

Prolepsis of the gods

Post by “Rolf” of June 25, 2025 at 5:07 AM

After our discussion last Sunday, I’ve been thinking about prolepsis and the [epicurean gods](#). I’m currently listening to a podcast episode on the topic, and it was mentioned that that prolepsis of the gods perhaps unique in that it’s a prolepsis on something that is intelligible but not sensible. This made me think about how this could be.

Perhaps it’s not about the gods actually existing, but merely the fact that when humans have a telos (pleasure, in this case), it is a natural feature of our minds to consider the pinnacle of that telos; in this case, a perfectly incorruptible and tranquil being, that is to say, a god.

Post by “Don” of June 25, 2025 at 7:01 AM

There's also the prolepsis of justice which doesn't physically exist but "we know it when we *see* it." That one, I've taken to be akin to the innate sense of fairness exhibited by various animals, ex.

<https://youtu.be/meiU6TxysCg?si=TnEwk2LCbupBEaVZ>

Post by “Rolf” of June 25, 2025 at 7:36 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

There's also the prolepsis of justice which doesn't physically exist but "we know it when we *see* it." That one, I've taken to be akin to the innate sense of fairness exhibited by various animals, ex.

<https://youtu.be/meiU6TxysCg?si=TnEwk2LCbupBEaVZ>

Hmm, the concept of an innate justice feels a bit iffy to me, too close to objective morality. Didn't Epicurus say something about how justice is only a social contract in which we agree to neither harm nor be harmed? How does this mesh with the idea of a prolepsis of justice?

Perhaps I'm misunderstanding something.

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2025 at 8:17 AM

I will write more in response to Rolf's question but my first comment would be that I think most of us agree that a prolepsis comes before any opinion or conclusion. So anytime the statement is something like "sharing food is fair" that is a conclusion and not a prolepsis.

If prolepsis is a PRE-conception, I would describe it more as "the ability to recognize that an issue is involved." The monkeys recognize that there is an unequal distribution of food in this example, but that in itself does not tell us or them what a "fair" distribution of food would be.

Lucretius argues that the gods could not have created the universe because it makes no sense that the gods had any inkling of the possibility of any kind of universe at all until there was first a universe of a kind to serve as an example from which they could recognize a pattern.

Further, the [principal doctrines](#) make clear that even "justice" is a very fluid concept, and that what appears to be just at one moment can be unjust at the next if circumstances change -- and that includes compacts not to harm or be harmed, which not all are even willing or able to make in the first place. We can recognize that justice as an issue exists, but we don't know what is just or unjust with evaluating in our reasoning minds particular contextual facts.

So the reason prolepsis is not an "objective morality" - I would say - is that prolepsis has no "objective" content (opinion, conclusion) within it. To say that the monkeys have prolepsis of justice does not mean that Nature gives them a correct conclusion as to whether they are getting a fair or just amount of food.

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2025 at 8:50 AM

Maybe an even better example would be lower organisms - all the way down to single cell amoeba. We would not expect - and do not associate in our minds - the actions of amoeba in competing for food to be just or unjust. We do not expect that amoeba have any appreciation at all for such issues, and for amoeba no justice or injustice exists.

Somewhere up the line of advancement living things become capable of "thinking," and at some point they begin to appreciate that there is an issue or question involved in their

relationships to other living beings. Somewhere in that range they begin to have "prolepsis of justice" which allows them to even begin considering that their relationships with other living beings might be divided into categories of relationships, and they begin to consider whether one type of relationship is more productive for them than another type of relationship. At that point they begin to consider some things "just" and other things "unjust" - but those are just words that we assign to the concept. I would say that you are long past the "prolepsis" stage at that point.

But if the "prolepsis" of justice or gods did not exist, we would never begin considering or discussing those concepts in the first place.

It's much better in my view to start analyzing prolepsis from the point of view of philosophy and the Meno problem than it is to start with some particular clinical phenomena (like monkeys or beavers) and try to analyze the issue in terms of specific animals or their conclusions. Otherwise you just transfer to the monkeys the same question we ask about ourselves: "Where does the whole idea of "justice" come from in the first place?"

Post by “Rolf” of June 25, 2025 at 8:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But if the "prolepsis" of justice or gods did not exist, we would never begin considering or discussing those concepts in the first place.

Why doesn't this argument apply to things we don't have a prolepsis of, such as atoms? If we don't have a prolepsis of atoms (which I agree we don't), how could we begin considering or discussing the concept? And why doesn't the answer to that question also work for gods or justice?

Post by “Cassius” of June 25, 2025 at 9:25 AM

I think most here agree that we don't have a prolepsis of atoms.

I would also say myself that your question is why DeWitt argues that Diogenes Laertius' description of prolepsis (examples as to humans and oxen) is at best incomplete and at worst just wrong as a description of prolepsis. And as you know DeWitt concludes that Cicero's

understanding of the issue as expressed through Velleius (as something that exists BEFORE an individual's first exposure to an example) is much more accurate.

Our process of concluding that atoms exist is outlined at length by Lucretius in Book One. We come to the conclusion that atoms exist through deductive reasoning about things that we do see exist. I would say that is just how we come to the concept of humans and oxen as well. Our senses (trustworthy as without opinion, just like prolepsis) tell us that bodies in general exist. It is our minds that have to use reasoning to deduce the categories from atom to human and everything in between into which we place those bodies and assign names to them. As to the assignment of names that too arises from nature in the trial and error experience of men, and there is no god-given assignment of classes or names to them.

As to gods (divinity) or justice however, the two best-documented examples in the major surviving texts, those are more in the nature of abstractions of which we never touch or "see" or smell or hear examples directly. That is why deductive reasoning alone does not work for gods and justice. Did we not have some kind of faculty for recognizing the patterns involved, our five senses would never recognize that these relationships / abstractions exist.

Post by "TauPhi" of June 25, 2025 at 9:26 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But if the "prolepsis" of justice or gods did not exist, we would never begin considering or discussing those concepts in the first place.

In similar fashion we could argue that if prolepsis of unicorns did not exist, we would never be able to talk about unicorns. Unicorns, justice and gods are complex concepts that we understand by the act of reasoning. Pre-concepts are simple patterns - building blocks which are used by the act of reasoning to create complex concepts. Prolepsis of gods or prolepsis of justice is an oxymoron. It's like saying simplicity of complexity.

