

Philodemus On Piety

Post by “Don” of December 18, 2020 at 10:05 PM

In looking through Obbink’s work, I found mention of some important words in the original Greek text and thought they might shed some light on some of the extant writings of Epicurus where we have questions. Then again maybe not. So, here it goes. For this entry, we’re looking at prolepsis which is mentioned only twice in On Piety.

Column 45, Line 1300

Obbink (starting around line 1280, emphasis added and notes added as parenthetical statements for clarity):

And they (Epicurus and the kathegomenes) are continually saying everywhere (in their writings), lest I go on too long by adding treatises by them (i.e., to put it briefly), that of all existing things it (the divine) is the best and most holy, most worthy of emulation, having dominion over all good things, unburdened by affairs, and exalted and great-minded and great-spirited and ritually pure and purest and propitious. Therefore they say that they alone strive after the greatest form of piety and that they hold the most pious views about the gods, and they charge the rest with holding the opposite views, in as much as they (other, non-Epicurean philosophers) teach contrary to the naturally acquired generic conception (prolepsis), and [verb missing] the purest views as regards the ineffable pre-eminence of the strength and perfection of the divine... [gap - 1 col c.90 words]

Unfortunately, Obbink’s note to column 45 doesn’t help much. Here is an excerpt:

“Epic. Ad Moec. states that the assertions of the many about the gods are not derived from [prolepseis]. ... prolepsis, a technical term for which Epicurus was notorious, reflects a process of reasoning that forms a major part of Epicurus’ epistemological programme. The source tradition is unambiguous that he thought it was at least possible to have a prolepsis of god or divine nature, but otherwise we do not hear much about it in this treatise, nor does it seem to have played a major role in Philod. De dis ... When Philodemus says here that the others teach about the gods in a way that is contrary to the prolepsis of them, the concept is probably deemed to be unproblematic and to be fully sketched out by passages such as KD 1, Ad. Menoec. 123, and the definitions of the pious and impious man above, 1130-65. (i.e., lines 1130-65 in On Piety)

For reference, lines 1130-65 discuss the pious person preserving the immortality and “consummate blessedness of God [i.e., the god, the divine nature] together with all things included by us” and the impious man who “banishes” these qualities from the divine. The pious person “we honour for his piety, whereas the other we despise as manifestly depraved.”

Column 66A, Line 1887

Obbink:

For all (perhaps “infinity”?) [several words missing] is thought of, just as time is defined (or divided or distinguished), as being a naturally formed generic conception (prolepsis); and just as also in book 32 (of Epicurus’s On Nature), he says that because the existence of the gods is apprehended with clarity (i.e., vivid knowledge of the gods), although as a unified entity among underlying existents, and their (gods’) nature is less able to be perceived by thought than other existents, and generally towards [~25 words missing] who towards [one word missing] but of all those [word missing] self-completing [one word missing] all.

I found it interesting that time here is included in the examples of “naturally formed generic conceptions” or prolepses. I thought I remembered that “time does not exist” according to the podcast discussions of DRN Book 1: *We’re wont, and rightly, to call accidents. | Even time exists not of itself; but sense Reads out of things what happened long ago, | What presses now, and what shall follow after: | No man, we must admit, feels time itself, | Disjoined from motion and repose of things.*

So, is the author (Philodemus or Phaedrus) here saying that “time” is also a prolepsis, a preconception that we learn? That would be an interesting development. If prolepses are formed by repeated exposures to a concept or thing, I suppose a concept/prolepsis of time could be formed. Here’s Obbink’s take...

Obbink has this in the notes to column 66A:

“1885-6 καθαπερ οριζεται χρο[νος] : here the fact that the gods exist in the first instance as conceptualized by humans is illustrated by comparison to the ontological status of time, which according to Epicurus is not even a per se entity (but rather an accident or attribute of other entities), yet is not in consequence any less real. Rather, it is in an epiphenomenon of our thinking about certain occurrences in relation to other events and objects. For the status of time as an accidental property of things see Epic. Ad Herod. 68-73; Demetrius of Laconia ap. Sext. Emp. Adv. math. 10.219-27, where time is styled an ‘accident of accidents’; Lucr. I. 459-63.

“1887 προληψιν : formation of the prolepsis of the gods (and the implied lack of it among opponents) is also discussed adobe, 1300, and it (or something very like it) is said to have obtained among the ‘first humans’ in cultural history above at 224-31. On the prolepsis of the gods see further Epic. Ad Herod. 76-7, Ad Menoec. 123-4; Luce. 5.1161-1225, 6.68-79; Cic. De nat. Deor. 1. 43-9.”