

The Definitive "Are Beavers Born With The Innate Disposition To Build Dams, Or Do They Learn It From Older Beavers?" Thread

Post by "DaveT" of June 27, 2025 at 6:41 AM

I've been searching for a way to clarify for myself when or how Epicurus viewed the concept of prolepsis, I went to the Internet and Google's free AI, Gemini. It gave citations to back up its response, which I can paste into this discussion if anyone would like to see them.

Can our better educated friends here, give a deeper analysis of the response I got to my query; "prolepsis as discussed by Epicurus"? The answer it gave is in **bold**.

In Epicurean philosophy, *prolepsis* (plural: *prolepseis*) is a fundamental concept in their theory of knowledge, serving as one of the three criteria of truth, alongside sensations (*aisthêsis*) and feelings (*pathê*).

Here's a breakdown of prolepsis as Epicurus understood it:

* **Meaning:** Prolepsis translates to "preconception," "anticipation," or "pre-notion." It refers to a basic, general concept or idea that has been formed in our minds through repeated sensory experiences.

* **Formation through Experience:** Epicurus was an empiricist, meaning he believed that all knowledge ultimately derives from the senses. Prolepseis are formed when repeated sensory inputs of a certain kind leave a lasting impression or "trace" in the mind. For example, by repeatedly encountering dogs, we form a prolepsis of "dog" - a general idea of what a dog is.

* **A Criterion of Truth:** Prolepseis are considered self-evident and true. They act as a foundational, clear understanding against which we can evaluate new perceptions and opinions. When we encounter something new, we can refer back to our prolepsis to help us recognize and categorize it. If a new perception aligns with a relevant prolepsis, it is more likely to be true.

* **Precondition for Thought and Language:** Prolepseis are essential for rational thought and language. Without these pre-existing general notions, we wouldn't be able to name things, understand concepts, or engage in meaningful discourse. For instance, to understand the word "man," we must already have a prolepsis of what a man is.

*** **Solution to Plato's Meno Paradox:**** Epicurus' concept of prolepsis offered a solution to Plato's paradox in the **Meno**, which questioned how one could learn something new if they didn't already have some prior knowledge of it. Prolepseis provide this "pre-knowledge" or "preliminary concept" that allows us to recognize and learn.

*** **Not Innate in the Platonic Sense:**** While sometimes referred to as "innate," Epicurean prolepseis are not innate in the Platonic sense of being divinely implanted or pre-existing before experience. They are formed through a physiological, empirical process of repeated sensory input.

*** **Role in Understanding Abstract Concepts (like the Gods):**** Even for abstract concepts like "gods," Epicureans believed we form prolepseis. Our prolepsis of the gods, derived from common human experience and the appearance of living, blessed beings, leads to the Epicurean understanding of gods as tranquil, immortal, and not interfering in human affairs.

In essence, Epicurean prolepsis highlights the importance of direct sensory experience in shaping our fundamental understanding of the world, providing the building blocks for all subsequent knowledge and thought.