

Phaedo and prolepses

Post by “Godfrey” of October 17, 2020 at 3:33 PM

Prolepses are one of the theories of Epicurus that have very little remaining in his extant writings. Recently I gave Plato’s *Phaedo* a quick read, and one thing that struck me was this passage. The context of this argument is in direct contrast to Epicurus’ universe of atoms and void, and similarly to his theory that the “soul” begins and ends at birth. Which would lead one to the conclusion that Epicurus was probably looking closely at this from time to time as he formulated his counter argument. This particular portion appears to relate to the *prolepses*, and it is part of a “proof” that we have an eternal soul:

Then before we began to see or hear or perceive in any way, we must have had a knowledge of absolute equality, or we could not have referred to that standard the equals which are derived from the senses?— for to that they all aspire, and of that they fall short.

And if we acquired this knowledge before we were born, and were born having the use of it, then we also knew before we were born and at the instant of birth not only the equal or the greater or the less, but all other ideas; for we are not speaking only of equality, but of beauty, goodness, justice, holiness, and of all which we stamp with the name of essence in the dialectical process, both when we ask and when we answer questions. Of all this we may certainly affirm that we acquired the knowledge before birth?

But if, after having acquired, we have not forgotten what in each case we acquired, then we must always have come into life having knowledge, and shall always continue to know as long as life lasts— for knowing is the acquiring and retaining knowledge and not forgetting. Is not forgetting, Simmias, just the losing of knowledge?

But if the knowledge which we acquired before birth was lost by us at birth, and if afterwards by the use of the senses we recovered what we previously knew, will not the process which we call learning be a recovering of the knowledge which is natural to us, and may not this be rightly termed recollection?

So much is clear— that when we perceive something, either by the help of sight, or hearing, or some other sense, from that perception we are able to obtain a notion of some other thing like or unlike which is associated with it but has been forgotten. Whence, as I was saying, one of two alternatives follows:— either we had this knowledge at birth, and continued to know through life; or, after birth, those who are said to learn only remember, and learning is simply recollection.

Then, Simmias, our souls must also have existed without bodies before they were in the form of man, and must have had intelligence.

Unless indeed you suppose, Socrates, that these notions are given us at the very moment of birth; for this is the only time which remains.

Yes, my friend, but if so, when do we lose them? for they are not in us when we are born— that is admitted. Do we lose them at the moment of receiving them, or if not at what other time?

No, Socrates, I perceive that I was unconsciously talking nonsense.

Then may we not say, Simmias, that if, as we are always repeating, there is an absolute beauty, and goodness, and an absolute essence of all things; and if to this, which is now discovered to have existed in our former state, we refer all our sensations, and with this compare them, finding these ideas to be pre-existent and our inborn possession— then our souls must have had a prior existence, but if not, there would be no force in the argument? There is the same proof that these ideas must have existed before we were born, as that our souls existed before we were born; and if not the ideas, then not the souls.

Edited from Plato: The Complete Works (31 Books) (p. 767-770). Titan Read Classics. Kindle Edition.

Does this passage add any clarity to how we can understand the *prolepses*? If we examine the opposite of everything Plato describes here, can we replicate a part of Epicurus' process of conceiving the *prolepses*?

I see in here a potential source for Diogenes Laertius' "cow explanation" of *prolepses* as things learned from repeated exposure, which would seem to reduce its credibility. Also the *eidola* would relate to this, and DeWitt's idea of a *prolepsis* as an embryonic notion or sketch of an idea. Then of course there's the fact that we have modern neuroscience to consider once we reach some sort of understanding of Epicurus' conception. I haven't had a chance to digest the full implications yet!

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2020 at 4:20 PM

Great point - Godfrey -- we discussed some of this in the podcast that we released today, and I definitely think you are on to something.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I see in here a potential source for Diogenes Laertius' "cow explanation" of prolepses as things learned from repeated exposure, which would seem to reduce its credibility. Also the eidola would relate to this, and DeWitt's idea of a prolepsis as an embryonic notion or sketch of an idea. Then of course there's the fact that we have modern neuroscience to consider once we reach some sort of understanding of Epicurus' conception. I haven't had a chance to digest the full implications yet!

