prolepsis of justice, the author



of the Kyriai Doxai --presumably Epicurus-- presents the claim that justice is what serves the needs of social intercourse. Apparently, prolepseis take the form of claims about the way things are. These claims are facts about the world, not mere opinions. So prolepsis enjoys the evidential status aisthesis does.

Consequently I see no foundation for the most common interpretation, that Epicurean prolepsis is some kind of conceptual device. The most popular version of this thesis has been that prolepseis are the meanings of individual words, as they might also have been for the Stoics, individual concepts which when strung together in the appropriate way would provide meaning to sentences, constituting lekta. Now I have argued against this interpretation in "Epicurean Semantics," where I pointed out that we should take the evidence of Plutarch and Sextus seriously, that there is nothing in Epicureanism comparable to what the Stoics claimed was the significance ( to semainomenon ) of voiced sounds. The Epicureans made do with just voiced sounds, or utterances, and the events happening in the world which those utterances referred to. Attention to everything which the Epicureans say about the origin and character of language suggests that utterances label states of the world, or else they are vacuous sounds. The prolepseis, then, are not vehicles of meaning, but conveyances of evidence making claims on the world, not making sense of our vocabulary.

Some would maintain that nevertheless prolepseis are mental representations, though what they represent are complex ideas about the world. This too seems unlikely. The authority of perception and the authority of our feelings would be called into question, with disastrous consequences for Epicurean empiricism, were it the case that what it is

we see or how it is we feel were somehow dependent upon our own subjective perspective and viewpoint. The Epicureans were adamant on the mechanical, automatic character of perception and feeling, which somehow guaranteed the information we received from our senses was information about the state of the world, as opposed to our state of mind. The purely referential character of what it is we perceive and the pleasure and pain we feel is what guarantees the epistemic authority of aisthesis and pathe. Now it appears not just from secondary sources but also from what Epicurus states in book 28 of his Peri Physeos that prolepsis also enjoys such evidential authority. This would require that the claims of prolepsis have the same referential fixity as that enjoyed by aisthesis and the pathe. Indeed, it is only if this is so that prolepseis could possibly be construed as at least part of what underlies our utterances, as part of the proton ennoema behind every utterance, which is the point of reference for all investigation.

We conclude that prolepsis for the Epicureans makes evidential claims on the nature of reality. But we still need to know how such prolepseis are generated and what sorts of events in the world they describe. To answer either question is to offer conjecture. One of the controversies in the literature concerns whether Epicurean prolepsis is restricted to abstract entities, as the example of justice would seem to suggest, or to individual things, as Diogenes' examples suggest and the example of the character of the gods speaks in favor of. What complicates conjecture is the very real possibility that over time the Epicureans may have changed their mind on the range of prolepseis. Both Diogenes and Cicero talk of revisions of the younger Epicureans in this context, and Plutarch and Sextus make similar suggestions. It could be the case that at first

prolepsis played a rather minor role with a restricted range and over time the range extended.

From the examples we do have in Epicurus it seems that prolepsis is concerned with the character of a thing or a state of affairs --what it is to be just, as opposed to what the instantiations of justice are, what the character of the gods is, as opposed to who the gods are. Given Epicurean epistemic realism, these claims on the character of some thing or state must be seen as claims on the world, so that prolepsis, like aisthesis for a realist, is ambiguous between the psychological act of apprehension and the content discerned, some feature of the world. In the case of prolepsis what is discerned should be some abiding character in things, as opposed to some temporary appearance. Not surprisingly, Epicurean atomism suggests the need for these two different kinds of information. Since all that exists are simply atoms moving in the void, on any occasion what one perceives is, as it were, a time slice of a continuous process ----so the apple looks green now. It is also the case that certain atomic configurations are relatively abiding in any particular cosmos. And so in our world water has a particular atomic arrangement and iron another. Information about the one, the state of current appearances, is not the same as information about the other, the relatively abiding state of nature.

The history of Plato's Forms and Aristotle's natural kinds should have made Epicurus more sensitive to this issue than Democritus would have been, and in any case this sensitivity to the abiding structures in nature is certainly obvious from the De Rerum Natura. There is clearly a need for information about these abiding structures in natural philosophy and this need can be satisfied in part by Epicurean inference and confirmation.

But it also appears that we can recognize the abiding character in perceived things and states. We recognize justice to be what serves social interest, the gods to be blessed and immortal. Such recognitions are part of the evidence, not part of our inferences. And prolepsis, it seems, constitutes such recognitions.

The question how prolepsis differs from aisthesis becomes, on my view, mostly a matter of degree. On a strict view of perception we perceive only sights and sounds, smells and tastes: colors, shapes, specific noises and other such primitive phenomena. To perceive a man or a tower in the distance would then require a more elaborate psychological process. At what point this more elaborate process becomes something other than perception is difficult to say. Broadly speaking, recognizing a tower in the distance remains aisthesis, not being an inference. But it could well be that at some point Epicurus or Epicureans wanted to discriminate some more sophisticated recognitions as the work of prolepsis, possibly recognitions requiring repeated experiences so as to make familiar lingering characteristics or forms. A passage in Philodemus' De Signis claims there is a prolepsis for human nature, just as Diogenes Laertius suggested that there is a persistent form recognized throughout the instances of accumulated experience of seeing a man or seeing a horse. Yet judging from Epicurus' own examples, perception seems to take on the responsibility for recognizing natural structures, leaving prolepsis for the more abstract characteristics requiring more than the operation of the sense organs but the mind as well, the case of justice, the case of the gods' character.

If we could determine how prolepseis arise, we might be in a position to determine their range. As I understand prolepsis, it cannot

be the work of any particular sense organ, but it is a perceptual recognition of the mind as a result of the work of the separate sense organs. But if we assume it is the work of dianoia, it is still something we perceive in the world, not a rational reconstruction or hypothesis. Here the case of the gods is instructive. The mind, operating as a sixth sense sensitive to especially fine eidola, perceives the gods, just as it perceives phantoms in dreams. I suggest that this same apprehension of the mind, epibole tes dianoias, can perceive persistent characteristics characterizing the things it or the other sense faculties perceive, the sorts of things these things are. And so we have a prolepsis that the gods are blessed and immortal, over and above having a vision of them. Presumably these prolepseis are formed in the mind as a result of repeated experiences, allowing us to get acquainted with the persistent characters of things. As accumulated information, these prolepseis would be common to all familiar with the same sorts of experiences.

My best guess is that in Epicurean theory prolepsis was first understood as a type of epibole tes dianoias, and the two remained associated with each other as perceptual activities of dianoia, sometimes taking in mental visions, sometimes recognizing natural kinds and characters. In the case of the gods it would have been easy to confuse the two activities as Cicero did. And it is easy to understand how the recognition of natural types could come to be identified with primitive concepts, which the Stoics wanted.

I hope, dear members of the SAGP, that this synopsis of my views will help show you the way to ataraxia, if not Philadelphia.