We can talk about unicorns easily because we combine plethora of patterns we can merge by the act of thinking to understand unicorns as a concept. In similar fashion we can easily talk about 'duocorns', 'tricorn' or 'quadrocorns'. No-one reading this post has ever heard about such creatures but everyone can easily imagine these because everyone has developed sufficient amount of patterns to be able to comprehend such complex concepts. The same process applies to justice and gods.

Post by “Cassius” of June 25, 2025 at 9:51 AM

Rolf, TauPhi's post is a useful example of how on an issue like this where there is fragmentary or even conflicting evidence with which to work, different people are going to come to different conclusions, and each person in the end has to reach their own conclusion pending discovery of more texts.

I gather Tau Phi is saying that the same process that applies to unicorns applies to gods and justice. I would disagree. I would argue that a unicorn is an example of a concept/idea that arises from combining examples of horses with examples of horned animals, and that thus something very different is involved in abstractions such as justice or divinity.

This is why I argue the starting point for analysis should be the alleged paradox of Meno and the assertions of Plato.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 25, 2025 at 12:49 PM

Could we say that prolepsis is an inborn ability that is required for reasoning - prolepsis is the ability to have pattern recognition. Because of prolepsis, the monkeys (in post 2 video above) know the difference between cucumbers and grapes. Then what happens next...they must be applying some level of reasoning - they remember that in the past they observed a repeated pattern of sharing out the same thing and they came to expect that to happen...but when it didn't happen it felt "wrong" to them.

If they had always each received something different from their first earliest experience, then perhaps they would have been conditioned to accept the difference.

So perhaps the experiment is flawed.

Post by “Cassius” of June 25, 2025 at 1:04 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Could we say that prolepsis is an inborn ability that is required for reasoning - prolepsis is the ability to have pattern recognition.

I think that's a pretty logical conclusion. Calling it "ability to have pattern recognition" does not presume that the mind already has in it the particular patterns that are to be recognized. The problem comes when we begin to think (and there is a great temptation to do so) that some *particular* pattern is inborn within us at birth.

I think most of us agree that we are not a "blank slate," but describing what it is that IS inborn is hard to do. Lucretius gives examples of how different animals have different temperaments, and that's somewhere in the ballpark, but there might not be much better way than to just call it "the ability to have pattern recognition."

To repeat, this is an area where we should welcome back and forth discussion and debate and exploration of options from anyone who's looked into the issues at all.

3-288

Moreover the mind possesses that heat, which it dons when it boils with rage, and the fire flashes more keenly from the eyes. Much cold breath too it has, which goes along with fear, and starts a shuddering in the limbs and stirs the whole frame. And it has too that condition of air lulled to rest, which comes to pass when the breast is calm and the face unruffled. But those creatures have more of heat, whose fiery heart and passionate mind easily boils up in anger. Foremost in this class is the fierce force of lions, who often as they groan break their hearts with roaring, and cannot contain in their breast the billows of their wrath. But the cold heart of deer is more full of wind, and more quickly it rouses the chilly breath in its flesh, which makes a shuddering motion start in the limbs. But the nature of oxen draws its life rather from calm air, nor ever is the smoking torch of anger set to it to rouse it overmuch, drenching it with the shadow of murky mist, nor is it pierced and frozen by the chill shafts of fear: it has its place midway between the two, the deer and the raging lions.

3-307

So is it with the race of men. However much training gives some of them an equal culture, yet it leaves those first traces of the nature of the mind of each. Nor must we think that such maladies can be plucked out by the roots, but that one man will more swiftly fall into bitter anger, another be a little sooner assailed by fear, while a third will take some things more gently than is right. And in many other things it must needs be that the diverse natures of men differ, and the habits that follow thereon; but I cannot now set forth the secret causes of these, nor discover names for all the shapes of the first atoms, whence arises this variety in things. One thing herein I see that I can affirm, that so small are the traces of these natures left, which

reason could not dispel for us, that nothing hinders us from living a life worthy of the gods.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 25, 2025 at 6:24 PM

[Cassius](#) would you refresh my memory on the particular paradox of Meno that you're referring to?

Post by “Joshua” of June 25, 2025 at 6:30 PM

Meno asks Socrates:[20][21]

- "And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?"

Socrates rephrases the question, which has come to be the canonical statement of Meno's paradox or the paradox of inquiry:[20][22]

- "[A] man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire."

— translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1871

From Wikipedia ^

Post by “Cassius” of June 25, 2025 at 7:12 PM

Thanks Joshua.

Godfrey we have a discussion thread on it here:

Thread

Prolepsis / Anticipations As Epicurus' Answer to the MENO Problem

We definitely need to keep working on making prolepsis / anticipations understandable to normal people of ordinary education. In reading a 2023 work which @Matteng brought to our attention, I want to highlight the following passage passage to the effect that both Epicureans and Stoics looked to (their own) view of PROLEPSIS as the answer to "the Meno Problem."

We haven't yet gotten to the Epicurean sections of Cicero's Academica, but that's on the horizon for our podcast. By the time we get...



Cassius

October 31, 2024 at 1:20 PM

But we really need our own extended treatment of exactly what it involved.

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2025 at 7:20 PM

If I recall correctly the first video in the following post is very good:

Post

RE: Prolepsis / Anticipations As Epicurus' Answer to the MENO Problem

So far this video by Matthew Lampert is the best I have found setting forth Meno's issue. There is also a Greg Sadler video on this one, and I will link it below, but I don't consider it as good as the first one. I'll keep looking for a better video that sets out the basic issue.

Matthew Lampert: if you only watch one video, watch this one:

youtu.be/yXKnS7YXOv4

Greg Sadler:

youtu.be/QrIYClniEHc



Cassius

October 31, 2024 at 6:15 PM

This sets up that the entire issue is a sort of logic problem, and if prolepsis is a response to it as it appears to be, that shows that the theory of prolepsis has its root in a deductive logic chain just like atoms do.

[EDIT: I changed that last sentence to add "the theory of prolepsis." I would say that: "Atomism" is a theory that describes in general terms what atoms are without giving us every detail; atoms themselves are real. "Prolepsis" is a theory that describes a faculty that allows us to recognize patterns without explaining every detail of the process, but the individual experiences of prolepsis are not just a theory but really exist.]

And that's why I keep saying that we shouldn't be looking at this primarily in terms of human biology. Yes the exploration of human biology will give us validation that the conceptual framework makes sense, but just like Epicurean atomism is a framework rather than a blueprint that we can take and immediately start building molecules and planetary systems, prolepsis is not going to be something that immediately lets us start decoding the workings of the brain. Prolepsis is a logical theory that shows to us that knowledge is possible and gives us justification for dismissing the Platonic arguments and moving forward with science at whatever pace we find appropriate. That's a hugely important achievement that should not be underestimated, even if it doesn't *immediately* lead to a pill to take for depression or mental illness.. To judge prolepsis to be lousy psychology would be just as unfair and inappropriate as to judge Epicurus to be a lousy builder of nuclear reactors.

