

"Method And Evidence: On Epicurean Preconceptions" - Pierre-Marie Morel (2008)

Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2021 at 9:22 AM

It is possible, as some have suggested, that preconceptions, because they are the most natural and immediate or most basic notions, correspond to cases of 'confrontation' (περίπτωσις). The question is very difficult to resolve. However that may be, since all ἐπίνοια derive from sensations, we can say that each constitutes a kind of "memory of that which has frequently become evident externally," which is just what a preconception is. It is thus difficult to establish a clear distinction between preconceptions and other notions. In addition, although certain opinions, thoughts, or judgments are false, it seems that, for Epicurus, preconceptions are always true: (text [1]) "preconceptions are self-evident. And opinion depends on something prior and self-evident, which is our point of reference when we say, e.g., 'how do we know if this is a man?'" Preconception in this sense is a fundamental or primary 'idea' that is always true, because it is absolutely clear (ἐναργής), and that is common to all men. It is thus not surprising that the concept of preconception plays a central role in Epicurean doctrine, sometimes implicitly, but also explicitly, as the correct concept of the divine or of justice.

Unfortunately, Epicurus did not bequeath us a general treatment of preconception, and Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, which generally translates the Greek πρόληψις by *notitia* or *notities*, offers only rather dispersed comments on the matter.¹⁰ What we have is just a few paradigmatic cases (the gods, the just) where Epicurus makes use of the word πρόληψις, but without giving a clear definition of it. Furthermore, the psychological status of preconception is not entirely clear: the questions that I have posed above in a general way are relevant as well to the particular framework of Epicurean philosophy. They have given rise to highly divergent interpretations and there is no current consensus on the matter.

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