

Prolepsis / Anticipations As Epicurus' Answer to the MENO Problem

Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 1:20 PM

We definitely need to keep working on making prolepsis / anticipations understandable to normal people of ordinary education. In reading a 2023 work which [Matteng](#) brought to our attention, I want to highlight the following passage passage to the effect that both Epicureans and Stoics looked to (their own) view of PROLEPSIS as the answer to "the Meno Problem."

We haven't yet gotten to the Epicurean sections of Cicero's *Academica*, but that's on the horizon for our podcast. By the time we get there we are going to want to have developed our understanding of what the Meno problem is, and how Epicurus addressed it using the concept of prolepsis / anticipations.

In his 2023 article *The Elaboration of Prolepsis Between Epicurus and the Stoics*, Jean-Baptiste Gourinat states:

Quote

In both schools, preconception is also a preliminary tool for research, discussion and intelligence, as explicitly said for Epicurus by Diog. Laert. X 33 and Cic. DND I 43. 83 Similar views are attributed to the Stoics by Cicero in Acad. II 21 and Acad. I 42, which was seen as a parallel answer to what was coined as the Meno problem:

That the problem advanced in the Meno, namely whether search and discovery are possible (εἰ οἷόν τε ζητεῖν καὶ εὐρίσκειν), leads to a real impasse. For we do not, on the one hand, try to find out things we know –a futile proceeding– nor, on the other, things we do not know, since even if we come across them we do not recognize them: they might be anything. The Peripatetics introduced the conception of “potential intuition” but the origin of our difficulty was actual knowing and not knowing. Even if we grant the existence of a potential intuition, the difficulty remains unchanged. How does this intuition operate? It must be either on what it knows or on what it does not know. The Stoics make the “natural conceptions” responsible (οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς τὰς φυσικὰς ἐννοίας αἰτιῶνται). If these are potential, we shall use the same argument as against the Peripatetics; and if they are actual, why do we search for what we know? And if we use them as a starting-point for a search for other things that we do not know, how do we search for what we do not know? The Epicureans introduce “preconceptions”(οἱ δὲ Ἐπικούρειοι τὰς προλήψεις); if they mean these to be “articulated” (διηρθρωμένας), search is unnecessary; if “unarticulated”(ἀδιαρθρώτους), how do we extend our search beyond our preconceptions, to look for something of which we do not possess a

preconception? (Plutarch, fr. 215f Sandbach = Extracts from the Chaeronean)

Footnote 83 is: " See also Sextus Emp. AM I 57 and XI 21: "according to the wise Epicurus, it is not possible to inquire (ζητεῖν) nor to come to an impasse (ἀπορεῖν) without a preconception".

This post needs to be the beginning of an extensive discussion of what "The Meno Problem" was to Plato, the presumptions that underlay Plato's view of the issue, and how Epicurus addressed the problem with his innovative use of the term "prolepsis." Getting a grip on the original problem should go a long way toward understanding how Epicurus was using the term prolepsis and what he expected us to understand about it. This isn't rocket science - the problem posed by Plato appears to be relatively straightforward, and the answer given by Epicurus should be equally straightforward.

Gourinat continues this way:

Quote

So Epicureans and Stoics seem to have resorted to "natural conceptions" or "preconceptions" as a solution to the Meno problem, 84 alternative to the Platonic doctrine of the reminiscence, and even to the actualization of potential knowledge in the Peripatetic school. Zeno's criticism of Plato's theory of ideas was famous, 85 and he could hardly have adopted one of its corollaries: recollection. It is striking that both Epicurus and the Stoics seem to have borrowed something from some empiricist passages of Plato: the wax analogy in the Theaetetus in the case of the Stoics and the book simile in the [Philebus](#) in the case of the Epicureans. In the Theaetetus, however, Plato explicitly argues that the wax simile is not a sufficient explanation, since these empiricist views cannot explain intellectual errors, especially in the case of mathematics. Thus, the Hellenistic philosophers needed to account for the origins of our knowledge in cases where empirical concept-formation was not a sufficient explanation. According to Plutarch, Chrysippus as well as Epicurus also needed to explain what we start from, when we want to pursue an enquiry: without a preconception of something, we cannot search for it since we would not even know what we are looking for.

I suspect that all of us are not going to find ourselves in full agreement with the way that Gourinat ultimately unwinds the issues, because (as Gourinat says himself) he sees contradictions in Epicurus' view of prolepsis as a criteria of truth. But regardless of that it's clear that we need to go back and reconstruct the question and the possible answers.

In this context I will close the post with Diogenes of Oinoanda's Fragment 5 (Martin Ferguson Smith), which I think is related. We need to ask not only "*Who will choose to seek what he can never find?*" but also "*Who will choose to seek, or who can understand, something of which he*

has no prior notion whatsoever?"

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find? Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.