Post by "Godfrey" of June 25, 2025 at 7:54 PM

That Meno certainly was a cheeky bugger! At any rate, I seem to have completely missed this, and to my detriment. Thanks!

Post by "Rolf" of June 26, 2025 at 3:59 AM

I've got to be honest, I don't really understand Meno's paradox and how it's helpful in the context of Epicurean philosophy. I just watched Matthew Lampert's video, and while it was helpful in understanding what Socrates/Plato believed, I disagree fundamentally with the

premises of the paradox and I don't see why it's something that needs to be solved to move forward.

I can know a bit about something (for instance, I know that I want to feel good), but not know anything about how to accomplish that, but still find out about Epicurean philosophy through online research for instance. I can be completely unaware of something but find out about it from a friend and then go on to study it. It really feels like sophistry detached from real life.

Even when Epicurus takes the solution to prolepsis (which makes a lot more sense than Socrates' solution obviously), I still don't see why I would need some kind of preconception of something in order to learn about it. I can learn about the concept of a god from somebody else, and maybe the first person to believe in a god did so because they thought it was a reasonable conclusion as to why natural phenomena behave the way they do. I also don't see how "knowing" something means we have no need to "enquire" about it. It's not like knowing and unknowing is some binary state.

Independent of Meno's paradox, I feel I have some grasp of prolepsis now. I keep going back to the honeybee example: Bees aren't *just* pleasure-pursuing machines, they have some built-in "rules" they follow. They collect pollen, they live in a hive. On the same token, humans have patterns that they're naturally drawn to, and the human-animal thus has different things that are necessary for happiness than other animals. It's clear to me that we're not just born as blank-slates left to pursue pleasure with no guidelines.

Beyond this though, and assuming my understanding here is correct, I'm very much lost on this topic.

Post by "Cassius" of June 26, 2025 at 6:58 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I've got to be honest, I don't really understand Meno's paradox and how it's helpful in the context of Epicurean philosophy.

The issue of skepticism is a huge one, and it is fundamental to the conflict between the schools.

But let me address something in particular as it may apply to all your comment in that post: Many people see Epicurus as a self-help therapist for whom it is a given that being "happy" is the goal, with the only question being what techniques to follow to achieve happiness.

I would say this is basic misunderstanding of what Epicurus is all about. Yes, understanding how to properly pursue happiness will follow in the end from Epicurus' insights, but that is not the place you have to start. As Diogenes of Oinoanda says, the question is not the "means" of happiness, but "What is happiness?" in the first place.

Plato's cave analogy is famous because it dramatizes the contention of the Platonists (and the rest) that human life is lived in the dark with only unreliable flickers of evidence that we can't trust. Such people therefore contend that we therefore ultimately need to trust in the gods and their gift of esoteric logic in order to understand the truth. These people say that we are a supernatural creation and that we ultimately need to live a life of hard-coded virtue in order to live life properly.

So the very first issue is whether we as humans are even capable of understanding anything to be true. All the other major Greek schools held that we cannot do so without some form of "logic" that transcends the senses and our natural abilities as the core of the way forward. Even today we are confronted with Abrahamism which says essentially the same thing, just more explicitly based on religion.

Just as with atomism which is needed to understand physics, Epicurus needed a framework for understanding the way humans think -- a way that we *can* legitimately determine which things are true and which are not. If you are convinced from the beginning that truth is impossible to find, you will eventually give up trying, and that is what Epicurus is finding.

Remember, Epicurus started out as a philosopher because he rejected the theories of chaos and he wanted a framework that he could believe to be true. He is primarily a philosopher, not a therapist, and while he is happy to build a therapy on top of the philosophy, Epicurus says that it would be better to believe the myths of the religions than to give in to hard core determinism, which is itself a kind of skepticism. If Epicurus had concluded that the evidence supports that a supernatural god and heaven really did exist, Epicurus would have embraced it, because his primary concern is truth, not taking a pleasure pill. You don't know for sure that pleasure is the appropriate guide until you've taken a firm position on the basic constitution of the universe, and you can't take a firm position on the basic constitution of the universe until you have confidence that taking a firm position of any kind on any subject is possible.

The point I would stress is that the friction and conflict between the schools is real and essential to recognize. Epicurus was practical enough to see that he had to engage in that conflict if he wanted his school to be successful, to reach more people with its message, and to survive that conflict without being run out of town, as he himself had been in Mytilene.

The primary weapons used against Epicurus were skepticism and determinism, as they remain today. A theory of knowledge, of which prolepsis is an important part (but not the whole) is essential to being confident of anything, and to fighting back against those weapons that are being used against us. You can't have confidence that skepticism and determinism are wrong without a proper theory of knowledge.

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 10:12 AM

Thanks for your response Cassius. Your point about Epicurus being a philosopher first is an important one for sure, though I’ll admit I’m a little confused on how it all relates back to prolepsis and Meno’s paradox. I do see what you’re saying about how a theory of knowledge and an understanding that we *can* truly know something is importantly, however.

Let me ask you this: How does prolepsis help defend against skepticism and allow us to be confident in our knowledge?

Additionally, why is prolepsis necessary for us to know certain things? Isn’t it possible that we simply learn them from experience? I get that Epicurus had to respond to Meno’s paradox, but why didn’t he simply disagree with the whole premise that we need to have some foreknowledge of something in order to know it?

Please let me know if I’m misunderstanding something!

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 10:16 AM

On second thoughts, I see what you mean by “Epicurus was a philosopher first” in this context: Something like prolepsis is an important concept within the overarching philosophy even if it doesn’t directly relate to happiness or maximising pleasure. I agree with you on this, and my example of “I know that I want to feel good” was just an example of how I don’t need to know about something fully in order to enquire about it - it was not me saying that Epicurus’ philosophy is only about “the means of happiness”!

The rest, however, I am still unsure about.

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 10:40 AM

I am sure others will have suggestions but let me take a stab at it:

[Quote from Rolf](#)

How does prolepsis help defend against skepticism and allow us to be confident in our knowledge?

