

Are anticipations internalized rules about the way the world works?

Post by “Pompadour” of May 2, 2020 at 5:04 PM

First, let me acknowledge that I'm a novice and won't even call myself an Epicurean as I don't have the foundation to do so. Nonetheless, as a long-standing atheist, I have been attracted to Epicurean philosophy and would like to understand more. **I'm very much looking for practical vs. academic understanding.**

I'll admit that, of all the concepts in Epicurean philosophy, anticipations is the one I'm struggling with the most. In the absence consensus on the meaning, I can see this becoming a source of misunderstanding. Clearly, Epicurus placed importance on this as a source of truth.

Based on what I've read, the only understanding of anticipations that resonates with me is **internalized rules about the way the world works**. (This is me paraphrasing what I've read, not an explanation I found in the literature.) For example, if I observe a phenomenon and whenever the conditions are repeated the same thing happens, I can intuit cause and effect while not necessarily knowing what the actual mechanics at work are. And as children develop, and even as adults, I think this process is precognitive and unconscious. These can be rules about the physical world (e.g. I can crawl over a clear sheet of glass and won't fall through because it is solid) or about human nature (e.g. I'm more likely to have my argument accepted if I acknowledge the truth in the counter-argument).

So please help me learn by telling my why I'm right or wrong, and what I'm missing in my interpretation of anticipations. Thanks!

Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2020 at 6:07 PM

Pompadour first let me ask if you have read what DeWitt has to say about anticipations in his Chapter 8. If you have not, send me a message and I can point you to where you can find it.

As you know this is an area of controversy where we don't have nearly as much information as we would like, and we have to glean what we can from the sources and from our own knowledge and attempt to reconstruct.

You are aware of what we might call the standard approach, that anticipations are essentially "concepts" as against the DeWitt approach, where anticipations are more "intuitive"?

Also there is a relatively recent article from Voula Tsouna that discusses differences in her thoughts vs those of David Sedley, which you might want to read at some point. I think we posted it here but I will look for the link after I finish this post.

So you will first want to deal with deciding for yourself what part of anticipations pre-dates "experience" and what part (if any) only follows exposure to something, as which is the Diogenes Laertius with which DeWitt disagrees.

As for me I side with DeWitt, and believe that the greater part of what I prefer to refer to as the "faculty of anticipations" is a faculty, like sight or hearing, that processes information, and that pre-exists the receipt of any information from the senses, just as the eyes exist at birth before anything is seen. And thus I believe the answer is found in analogizing the faculty of anticipations to the faculty of sight, which works in pre-designed (by Nature) ways before ever being exposed to the first "thing" that is "seen."

And I believe viewing anticipations this way, as a natural faculty, is the only way they could ever have been considered by Epicurus to be a part of the "canon of truth." Otherwise, the RESULTS of the faculty anticipations, which might be things like the "rules" to which you refer, would better be viewed as end-results of the faculty, like opinions or concepts are the end-results of thinking, and if we were to consider THOSE to be "standards of truth" then we would have essentially a "feedback loop" where we would be creating our own standards, rather than following the lead of nature as we do with the sensations and with the feelings of pain and pleasure. If you see where I am going with that, I am following DeWitt in holding that the standards of truth are the measuring stick, and never the things that are measured.

That's a start to an answer. Please comment and we'll continue and others can chime in! And thanks for joining the forum!

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2020 at 6:21 PM

Pompadour I checked and it appears that the Tsouna article was not here, but I have fixed that now.

So the primary sources I would suggest you consider are :

1) Dewitt's Chapter 8 on the Canon (I always recommend starting with DeWitt).

2) Tsouna's "[Epicurean Preconceptions](#)" (which includes her references to Sedley's views)

3) Sedley's own "[Sextus Empiricus and the Atomist Criterion of Truth](#)" (I have not recently read that one so I am not sure what it contains.

I know however you said you were trying to get a practical and not an academic understanding of the issue, so don't interpret these comments as "Go read those articles first." 😊

I just like to start out conversations by listing the points of view and the sources so we will be on the same wavelength and people reading later will understand the general playing field.

One way I always wrap this up in my mind is to ask whether anticipations are "conceptions" or "something before conceptions." That is why I like the word "preconception" or "prolepsis" rather than anticipation, because it makes it much harder to confuse the issue as being nothing more than "concepts" if you always affix the PRE to the word.

Any version of preconceptions which equates them as concepts formed only after experience would in my mind make the issue a self-reinforcing feedback loop which I believe Epicurus would never have considered to be a part of the "canon of truth" any more than he would have included opinions formed as the result of operations of logic.

Post by “Pompadour” of May 2, 2020 at 11:33 PM

Cassius: Your distinction between faculty and result is just what I needed, and really helped me understand what may be meant by intuition. I presume if Epicurus was writing today, he would be talking about the brain and its cognitive processes. Also, from the perspective of any individual, don't the results of that faculty become the basis for each person's truth?

I will read the Tsouna article. As for DeWitt, I read what is available free online via Google books, but it doesn't include chapter 8. I may buy the Google books version, although its not the most reader-friendly.

Thank you for understanding my wish for practical vs. academic. Its not that I don't want to read the articles, but its helpful to have some guidance to know what I'm looking for. I'll probably be back for more clarification after I read Tsouna and chapter 8 of DeWitt.

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2020 at 7:18 AM

[Quote from Pompadour](#)

Also, from the perspective of any individual, don't the results of that faculty become the basis for each person's truth?

Yes, I think you are right, with the caveat that we have to remember that just like the things we see can be distorted by distance, or fog, or many other things, presumably the things that any other faculty report to us can also be distorted. Presumably that would be why Epicurus reports in the letter to Menoeceus that the views of some people about the gods are not "true" anticipations (true in the sense of accurate).

That is why I like DeWitt's analogy about the faculties being tools of precision (like a measuring stick) rather than the thing being measured. The measuring stick can be applied to innumerable different particular things, without at birth ever containing any content unique to that thing being measured, just as the eyes at birth contain the mechanism of sight without ever having been exposed to anything that will be seen during life.

So as DeWitt says it is important to always keep in mind whether you are talking about tools of precision (straight edge, level) or the stones with which you build the wall. The wall and the stones are the results, but are not themselves the tools of precision (the standard).

And therefore as you say I think Epicurus would be very interested in studying the brain and its cognitive processes so that we can understand them and account for possibilities of error. I see proof of that in chapter four of Lucretius, where much time is devoted to "images" and how they can be distorted (illusions) without those distortions ultimately undermining our confidence in the senses (because we can account for those distortions and correct them by proper use of those same senses).