

"Method And Evidence: On Epicurean Preconceptions" - Pierre-Marie Morel (2008)

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2021 at 8:52 AM

I have not had a chance to do more than scan this paper, and I can't begin to judge how much I agree or disagree with it, but it looks like a good addition to our collection of articles on Preconceptions:

<https://www.academia.edu/5775862/Method...=download-paper>

ABSTRACT

In this paper it is argued that preconception (*prolēpsis*), i.e., the general notion derived from sensation according to Epicurus, is the 'key concept' of the Epicurean methodology. Scholarly discussions have so far mainly focused on issues about the psychological status of *prolēpsis*, and the two main points of view traditionally held—preconception as a representation and preconception as a movement of thought—have seemed to be incompatible. I argue here that they are not and that preconception must be considered under both aspects, as a mental image as well as a movement of thought. However the most important point in Epicurus' agenda is the methodological status of preconception. It is not reducible to the single function of a basic concept that is necessary for any subsequent investigation. Preconception, in many occurrences, continues to operate as a criterion throughout the process of discovery, and not just as a point of departure. Thus, Epicurean preconception reconciles the immediateness of sensation and, more generally, of self-evidence with the rational mediation of method.

Epicureanism, like any empiricist philosophy, must confront the problem of the status of 'ideas,' whether these are understood as general notions, abstract representations, or simple thoughts. Since we grasp not only individuals (this cat, this tree here or that one there), but also classes or species (cats, of which that cat is an instance, trees in general), or again abstract notions (such as values), we necessarily grasp also 'ideas,' in the very broad sense that I am employing. This poses no problem of principle, since it is not necessary that such 'ideas' are innate ideas, or that they exist as such, separately from the mental act that grasps them, in the manner of Platonic ideas. It is enough that we agree on some use of the term.²

¹ Many thanks to David Konstan for his translation of the first version of this paper and for the stimulating discussions we have had on the epicurean preconception. I would also like to thank Mary Louise Gill, Erin Roberts and Dimitri El Murr for their remarks and the Anonymous Referee for her/his accurate reading and useful comments.

² As does John Locke at the beginning of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (I, I, Intr., § 8): "What 'Idea' stands for. Thus much I thought necessary to say concerning the occasion of this Inquiry into human Understanding. But, before I proceed on to what I have thought on this subject, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader for the frequent use of the word idea, which he will find in the following treatise. It being that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or

Also now in the Epicureanfriends file-base here: [Morel - "Method and Evidence: On Epicurean Preconception"](#)

Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2021 at 9:22 AM

It is possible, as some have suggested, that preconceptions, because they are the most natural and immediate or most basic notions, correspond to cases of 'confrontation' (περίπτωσις). The question is very difficult to resolve. However that may be, since all ἐπίνοια derive from sensations, we can say that each constitutes a kind of "memory of that which has frequently become evident externally," which is just what a preconception is. It is thus difficult to establish a clear distinction between preconceptions and other notions. In addition, although certain opinions, thoughts, or judgments are false, it seems that, for Epicurus, preconceptions are always true: (text [1]) "preconceptions are self-evident. And opinion depends on something prior and self-evident, which is our point of reference when we say, e.g., 'how do we know if this is a man?'" Preconception in this sense is a fundamental or primary 'idea' that is always true, because it is absolutely clear (ἐναργής), and that is common to all men. It is thus not surprising that the concept of preconception plays a central role in Epicurean doctrine, sometimes implicitly, but also explicitly, as the correct concept of the divine or of justice.

Unfortunately, Epicurus did not bequeath us a general treatment of preconception, and Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, which generally translates the Greek πρόληψις by *notitia* or *notities*, offers only rather dispersed comments on the matter.¹⁰ What we have is just a few paradigmatic cases (the gods, the just) where Epicurus makes use of the word πρόληψις, but without giving a clear definition of it. Furthermore, the psychological status of preconception is not entirely clear: the questions that I have posed above in a general way are relevant as well to the particular framework of Epicurean philosophy. They have given rise to highly divergent interpretations and there is no current consensus on the matter.

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