It provides a framework which points to both a starting point for knowledge and way of expressing how we get to the point of concluding that some things are right and some things are wrong. Epicurus is constantly looking back to the ultimate questions of the universe, such as whether the universe is eternal in time or infinite in size or has any supernatural elements. If you can't point to a mechanism through which conceptual thinking began to be accumulated by living beings, then you are left with the concern that all this - including our thought processes - have been supernaturally created. I would say that prolepsis does for human thought what atomism does for pure physics - it provides a non-supernatural framework of analysis, and then it's up to us to go from there to understand more about atoms and more about the brain. But if you don't have such a framework, then many people will decide just to go with the flow of the gods and never challenge the orthodoxy. When you have conceptual framework for the development of concepts and truth that makes sense, you can confidently dismiss radical skepticism and have confidence in those things that you can hold to be true, vs those that are false and those where you have to "wait" and accept alternative possibilities until you have more information.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Additionally, why is prolepsis necessary for us to know certain things? Isn't it possible that we simply learn them from experience? I get that Epicurus had to respond to Meno's paradox, but why didn't he simply disagree with the whole premise that we need to have some foreknowledge of something in order to know it?

Because there is a root of truth to the question being asked in Meno. How do you conclude that you are "Right" about something if you don't already know what "right" is? How much experience is enough in order to be confident about something? Ultimately there has to be a framework in which you take a position on how much experience, and what kind of experience, is enough.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Something like prolepsis is an important concept within the overarching philosophy even if it doesn't directly relate to happiness or maximising pleasure.

Well of course I would say that it is absolutely essential to both happiness and maximizing pleasure 😊 unless you are confident that pleasure and happiness should be your goal, and that you are pursuing them correctly, then you will be plagued with doubt and all the problems that doubt creates

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 12:47 PM

Much appreciated! I'll be reading and re-reading your response a few times before fully grasping the ideas I'm sure.

In the meantime, a follow-up question:

How does prolepsis help to disprove that “all this - including our thought processes - have been supernaturally created”? From what I understand, prolepsis just describes instances of in-built knowledge, right? But not where those preconceptions come from? Couldn't a supernatural believer still just respond, “well those preconceptions come from god”?

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 12:51 PM

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! 😞

Post by “DaveT” of June 26, 2025 at 2:46 PM

Have I missed something? I tend to think that the prolepsis discussed by Epicurus was based on a limitation of his access to modern science 2,300 years ago. I think it is becoming clearer that a conception that you can know something before you apprehend it, or use your senses to learn it, is not how we know things.

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 4:41 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

How does prolepsis help to disprove that “all this - including our thought processes - have been supernaturally created”? From what I understand, prolepsis just describes instances of in-built knowledge, right? But not where those preconceptions come from? Couldn't a supernatural believer still just respond, “well those preconceptions come from god”?

It "disproves" a supernatural basis for thought processes by providing a rational non-supernatural basis for understanding what we observe to be the case in the way people think and make decisions, without resorting to pre--existence or other supernatural arguments. This is very parallel to atomism, which provides a non-supernatural basis for the way the world works. In both cases you're now asking how atomism or prolepsis/canonics "disprove" the supernatural, and the answer to that has to come down to your conclusions about what kind of proof is possible and what is required. If you fall into the belief that only god can provide certainty, then you can never meet that standard -- but there is no reason to accept that supernatural standard in the first place. This is an issue far beyond the prolepsis alone and falls under general canonicity, but prolepsis is an important part.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

Have I missed something? I tend to think that the prolepsis discussed by Epicurus was based on a limitation of his access to modern science 2,300 years ago. I think it is becoming clearer that a conception that you can know something before you apprehend it, or use your senses to learn it, is not how we know things.

Others may agree with you DaveT, but speaking only for myself I don't think Epicurus would have cared any more what science today says than we should care about what science in 4500 AD will say. We can only live our lives with the information that we have. Epicurus knew that using the word "prolepsis" does not convey all the details of thought, just as he knew that talking about "atoms" doesn't explain all the workings of the human body.

It seems clear that prolepsis was considered to be an advanced topic, and that's why it is not explained at length in Epicurus' letters or in Lucretius.

As to "a conception that you can know something before you apprehend it, or use your senses to learn it, is not how we know things" I don't think that this gets to the heart of the issue. I think the best way to get to that is to read some of the material on the Meno paradox, as that sets out the logical dilemma that Plato was trying to throw in the way of any philosophy based on the senses. To me the prolepsis issue is geared toward that debate, and I suspect that it leads to a lot of spinning wheels to read something "clinical" into it that will improve day to day pleasure/pain decisionmaking.

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 4:51 PM

Cassius, could you perhaps give some more everyday examples of prolepsis? I seem to be misunderstanding what it is at a basic level. Is it incorrect, for instance, that the idea of god itself is a prolepsis, and instead that the *capability* of believing gods exist is a prolepsis? I feel it would be helpful for me to go back to the “ground floor” and define what prolepsis actually is.

Post by “Rolf” of June 26, 2025 at 5:10 PM

If I’m understanding correctly, Epicurus says that prolepsis is a universal guide or criterion that leads us to the knowledge that (among other things) the gods are blessed and incorruptible.

However, many gods that were and are worshipped are violent, jealous etc. Zeus, for example. To this, Epicurus writes:

Quote

For the sayings of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions.

Isn’t this essentially the same as saying, “prolepsis is a universal criterion, except when it isn’t”? On what basis is he able to dismiss these exceptions to his claim as errors?

Post by “Don” of June 26, 2025 at 5:15 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! 😞

The HUGE problem is that there are not a lot of surviving texts that speak specifically to prolepsis. That's one reason [Bryan](#) 's compiling uses of the word and related words is so helpful, seeing the word/s in context.

There are a VARIED number of interpretations of prolepsis, starting as far back as Cicero! I don't know whether we'll ever have the concept from an Epicurean perspective definitively described.

That said, with due respect to [Cassius](#) and others bringing in Meno and the theory of knowledge, I ****personally**** see prolepsis, ancient concepts of memory formation, the workings of the *psykhē* (mind/soul), to be of tangential importance to applying Epicurus' philosophy in the modern world to my way of living. I find the investigations that the ancients dealt in and how they arrived at their findings of fascinating intellectual curiosity. But *eidola* do not grind grooves into my *psykhē* to make subsequent similar *eidola* easier to intercept. Brains don't work that way.

What Epicurus does give me is a firm commitment to finding physical causes completely devoid of woo-woo. It might not be *eidola* and *psykhē*, but it is a physical, natural, material cause to my memories, thought, and other mental processes. The Letter to Pythocles is a testament to finding material, physical causes to phenomena.

So, I don't get hung up on the specific details taught in the ancient school; but I think there are principles that are directly applicable from then to now.

