

Prolepsis of the gods

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 2, 2025 at 8:42 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Actually, could somebody take a crack at explaining fundamentally what prolepsis is? Is it innate knowledge that we're born it? I'm more confused than I thought! 😞

I can provide a few instances that might help orient the idea. (And *not* that I have a full grasp – it's a slippery concept for us all – but these are the examples I found in the available works).

Diogénēs provides us with the following definition (*per my swing at translating*).

Quote

33 But they call the [next criterion] “*Preconception*”⁵⁰ as if a *comprehension, or a right opinion, or notion, or universal thought* stored in *her*, that is, *memory of the appearances* repeatedly [received] from abroad, like [*the form of a*] *Human*, such is one example; for once it [appears], the clear [form of a] *Human* attaches to [the] preconception, and the imprint of the sensations is preceding [it]. Then, each name primarily follows [what] is visible, since we could not have sought the investigation if we had not first perceived it, just as [we] have further established a *horse is* [*this*] or [*a*] cow [*is that*]. For one must perceive *before* the preconception the [physical] form of [a] horse and of [a] cow. One should not at all have named something, not before one experienced the [physical] impression related to the preconception. But the preconceptions are manifest [to the mind], and because of prior [experience] the conjectural things are contingent upon sensible [stimuli] to [which] we say they are referring, as when we have confirmed if [a] *Human* is there. **34** But they also call the preconception [an] *opinion* [that] they affirm [to be] either *true* or *false*; for indeed, to be *true*, [it] must corroborate or *not* contradict; but if *not* corroborating or *contradicting*, [it] happens to be *false*. Hence, this has introduced [the need to practice] waiting [for confirmation]; for example, a [soldier] had waited [to make a judgment] and had advanced near a watchtower, and [having advanced] near, it had become known what sort [of watchtower] it appears [to be].

One takeaway here is that, of considerations, a *prolēpsis* is a true consideration, and, further, a consideration the directly corresponds with a *real, demonstrable thing, or type of thing*. *Truth* is a *true belief* about reality, so the *prolēpsis* of gods is having the right opinion about theology.

Epíkouros gives us an example of a *true belief* versus a *false belief*:

In the *Epistle to Menoikeus*, in a discussion on theology, the [ΠΡΟΛΕΨΕΙΣ](#) or [προλήψεις](#) (*prolēpseis*) are contrasted against [ΥΠΟΛΕΨΕΙΣ](#) or [ὑπολήψεις](#) (*hypolēpseis*). Whereas the *prolēpseis* are formed in the mind "**before**", so *hypolēpseis* are formed "**after**" (123). The *prolēpsis* of a god is a *being who is blessed and incorruptible*. The *hypolēpseis* of a god is a *being who is corrective, punitive, meddling, and generally troublesome*. The *prolēpsis* in this case is just the basic definition of "a god", whereas the *hypolēpsis* incorporates another, unrelated *prolēpsis* (like the *prolēpsis* of the atmospheric phenomena of static discharge) to create a fantastical narrative that deviates from this fundamental definition (like *Zeus smites the wicked with thunderbolts* or *rewards the faithful by not obliterating them*). *Hypolēpseis* are *false assumptions*, directly contrasted against reliable *prolēpseis*.

From this, I take away that the *prolēpsis* of the gods corresponds with the notion that a god is a *perfectly happy being*, whereas a mortal is an *animal that dies*, and a horse is a *hooved quadruped*. In this sense, it can be helpfully contextualized as part of the process of a naming schema. All disconnected cultures of peoples have a words for "warmth" and "baby" and "milk" and "hair", "light", "dark", and, as the cross-cultural exchange triggered by Alexander demonstrated to Hellenic Greece, apparently, as is evident to anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists, "**gods**".

In the *Epistle to Herodotos*, the Hegemon contrasts the *prolēpseis* of objects perceived by us against the "concept of Time", which is not described as a thing like a "horse", or "man", or "god", nor a category of things like an "animal", or "mortal", or "immortal", nor even expressed as a quality of a real thing, like "having hooves", or "respirating", or "being perfectly happy", but is rather just a kind of relative, measuring stick, an "accident of accidents" (172). We casually throw around the word *time* to actually mean something like *any relative, human measurement against periodically-rotating, nearby objects, albeit the annual revolution around the Sun, or the frequency of a Cesium-133 atom*. Here, Time is a bit of a contrast against a classical, Epicurean preconception.

Mentioned elsewhere, in the final few *Doctrines*, Epíkouros identifies "justice" as a *prolēpsis*, which, itself, is neither a real thing (like a "man" and "horse"), but more of a category (like "vertebrates") but as applies to situations and events, as a *pact to neither harm nor be harmed*. The preconception is realized during any periods where pacts are being honored between different parties. Here, there's not a Golden Triforce you can pocket called "justice", but there are examples of the "justice" that is evident within "just actions", so, this is another, kind of *categorical* preconception.

That's how I read it. These are the main instances I found where "preconception" is used.