

# Plato's Meno, the "Eristic Paradox," and the Epicurean Response

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themselves were forms of sensory recognition and that *ἔννοιαι* followed suit as well, as forms of mental recognition. This is an important difference.

The Epicureans claimed to be undaunted by the **eristic** paradox, though according to Sextus they themselves were caught: "The Epicureans... say, either you understand what demonstrative proof is or you do not. And if you understand and have conception of it, there is demonstrative proof. But if you do not understand, how do you find in the first place what you do not understand?"<sup>30</sup> Sextus interrupts at this point to object: "By saying this they pretty much turn themselves upside down, since it is agreed that *πρόληψις* and *ἔννοια* must precede every inquiry, for how can one even inquire, having no conception of the thing being sought?"<sup>31</sup>

Sextus' objection is misleading. Of course, Epicureans were themselves known to have asserted that *πρόληψις* is the *sine qua non* for inquiry and thought.<sup>32</sup> But the Epicureans never said *ἔννοια*, or conception, is a prerequisite as well. There is a difference, after all, between having the full conception of a thing (what the Stoics, for example, meant by the articulate, definitional character of both *πρόληψις* and *ἔννοια*) and having some perception of a thing, in particular what the Epicureans meant by *πρόληψις* as a perceptual form of sortal recognition. Consequently, once one has already seen enough instances to recognize something of that sort (a man, for instance), one might already have a proleptic perception prior to the full conception of what it is to be a man. Sextus' objection hangs on an equivocation between "having no conception whatsoever of a thing" (excluding a *πρόληψις* even) and "having no full conception of a thing" (having no defined *ἔννοια*). This equivocation provides sufficient space for an Epicurean to swerve, even though it might catch a Stoic.

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