

With Images And The Mind As A Supersensory Mechanism, Was Epicurus Suggesting A Form of "ESP"?

Post by "Cassius" of December 15, 2018 at 8:21 AM

I am no fan or proponent or reader of "ESP" material, but this issue came up in a Facebook discussion of the gods, anticipations, and images. I am posting this mainly as a conversation starter, as i have not researched this at all. But here are some thoughts as a starting point, beginning with text from "On the Nature of the Gods":

"“Anyone pondering on the baseless and irrational character of these doctrines ought to regard Epicurus with reverence, and to rank him as one of the very gods about whom we are inquiring. For he alone perceived, first, that the gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there but possesses untaught some ‘preconception’ of the gods? Such notions Epicurus designates by the word prolepsis, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing, without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed. The force and value of this argument we learn in that work of genius, Epicurus's Rule or Standard of Judgment.”"

Clearly the leading context here is preconceptions (Anticipations), followed by actions of the mind (rather than the five senses):

"(For we are bound to employ novel terms to denote novel ideas, just as Epicurus himself employed the word prolepsis in a sense in which no one had ever used it before). We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that ‘that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak.’"

"If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshipping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine Power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

And this following quote is probably why DeWitt discusses the mind as a "suprasensory" mechanism:

" Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, "

This is Velleius and not Epicurus, but Cicero had access to all of the important Epicurean texts, he had studied in Athens himself, and he was writing at least in part to Epicurean friends (Atticus, and no doubt many others) to whom his credibility could not have survived had he not been at least relatively faithful to the well-known facts of the time

No doubt these next two paragraphs do not make a lot of sense to us (the second one however is pretty clear) but it isn't clear whether we have issues here of translation, or corruption, of intentional deception, or what. But there's also the possibility that this phrasing **would** make more sense, largely as is, if we understood and followed rigorously the original materialist foundation, and followed through those implications as the ancient Epicureans did. But the entire subject of "images" and how they might be received and processed in the mind without going through the five senses would take a lot of theoretical discussion we haven't even begun to consider:

"Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

"Moreover there is the supremely potent principle of infinity, which claims the closest and most careful study; we must understand that it has in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart. This property is termed by Epicurus *isonomia*, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the causes of destruction are beyond count, the causes of conservation also are bound to be infinite."

I am no fan or proponent or reader of "esp" material, and I just grabbed this link as an example, but is everyone here prepared to dogmatically maintain that there is absolutely no validity to all assertions of extrasensory perception in terms of "sensing with the mind"?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extrasensory_perception "Extrasensory perception or ESP, also called sixth sense or second sight, includes claimed reception of information not gained through the recognized physical senses, ****but sensed with the mind.***"*

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/629-with-images-and-the-mind-as-a-supersensory-mechanism-was-epicurus-suggesting-a-f/?postID=1612#post1612>

I don't see that there is a necessary connection between supernaturalism, which is ruled out by Epicurus, vs "sensing with the mind" which may possibly be referred to explicitly in these very texts we are discussing.

This is not a road I have entertained or plan to entertain, but it's an obvious question.

I can see it now: "Cassius is advocating that Epicurus taught ESP!!!!!" Well, not yet, but maybe so, lets wait and see. When I see clear evidence of something in the Epicurean texts I have learned to respect Epicurus enough that I want to take a very long and hard look at it before rejecting it entirely. There usually is very good reason for what's there, even if in modern terms the exact mechanism is described in a way we would disagree with. I am sure we all remember the swerve and how it appears to foreshadow what we consider to be commonplace science today.

In that text I quoted is "because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods." What does THAT mean? What about the word "towards"? Is this a bad translation, or what would explain "towards" rather than "from" if what we are discussing is the mind receiving them. There are hugely complicated issues in discussing all this, but to me, respect for Epicurus indicates that we should follow DeWitt's example and attempt to reconstruct a plausible scenario before we jump to a conclusion that he must necessarily be wrong because *we* don't understand this particular text.

Apparently Scientific American doesn't think the idea that the mind can be influenced by outside transmissions is outside the realm of scientific discussion -

"But scientists can do more with brainwaves than just listen in on the brain at work-they can selectively control brain function by transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS)."

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/.../mind-control-by-cell/>