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 5:17 PM

Rolf: Try this analogy:

What is an example of a sight? What is an example of a hearing? What is an example of a smell? You can describe a tree or a song or a flower at a conceptual level, but that is not the question. Trees and songs and flowers are complex conceptual conclusions.

Prolepsis is a faculty, not an idea or a conclusion.

The sense of smell is given to us by nature and we use it all the time without understanding or caring about its nature, so this is an example of a faculty that gives us input to knowledge, but not knowledge itself.

Anytime you can state an idea as a proposition, such as "there is a god" you are already past the proleptic stage, in my opinion.

And so Velleius does not really reference, to my understanding, "a prolepsis of a god." Rather, he is saying that we have a proleptic faculty which disposes us to thoughts which leads to the idea of a god, just as we have a nose which functions in a way that gives us input into a final conception of a flower.

Now, if what you are really focusing on is the proof of the existence of a god, then it's my view that that proof goes far beyond just prolepsis. I think that's why Velleius then goes on to talk about isonomia, because the particular concept of a particular type of god is another issue for chain reasoning that incorporates other issues, such as the infinity and eternality of the universe and that nature never makes a single thing of a kind.

So the ground floor is back at the point of realizing that prolepsis is a faculty parallel with seeing or hearing or pleasure or pain. It reacts in particular predisposed ways, but it does not itself provide content.

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 5:28 PM

Also, most of us think in terms of prolepsis being related to pattern recognition.

Think about if you were programming a computer to do pattern recognition. In addition to the camera and microphone (equivalents of eyes and ears) you would need some kind of software mechanism to take those inputs and detect recognizable patterns. Without that software mechanism the input of the camera and microphone would mean nothing. But the detection itself cannot be a set of pre-programmed patterns to match against - else those would be "innate ideas." We're talking something more akin to "AI" that can assemble patterns into ever-increasing layers of complexity.

But the faculty of prolepsis is the assembly process, not any particular pattern that is detected or assembled.

And in case we haven't mentioned this recently, a conclusion can be based in part on a prolepsis and still be wrong, Faculties are never true or false, but the conclusions we draw based on them can be. That's part of the explanation for how people can come to so many incorrect conclusions about the gods, even though everyone has their own faculty of prolepsis.

Post by “Bryan” of June 26, 2025 at 7:09 PM

I would say that the prolepseis are our '*mental* sense.'

I agree we are talking about a faculty. But what is *any* sense or faculty without an object? Sight means little without reference to what one sees.

A *pre-thought* visual sense occurs when we visually focus on an external impression, and a *pre-thought* mental sense (a prolepsis) occurs when we mentally focus on an internal impression.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

A conclusion can be based in part on a prolepsis and still be wrong, Faculties are never true or false, but the conclusions we draw based on them can be.

Well said, and very important to keep in mind.

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 8:03 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

That said, with due respect to Cassius and others bringing in Meno and the theory of knowledge, I ****personally**** see prolepsis, ancient concepts of memory formation, the workings of the *psykhē* (mind/soul), to be of tangential importance to applying Epicurus' philosophy in the modern world to my way of living. I find the investigations that the ancients dealt in and how they arrived at their findings of fascinating intellectual curiosity. But *eidola* do not grind grooves into my *psykhē* to make subsequent similar *eidola* easier to intercept. Brains don't work that way.

Yes Rolf, it's important to realize that not everyone here has the same focus and goals. Some of us are more interested in our own personal lives, and some of us are more interested in reconstructing the system for longer-term societal applications. These goals can be complementary and there is no reason for them to be in conflict, but you don't want to let yourself get whipsawed between the two perspectives.

To date we have had a small enough group that most everyone who has posted regularly has participated in most every conversation. But it's not necessary for those who aren't worried about competition between the schools to worry about the competitive angles, nor do the "evangelicals" need to look down on the "therapists." Each person can decide for themselves which aspects they are interested in and pursue those. If you are anyone reading this doesn't feel that prolepsis is something that interests you, there's no need to force yourself down a path that doesn't seem to be leading anywhere to that person. On the other hand canonic is

an example of a hotly-debated topic that Epicurus himself thought to be important.

Post by “Cassius” of June 27, 2025 at 6:02 AM

Rolf to drop back to Don's comment in [post 28](#) and his earlier comment about pleasures that you "get out of the way from," I've thought of another example of a type of pleasure that I think is applicable:

In addition to Epicurus saying that he [found his own peace chiefly in the study of nature](#), which I would say clearly includes the philosophical debates about nature which we are discussing, there is another very good example in the opening of Book 2 of Lucretius:

Quote from Munro Version

2-01

It is sweet, when on the great sea the winds trouble its waters, to behold from land another's deep distress; not that it is a pleasure and delight that any should be afflicted, but because it is sweet to see from what evils you are yourself exempt. It is sweet also to look upon the mighty struggles of war arrayed along the plains without sharing yourself in the danger. But nothing is more welcome than to hold the lofty and serene positions well fortified by the learning of the wise, from which you may look down upon others and see them wandering all abroad and going astray in their search for the path of life, see the contest among them of intellect, the rivalry of birth, the striving night and day with surpassing effort to struggle up to the summit of power and be masters of the world.

O wretched are the thoughts of men! How blind their souls! In what dark roads they grope their way, in what distress is this life spent, short as it is! Don't you see Nature requires no more than the body free from pain, that she may enjoy the mind easy and cheerful, removed from care and fear?

I would equate understanding the implication and the solution to radical skepticism in general, of which the Meno Paradox is part, to a good example of a part of what Lucretius is referring to as causing the wandering and going astray in the path of life. I say this from the point of view that you can't be confident that Nature does in fact no more than pleasure over pain, and you can't be removed from care and fear, if you don't think it is possible to be confident that these things are true, and that supernatural control and eternal punishment are false.

Now again - not everyone is bothered by the claims of philosophical skepticism or sees the immediate relevance to them. If they are not so bothered, then more power to them, but we likely would not have Epicurean philosophy to talk about in the first place if Epicurus and Metrodorus and Hermarchus and Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda and Philodemus had *not* been bothered by them.

Post by “Don” of June 27, 2025 at 8:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Now again - not everyone is bothered by the claims of philosophical skepticism or sees the immediate relevance to them. If they are not so bothered, then more power to them, but we likely would not have Epicurean philosophy to talk about in the first place if Epicurus and Metrodorus and Hermarchus and Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda and Philodemus had not been bothered by them.

In light of this excerpt above and others' reactions to my post, I feel I need to define my position a little more.