And I agree with this too. It seems very obvious that what DL wrote about forming a concept of an ox from having seen previous oxen would be very parallel (or contradictory) to the view that concepts are born with us at birth, carried from a previous life.

So from that point of view, it is possible that at least this aspect of prolepsis could have a very direct connection and usefulness to the ancient Epicureans in responding to the Platonic "recollection" theory.

The first thought that comes to my mind is "Is it possible that serving as response to the Recollection theory is primarily or exclusively what the prolepsis theory was all about?"

Related to that would be - does this shed any light on whyt Lucretius does not seem to deal with either the recollection theory or prolepsis, at least to any great extent?

I agree with you that we need to give some hard thought to this. it seems to me almost no doubt that we need to incorporate this into some of our basic discussions of what prolepsis is about - or at least what DL thought it was about.

Edit: Additional point --> I've read a lot about Epicurean preconceptions from the commentators without having seen too much discussion comparing them to this aspect of Plato. It's as if only DeWitt was really interested in comparing Epicurus to Plato. Geesh.

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2020 at 4:25 PM

Godfrey also, if I recall what DeWitt had to say before going back and checking it, Dewitt drew what I think is an important distinction between abstract vs concrete concepts. A concept of a concrete thing like an ox is not necessarily the same thing as an abstraction such as "beauty" or "greatness" or "smallness." DL seems to focus on the concrete part, using the ox horse, cow, or man, as a reference -- concrete things.

Here's the section:

Quote

The concept they speak of as an apprehension or right opinion or thought or general idea stored within the mind, that is to say a recollection of what has often been presented from without, as for instance 'Such and such a thing is a man,' for the moment the word 'man' is spoken, immediately by means of the concept his form too is thought of, as the senses give us the information. Therefore the first signification of every name is immediate and clear evidence. And we could not look for the object of our search, unless we have first known it. For instance, we ask, 'Is that standing yonder a horse or a cow?' To do this we must know by means of a concept the shape of horse and of cow. Otherwise we could not have named them, unless we previously knew their appearance by means of a concept. So the concepts are clear and immediate evidence. Further, the decision of opinion depends on some previous clear and immediate evidence, to which we refer when we express it: for instance, 'How do we know whether this is a man?' Opinion they also call supposition, and say that it may be true or false: if it is confirmed or not contradicted, it is true ; if it is not confirmed or is contradicted, it is false. For this reason was introduced the notion of the problem awaiting confirmation: for example, waiting to come near the tower and see how it looks to the near view.

So that would lead us to question that he might be oversimplifying and that there might be separate viewpoints on "the formation of concepts of real-world things based on experience" which DL seems to be referring to vs "the formation of "universal eternal abstractions" which might not necessarily be the same thing.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 17, 2020 at 8:49 PM

Quote

The first thought that comes to my mind is "Is it possible that serving as response to the Recollection theory is primarily or exclusively what the prolepsis theory was all about?"

That definitely is the pertinent question!

I think you're right that there's a distinction between concepts of real world things and universal abstractions. There are a lot of details to review: when I get a chance I'd like to do a

point by point comparison between this *Phaedo* passage and what the pertinent Epicurean sources have to say. Time to make some lists... 🤔

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2020 at 10:26 PM

I can't imagine these being anything but closely related. Part of the trick will be separating the type of pattern match reasoning that a computer could do from the kind of inborn intuition or instinct that animals have at birth, which I also think related to the issue of "programming " of pleasure and pain. There is almost certainly some kind of mechanism at work which does not require prior experience for it to come into play. And yet there is also almost certainly a pattern match process which does involve experience. So there are several distinct issues or processes, and the Diogenes Laertius definition of prolepsis is almost certainly incomplete to cover them all. Viewed though from the perspective of a compiler who was looking to set up easy to grasp distinctions as he progressed through the different schools, it is easy to see how Laertius find this aspect natural to highlight.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 18, 2020 at 4:43 PM

This is my take on the main points. I'm putting words in Epicurus' mouth by using my own understanding.

