

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 2, 2023 at 8:15 AM

We have several other interesting conversations going on right now but here is something that may ultimately be related that I think deserves a separate thread:

In Epicurean theory, what is the relationship, if any, between "images" and "thoughts"?

It seems to me that in Book Four and other places in Lucretius, there is a close relationship between the impact of images on the mind and then the operation of the mind in forming a picture of what it wants to think or do.

Book 4 of Lucretius:

[877] Next, how it comes to pass that we are able to plant our steps forward, when we wish, how it is granted us to move our limbs in diverse ways, and what force is wont to thrust forward this great bulk of our body, I will tell: do you hearken to my words. I say that first of all idols of walking fall upon our mind, and strike the mind, as we have said before. Then comes the will; for indeed no one begins to do anything, ere the mind has seen beforehand what it will do, and inasmuch as it sees this beforehand, an image of the thing is formed. And so, when the mind stirs itself so that it wishes to start and step forward, it straightway strikes the force of soul which is spread abroad in the whole body throughout limbs and frame. And that is easy to do, since it is held in union with it. Then the soul goes on and strikes the body, and so little by little the whole mass is thrust forward and set in movement. Moreover, at such times the body too becomes rarefied, and air (as indeed it needs must do, since it is always quick to move), comes through the opened spaces, and pierces through the passages in abundance, and so it is scattered to all the tiny parts of the body. Here then it is brought about by two causes acting severally, that the body, like a ship, is borne on by sails and wind.

Another example that is outside the core material but which may shed light on the question is Cicero's question to Cassius:

[15.16] **Cicero to Cassius**

[Rome, January, 45 B.C.]

L I expect you must be just a little ashamed of yourself now that this is the third letter that has caught you before you have sent me a single leaf or even a line. But I am not pressing you, for I shall look forward to, or rather insist upon, a longer letter. As for myself, if I always had somebody to trust with them, I should send you as many as three an hour. For it somehow happens, that whenever I write anything to you, you seem to be at my very elbow; and that, not by way of visions of images, as your new friends term them, who believe that even mental visions are conjured up by what Catius calls spectres (for let me remind you that Catius the Insubrian, an Epicurean, who died lately, gives the name of spectres to what the famous Gargettian [Epicurus], and long before that Democritus, called images).

2 But, even supposing that the eye can be struck by these spectres because they run up against it quite of their own accord, how the mind can be so struck is more than I can see. It will be your duty to explain to me, when you arrive here safe and sound, whether the spectre of you is at my command to come up as soon as the whim has taken me to think about you - and not only about you, who always occupy my inmost heart, but suppose I begin thinking about the Isle of Britain, will the image of that wing its way to my consciousness?

I will see what other cites I can come up with to use for discussion, but has anyone got any thoughts (no pun intended) on this relationship?

Part of the reason I am asking this question is to try to get a better handle on the pleasure and pain that is involved in making the "mental" vs "bodily" distinction. Are mental pains and pleasures felt as a kind of "touch"? If so, to what extent are images involved?

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 epibolés téō 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, epibolés téō 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 aisthēsis. 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 té s 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.