Do I feel that having a strong argument against radical skepticism (and superstition and religion and other anti-Epicurean positions) is important? Absolutely! This is one of the through-lines from the establishment of Epicurus' school down to the present day. Epicurus didn't wall himself away from the world. He vigorously engaged with the ideas circulating in his day, and modern Epicureans are called to the same.

Religion, skepticism, superstition, et. al. do a terrible amount of damage, both to individuals and to society in general. Am I bothered that many of the hoi polloi are in the grip of superstition, ignorance of natural science, etc.? Of course!!

And this little corner of the Internet - Our little boat of the SS EpicureanFriends - is one way to make authoritative material available "out there" in the market of ideas and to welcome passengers aboard.

What I don't want to get uptight about are the *details* of 2,000+ year old physics.

Is Epicurus onto something with his Canonics, his Theory of Knowledge? Absolutely! Otherwise, I wouldn't be on this forum or be thinking of myself as an "Epicurean." Is it necessary to have confidence in the truth of a REAL existing physical world with which we can interact in a meaningful way and not believe it is some pale reflection of a Realm of Ideal Forms or the "proving ground" for an after-death existence or some other lesser-than existence? Absolutely!

And Epicurus' grounding the truth of our reality - our existence - in the use of our natural physical and mental senses/sensations and feelings provides a bedrock, fundamental ground on which to stand. There IS an external physical universe with which we interact. There are a number of modern philosophies dressed up as science that need to be counteracted today, including "we live in a simulation" "we are constantly hallucinating" etc. As modern Epicureans, I firmly believe we need to understand the workings of the mind to be able to counteract these philosophies. Do I have a good grasp of their arguments? No, no I do not. There aren't enough hours in the day for me to read everything I want to read and do everything i want to do. But should I get anxious and frustrated and be in pain? Nope. I'll do what I can do. That's one reason I like the accessible style of Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett's popular books and those of others.

Epicurus was *brilliant* in his devising possible causes for vision, for memory, for hearing, for constructing mental pictures in our minds, for applications of "atomic" theory, but he was a human being living 2,000+ years ago with a brilliant mind but limited access to information. Understanding HIS arguments against radical skepticism and superstition should fully inform the style of our own arguments and inspire modern Epicureans to combat ignorance and superstition and religious dogmatism in our own day as he did in his.

Post by “Don” of June 27, 2025 at 1:18 PM

Along those lines, I offer my commentary on dogmatic vs skeptic:

[Epicurean Sage - Declare their beliefs and not remain in doubt](#)

Hicks: He will be a dogmatist but not a mere sceptic; Yonge: he will pronounce dogmas, and will express no doubts; Mensch: He will assert his opinions and will...
sites.google.com

Quote

With those two options available, being a dogmatist or being a skeptic, it seems to me that the significance is that one path leads to declaring that knowledge can be known, that it is possible to "take a stand" on what can be known about reality. The other path leaves one "puzzled," "in want of knowledge.," or simply letting problems remain without resolving them or at least proposing solutions. The second path implies that we can't really know anything. Epicurus was opposed to this idea wholeheartedly.

Post by “Patrikios” of June 27, 2025 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Additionally, why is prolepsis necessary for us to know certain things? Isn't it possible that we simply learn them from experience?

[Rolf](#),

I love the questions you bring to this topic of prolepsis. As I understand from [Bryan](#) list of English translations of the Greek **prolepsis**, included ‘**comprehension**’. Experience is essential to learning, but leaves out the other capabilities nature gives humans to achieve deeper levels of understanding & comprehension..

As a senior struggling through many years of experience, trying to become wise, I have come see prolepsis as enabling a ‘whole-body comprehension’ of whatever objects or concepts. The pattern recognition matching occurs across all sensory data that links together myriad related information. I first read of this type of learning in Robert Heinlein’s ‘**Stranger in a Strange Land**’ - where he learns to “grok” something or someone.

*“To **grok** it, understand it so thoroughly that you merge with it and it merges with you. “*

“**Grok** means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed — to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience. It means almost everything that we mean by religion, philosophy, and science and it means as little to us as color does to a blind man.”

[Grok - Wikipedia](#)

So, it maybe Heinlein’s grok appears to describe some aspects of proleptic comprehension.

Post by “Rolf” of June 28, 2025 at 3:43 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And so Velleius does not really reference, to my understanding, "a prolepsis of a god." Rather, he is saying that we have a proleptic faculty which disposes us to thoughts which leads to the idea of a god, just as we have a nose which functions in a way that

gives us input into a final conception of a flower.

Hmm, I think I get where you're coming from. A bee is not born knowing what a flower is and how to make honey, but they have the proleptic faculty to do these things without having to learn them from scratch through experience. Am I on the right track?

Post by "Rolf" of June 28, 2025 at 3:46 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But the faculty of prolepsis is the assembly process, not any particular pattern that is detected or assembled.

This is a helpful analogy, thank you. So to be clear, prolepses are unequivocally *not* innate ideas?

Post by "Rolf" of June 28, 2025 at 4:16 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

In light of this excerpt above and others' reactions to my post, I feel I need to define my position a little more.

Very well said Don, and this echoes approximately where I'm at as well. Without a doubt, I think it's important to combat radical skepticism and find solid ground to stand on that reality exists and behaves in a certain way. What I'm iffy on is the specific theory of prolepsis.

Post by "Rolf" of June 28, 2025 at 4:32 AM

Perhaps a forum-wide poll on the topic of prolepsis could be interesting? It seems there are many different ways of interpreting the concept, which may be leading to some confusion when

discussing it.

Post by “DaveT” of June 28, 2025 at 11:59 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

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

[Rolf](#) I've been doing (undoubtedly) superficial research on the internet to get this topic more firmly in my mind. How does this approach sound to make Prolepsis more concrete (ish) by comparing the major schools of the ancient era?

Prolepsis within Epicurus' thought is the acquisition of knowledge, the process that comes from experience through the senses, and truth can be determined from repeated experience and thinking about what we know.

Prolepsis within Plato's (stoic) thought is the acquisition of knowledge from innate sources, divine eternal universal truths.

Prolepsis within Skeptic (Phyrrro) thought is that you can't trust either of the above for definitive acquisition of knowledge since you can't prove either is true.

Post by “DaveT” of July 2, 2025 at 5:12 PM

[Rolf](#) I hope I'm not abusing a topic, but I committed myself to reading DeWitt. DeWitt is hard reading for me, because he is constantly on both the offense and the defense.

