Preconceptions and PD24

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 22, 2022 at 7:49 PM

"The point which Epicurus discusses after sensation is what he called by the technical term of προλήψις, anticipation or preconception. It is explained asa general idea stored up, a right opinion, a conception, or the memory of what has been more than once presented to us from without. When we apply a name to an object we can only do so by means of a previous conception corresponding to the name: and that conception is ultimately an image derived from the senses. Epicurus, in explaining these "anticipations,” says: “In the case of every term of speech the primary ideas it conveys must be seen (by the mental eye) and not stand in need of demonstration: otherwise we shall have nothing to which to refer the point in question. These preconceptions are not in any true sense innate. They are products of observation. Their value lies in being common to the mass of mankind, and so affording a basis of argument. In the case of any dispute, in which general terms are employed, the first question is: What clear and distinct idea can we attach to it? And this does not mean, can I define it—can I substitute one set of general terms for another? But can I really put it before my intellectual vision distinctly? Epicurus, like Bishop Berkeley, reduces general ideas to the individual images which do duty for them in the imagination. He wants us to realize our ideas in a concrete case as the true test of our having them. And here, perhaps, is a fundamental fallacy of Epicureanism. It holds that truth is identical with what is clearly and distinctly conceived. It substitutes imagination for thought. Unlike Spinoza, who contrasts the imperfect conception of the imagination with the adequate knowledge of understanding, Epicurus abides by what is easily and satisfactorily presented to the mind under a pictorial or semi-sensuous aspect. Now, imagination most easily reproduces the phenomena familiar to us of bodies in motion. [...] A word only existed as the symbol of a mental image: and therefore it must present its credentials in the shape of a prolepsis, i.e. a clear and distinct image, conveyable, not in the general terms of a definition, but in the precise and particular language of a description. Can the conception be realized as an image? If it can, it is a safe and satisfactory basis of argument : if it cannot, it must be dismissed. A curious example of this dislike to generalities, to definitions and divisions, is seen in the contest which the Epicureans carried on against mathematics. If we believe Cicero, Epicurus declared the whole of geometry to be false : and he couples the remark with an expression of surprise as to whether Polyænus, who had a considerable mathematical reputation, had put the whole science aside after he became a disciple of Epicurus. We may be sure he did not; and the very conjunction of the two statements suggests that Epicureanism rather expressed a view of the nature and method of geometrical truth, than a doubt as to its scientific value. What the Epicureans principally objected to, we infer, were the principles—the axioms, postulates, and definitions: though others of them, like Zeno the Sidonian, went further, and urged that there were points involved in the demonstrations which had not been explicitly accepted in the preliminary principles. Now, the definitions of geometry have the defect that they cannot be represented in any distinct image. No man can conceive an image of

a geometrical line, or point, or surface; the only image which can be raised to meet these terms is that of a physical line or surface, which is evidently quite unsatisfactory for the purposes of mathematics. Even if we go a step further, we can say that the general conception of a circle or a triangle corresponding to the definitions of Euclid is such as can only be realized in special and individual instances ofthesefigures. We need not particularly care for the abuse which, according to an ancient mathematician, they lavished on the proof of the proposition of the 1st Book of Euclid, as demonstrating what was palpable even to a donkey.) The main ground of their attack on the mathematical sciences was, that if they started from false premises (i.e.not in accordance with facts), they could not be true [...] The 'imaginative impressions on the intellect' are contrasted with the sensations in such a way as to render it more probable that we should understand by them the images which present themselves to the intellect (in the Epicurean description of it), and not to the senses. In other words, they represent the impressions derived from the spectra or idola, which are too delicate to affect the senses, but can act upon the mind." (Wallace, Epicureanism, 220-225)