

What Is The Relationship Between Thoughts or Other Mental Operations And "Images" In Epicurus?

Post by "Godfrey" of September 2, 2023 at 6:04 PM

Here are some quotes I have from trying to get a handle on *epibloai*. I'm not sure if they're helpful, and I don't have any conclusions to offer at the moment. This is quite a juicy topic: one perfect for Cicero to turn into an obfuscated mess.

Lucretius 4.793-817 (Long and Sedley translation 1987):

No doubt the images are steeped in technique, and have taken lessons in wandering to enable them to have fun at nighttime! (8) Or will this be nearer the truth? Because within a single period of time detectable by our senses - the time it takes to utter a single sound - there lie hidden many periods of time whose existence is discovered by reason, it follows that everywhere at every time every image is ready on the spot: so great is the speed and availability of things. And because they are delicate the mind can only see sharply those of them which it strains to see. Hence the remainder all perish, beyond those for which the mind has prepared itself. The mind further prepares itself by hoping to see the sequel to each thing, with the result that this comes about. Don't you see how the eyes too, when they begin to see things which are delicate, strain and prepare themselves, and that there is no other way of seeing sharply? As a matter of fact, even with things plain to see you can discover that the result of failing to pay attention is that it becomes like something separated from you by the whole of time and far away. Why then is it surprising if the mind loses everything else beyond the matters to which it is devoting itself?

Letter to Herodotus 50-52 (Mensch translation 2018)

And whatever image we derive by focusing the mind or the sense organs, whether on the object's shape or its concomitant properties, this shape is the shape of the solid object and is due either to the continuous compacting or to the residue of the image. Falsehood and error always reside in the added opinion [when a fact is awaiting confirmation or the absence of contradiction, which fact is subsequently not confirmed by virtue of an immovable opinion in ourselves that is linked to the imaginative impression, but distinct from it; it is this that gives rise to the falsehood]. For impressions like those received from a picture, or arising in dreams, or from any other form of apprehension by the mind, or by the other criteria, would not have resembled what we call the real and true things had it not been for certain actual things on which we had cast our eyes. Error would not have occurred unless we had experienced some other movement in ourselves that was linked to, but distinct from, the apprehension of the impression; and from this movement, if it is not confirmed or is contradicted, falsehood results; whereas if it is confirmed, or not contradicted, truth results. And to this view we must adhere,

lest the criteria based on clear evidence be repudiated, or error, strengthened in the same way, throw all these things into confusion.

From "Epicurean Prolepsis" by David Glidden (1985):

What is puzzling is that in his discussion of Epicurean theology Cicero seems to conflate the Epicurean apprehension of the gods through epibolé tés dianoias with the apprehension of their nature through prolepsis.

Unfortunately, Velleius goes on to describe this process of apprehension in some detail, and the description he comes up with turns out to be exactly what we know to be Epicurus' sixth sense, where the mind itself acts as a sense organ: namely, epibolé tés dianoias.

On the one hand, the process of imprinting guarantees that the kinds of things there are make their impact on the mind, a causal defense of realism and the testimony of aisthesis. This mechanical process enforces our ability to see things the way they are. To make this defence impregnable the Epicureans went on to insist that any thing we can imagine owes its character to a real existence - namely, the shape of some atomic construct striking the mind. To imagine a god or a flying horse or even to see that the gods are blessed and eternal is simply to be exposed to the requisite atomic patterns and in time to come to recognize them. According to Epicurus, it is some such process as automatic as this which makes perception possible and gives it its authority. And the dream figures the mind perceives are of a piece with perception generally, leaving, so to speak, no room for imagination: that is, nothing for the mind to make up on its own or at least no right for the mind to call such inventions aisthéseis, when for the Epicureans such cognitive impressions can be nothing more than judgments or opinions which must be tested against the vocabulary of experience, the way things look. Given the connection between epibolé tés dianoia and prolepsis, the mind is also said to be able to pick out figures by their sortal nature, to perceive the general character of things. This is all said to be part of the same process and prolepsis is said to enjoy the same sort of epistemic authority as aisthéseis in general.