Anyway, FYI if you choose to read more, in his chapter: VIII SENSATIONS, ANTICIPATIONS, AND FEELINGS, he gets into a discussion of **Prolepsis** at p. 143 under the topic of Anticipations of Epicurus' thought.

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).

Diogēnēs 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 that 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 *prolépsis* in this case is just the basic definition of "a god", whereas the *hypolépsis* incorporates another, unrelated *prolépsis* (like the *prolépsis* 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). *Hypolépsis* are false assumptions, directly contrasted against reliable *prolépsis*.

From this, I take away that the *prolépsis* 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 *prolépsis* 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 "respiring", 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 *prolépsis*, 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.

Post by “sanantoniogarden” of July 2, 2025 at 9:03 PM

An analogy (imperfect at best) I use to describe prolepsis, which should be familiar to most these days, are the cameras on our phones. Say that your mind is like a camera constantly taking pictures of various things. Take a picture of a big tree, little tree, wide tree, narrow tree.

Eventually the photo album on your phone will suggest a file simply called "trees" or "sunsets" because it has recognized (pattern recognition) the similarities between various individual pictures (sensations) and organized them into an album (prolepsis). Now an analogy which would apply to gods might be something like taking a picture of a ball, a bat, a base, manicured grass, chalk lines, and a foul pole, eventually suggesting a new file called "baseball". However abstract concepts like gods and the game of baseball would require a language to flesh out, I feel. Once again imperfect at best but maybe helpful to some.

Post by “TauPhi” of July 3, 2025 at 11:03 AM

I really like your photo album analogy, [sanantoniogarden](#) . This part especially highlights my own struggles with prolepsis:

[Quote from sanantoniogarden](#)

Now an analogy which would apply to gods might be something like taking a picture of a ball, a bat, a base, manicured grass, chalk lines, and a foul pole, eventually suggesting a new file called "baseball". However abstract concepts like gods and the game of baseball would require a language to flesh out, I feel. Once again imperfect at best but maybe helpful to some.

There are several problems I struggle to resolve. "Baseball" file creation based on the series of photos requires reasoning ie. we can create complex concepts consciously (some of them correctly, some of them incorrectly) by processing input data using our minds (language included). Epicurus realised that human reasoning is far from perfect and reasoning introduces probability of error. That's why senses, prolepsis and feelings can only be considered canonical if they are cut off from reasoning. Otherwise, any kind of knowledge would be impossible due to constant errors (which is exactly what Epicurus tried to overcome and come up with a way to explain that knowledge - at least subjective one - is possible to humans).

Another problem that creeps in is the theory of eidolas (images) that every material object is supposed to emit. Epicurus claimed that our prolepsis of gods comes from eidolas that reach our mind directly and these images are put in our photo album under 'gods' file. (To be clear, I am still impressed with the eidola theory. To come up with something like that in ancient times is ridiculously impressive. Below I'm only highlighting the impossibility of prolepsis of gods derived from this theory. I'm not trying to be smart criticizing ancient atomists from the modern perspective).

These two problems lead to serious aporia in my mind:

1) Prolepsis is a canonical faculty, knowledge is possible but prolepsis of gods is logically impossible (we know now that eidolas is a failed theory and images of gods do not reach human minds travelling from intermundia). That means Epicurus blundered with his description of gods being incorruptible and blessed. He had no input data to form prolepsis of gods and make any claims about gods, whatsoever.

2) Prolepsis is a form of reasoning and cannot be considered canonical faculty or knowledge is impossible. That means Epicurus blundered with his description of canon or applied pure reasoning in his description of gods. Whether his reasoning is correct or incorrect remains forever undetermined as knowledge is impossible in this case and everything goes.

I hope someone can help me out with this because, for the love of god, when I put prolepsis, epistemology and gods in the epicurean equation, I can't solve it no matter how hard I try. Anyway, thanks [sanantoniogarden](#) for your post. It made me think, reason and use language (probably incorrectly on all fronts but, hey, I'm only human).

Post by "Cassius" of July 3, 2025 at 11:22 AM

Bryan will likely do better than me but I would say:

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

1) Prolepsis is a canonical faculty, knowledge is possible but prolepsis of gods is logically impossible (we know now that eidolas is a failed theory and images of gods do not reach human minds travelling from intermundia). That means Epicurus blundered with his description of gods being incorruptible and blessed. He had no input data to form prolepsis of gods and make any claims about gods, whatsoever.

I think according to your own reasoning, with which I agree, saying "prolepsis of gods" is improper. Eyes don't see gods or trees or birds or any other "object" either. Once you assign a word or name to what you are talking about you are selectively choosing from the inputs of the eye to the brain, and I would say the same applies to "gods." What we seem to be revolving around is seeing prolepsis as a form of automatic selectivity among the inputs provided by the sensations and feelings, by which the brain *then* in a separate step takes that selected raw data and then assembles the patterns into concepts and attaches names to them.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

2) Prolepsis is a form of reasoning and cannot be considered canonical faculty or knowledge is impossible. That means Epicurus blundered with his description of canon or applied pure reasoning in his description of gods. Whether his reasoning is correct or incorrect remains forever undetermined as knowledge is impossible in this case and everything goes.

Same point as above. I would not see prolepsis as a form of "reasoning." Regardless of whether you pursue the "real" or "ideal" view of gods, the prolepsis that Velleius is talking about need not be anything more than the selective pattern-recognition of "blessed/happy" and "deathlessness." After those patterns are realized as applicable to life here, other observations about living beings here, that nature never makes a single thing of a kind, that the universe is eternal and filled with life, etc, would be enough to extend the concept through conceptual reasoning to conclude that such beings do in fact exist somewhere in the universe.

So in both cases I think your original point of reasoning - that prolepsis must be pre-rational and is never a "conclusion"- is the way forward. That original point just needs to be followed to its logical conclusion so that we rigorously separate the faculty of prolepsis from including "conclusions" or "ideas" of any kind.

Post by “Cassius” of July 3, 2025 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from sanantoniogarden](#)

An analogy (imperfect at best) I use to describe prolepsis, which should be familiar to most these days, are the cameras on our phones. Say that your mind is like a camera constantly taking pictures of various things.

I agree this is useful. Like a camera, the eyes and other senses are continuously receiving stimulation and input. Something in our brains has to decide what inputs to pay attention to and to assemble into relevant connections before we start rationally evaluating them. We don't constantly state to ourselves in words what our senses are receiving. We act on and assemble relationships between data automatically, and then process those into words when appropriate.