1A. Plato: there is knowledge before birth of equality, beauty, goodness, justice, holiness; dialectic “essences.” This is not possible without an immortal soul.

1B. Epicurus: there is no immortal soul, therefore by Plato's logic there can be no "essences."

2A. Plato: knowledge obtained before birth is forgotten at birth but still exists in the memory of the soul, therefore “learning” is properly called “recollection.”

2B. Epicurus: the soul does not exist before birth, but we have an inborn faculty to recognize concepts (for example justice, truth). This is the faculty of prolepsis.

3A. Plato: when we perceive something through the senses, we obtain a notion of some other thing which is associated with it. This notion is in the memory of our immortal soul and thus is "recollection."

3B. Epicurus: through repeated exposure to something through the senses we are able to construct a concept of that thing using the faculty of prolepsis. This conceptualizing occurs after the birth of the perceiver.

Post by "Cassius" of October 18, 2020 at 5:15 PM

Godfrey I agree with most all of that. I can't yet cite the location in the texts (that was the purpose of my earlier comment on Aristotle) but it is my impression that the commentators are pretty uniform in associating the word "essence" with Aristotle vs use of the word "ideal" or "idea" or "form" with Plato. Definitely this is something that would be good to track down the cites - we may now have the best one for Plato, in Phaedo, but perhaps it appears other places too. I have not yet had time to do the same tracking on Aristotle.

One practical reason to firm up that distinction is that today there are significant numbers of Randians who will say that Aristotle and Plato were totally at odds with each other, but as I understand the final result, their placement of "essences" in a different location (some other world vs residing within the thing) is a distinction without a real difference.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 18, 2020 at 5:58 PM

Quote

And if we acquired this knowledge before we were born, and were born having the use of it, then we also knew before we were born and at the instant of birth not only the equal or the greater or the less, but all other ideas; **for we are not speaking only of equality, but of beauty, goodness, justice, holiness, and of all which we stamp with the name of essence in the dialectical process**, both when we ask and when we answer questions.

Quote

Then may we not say, Simmias, that if, as we are always repeating, **there is an absolute beauty, and goodness, and an absolute essence of all things**; and if to this, which is now discovered to have existed in our former state, we refer all our sensations, and with this compare them, finding these ideas to be pre-existent and our inborn possession— then our souls must have had a prior existence, but if not, there would be no force in the argument? There is the same proof that these ideas must have existed before we were born, as that our souls existed before we were born; and if not the ideas, then not the souls.

These are the cites of "essence" from the Phaedo passage above.

Post by “Cassius” of October 18, 2020 at 7:08 PM

Thanks Godfrey! This from the [wikipedia page for "essence"](#) is what I am remembering:

Ontological status

In his dialogues [Plato](#) suggests that concrete beings acquire their essence through their relations to "[Forms](#)"—abstract universals logically or ontologically separate from the objects of sense perception. These Forms are often put forth as the models or paradigms of which sensible things are "copies". When used in this sense, the word form is often capitalized.^[5] Sensible bodies are in constant flux and imperfect and hence, by Plato's reckoning, less real than the Forms which are eternal, unchanging and complete. Typical examples of Forms given by Plato are largeness, smallness, equality, unity, goodness, beauty and justice.

[Aristotle](#) moves the Forms of Plato to the nucleus of the individual thing, which is called *ousia* or substance. Essence is the *ti* of the thing, the *to ti en einai*. Essence corresponds to the *ousia*'s definition; essence is a real and physical aspect of the *ousia* (Aristotle, [Metaphysics](#), I).