Post by “Bryan” of July 3, 2025 at 12:08 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What we seem to be revolving around is seeing prolepsis as a form of automatic selectivity among the inputs provided by the sensations and feelings, by which the brain then in a separate step takes that selected raw data

Yes, if someone shows you a diseased rat in a cage and says, "This is a god!" -- the immediate, automatic rejection you feel comes from the fact that it does not match your *prolēpsis* (i.e., mental sense / anticipation) of what a god is.

Only after that initial *sensation* can you begin reasoning out *why* you automatically think a sick rat in a cage is not a god.

Post by "TauPhi" of July 3, 2025 at 12:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So in both cases I think your original point of reasoning - that prolepsis must be pre-rational and is never a "conclusion"- is the way forward. That original point just needs to be followed to its logical conclusion so that we rigorously separate the faculty of prolepsis from including "conclusions" or "ideas" of any kind.

Thanks [Cassius](#) That's exactly where I struggle with regarding epicurean prolepsis of gods and I can't find any arguments that would justify Epicurus' claims. When you say this:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Regardless of whether you pursue the "real" or "ideal" view of gods, the prolepsis that Velleius is talking about need not be anything more than the selective pattern-recognition of "blessed/happy" and "deathlessness." After those patterns are realized as applicable to life here, other observations about living beings here, that nature never makes a single thing of a kind, that the universe is eternal and filled with life, etc, would be enough to extend the concept through conceptual reasoning to conclude that such beings do in fact exist somewhere in the universe.

I instantaneously say: There are no patterns for blessedness and deathlessness in nature that living beings are exposed to. These are concepts, ideas or conclusions humans can reason out but these concepts are not of proleptic nature. They are creations of reason ie. we have patterns for death and reasoning powers to comprehend the concept of the opposite. That's why we can comprehend deathlessness. Not because we are exposed to it but because we can create this complex concept (correctly or incorrectly) in our minds by the power of our minds and not by any criteria of truth. And that brings me back to square one.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 3, 2025 at 12:31 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

2) Prolepsis is a form of reasoning and cannot be considered canonical faculty or knowledge is impossible. That means Epicurus blundered with his description of canon or applied pure reasoning in his description of gods. Whether his reasoning is correct or incorrect remains forever undetermined as knowledge is impossible in this case and everything goes.

I would consider *prolēpseis* to just be raw, pre-interpretive mental data, like sensations are just physical data, and feelings are just emotional data, all of which are produced prior to evaluation or reflection. We digest all of this data when we exercise various applications of the mind, like *imagining, supposing, entertaining, fantasizing, considering, exploring, believing, or formulating* (which can all produce false results), and then there is acknowledging the raw data, just *witnessing, or observing, or recalling*, which is just recognizing the objects of experiences that are self-evident.

It's like lying to ourselves: we just can't. It catches up to us, because reality doesn't go away.

In that regard, I think of the mind like the moon, and *prolēpseis* are like impact craters that deepen over time. The mind is physically bombarded with hard impulses, and they leave marks in the form of memories. As humans, the shape of our craters are comparable - the "yellow" crater looks yellow on everyone's personal moon, and the "dog" crater looks like a dog. The craters for "mortals" looks the same, and "animals" (they're all breathing and making babies), and it would follow then that the basic crater of "divinity" largely looks the same to everyone (they're perfectly happy).

I think we all have an idea (just as people) of what a category of beings that are perfectly happy would be like (we all seem to share that notion), and that notion is perfectly natural, so it's just being received from environmental stimuli and physical experiences, because its shared.

Epíkouros explains that we're not physically observing the visible particles of the gods, like lights and colors, but rather, we receive knowledge of the gods by the means of subtle particles that only interface with the mental organ, comparable to the way we receive knowledge of justice. Justice has no color, nor a shape, nor a sound, nor a language; it is only expressed by particular examples. The gods are the same way. We have a basic definition of "a god" we can apply to various candidates for divinity. For example, Jews propose that the divine is YHWH. Fair enough. That's a proposition we can evaluate for truthfulness, and we can do so because we have a firm grasp of what the definition of a real *god* (who doesn't cause trouble), and that is our ruler to test for truth (literally, those basic understandings are part of the canon, meaning "ruler"). YHWH causes trouble, therefore, YHWH is not a real god. At best, YHWH (if real) is a meddling extra-terrestrial, or, *more likely*, a misconception, caused by mixing the notion of *god* with the notion of a *moody human*. Christians maintain, like Aristotle, that God created the universe. Diogénēs the Epicurean wonders, *Why? Was he bored? Was he lonely? From where does he inherit his artistic creativity?* That "God" sounds more like a human sculptor or a chemist than it does a principle of Goodness. We'll find false gods in anything supposed to have created us, evaluates us, and anything that interferes with our history. People throw around their conceptions of "God" all the time, and we know, for a fact, they are nonsense, because all of those conceptions contradict the basic notion of a happy being. Jesus literally bleeds for us (so they say). I can do that, and I am most definitely not a god. And you can't be both mortal and immortal, or else the meanings of words just dissolve into confusion.

In general, the *prolépseis* are grasped by the applications of the mind (like *contemplation* and *reflection*) in the same way that *contemplation* and *reflection* also grasp ideas like "Middle Earth" and "lightsabers" (which are only *real* as fantasy), but the difference is that all of these other mental objects are generated by the faculties of reason, whereas *prolépseis* are like fish captured by a mental net: the mind captures what nature gives it; our myths are made, not captured.

We talk a lot about *what the gods are* in this forum, and, I believe, most of the candidates we have proposed tend to contradict the raw definition of divinity that Epíkouros provides. We like the idea that they might just be mental conceptions that only exist in the human mind, made of mental particles, and that, perhaps, they were first recognized by early hominids in dream-states (either nocturnal dreams or perhaps self-induced visions). We also like to consider that the gods are some kind of laughing, talking, respirating space ghosts (I'm *sort* of joking). Honestly, we're not sure, but, we **can** be sure that it is irrational for any hypothetical "god" to act "ungodly", because, without a doubt, we know, for a fact, what the definition of a "god" is, regardless of *which one*.

Post by "Cassius" of July 3, 2025 at 12:46 PM

"I can't find any arguments that would justify Epicurus' claims..."

To what claims are you referring? I see no claim other than that a god is a totally happy and totally deathless being. And I see examples of some things that are happier than others, and some things that live longer than others, all around me.

Now you may object to happy and death as being concepts, but those concepts arise from real particular examples whether I label them or not.

I would see prolepsis as an ability or disposition to pick out similars from among randomness.

Post by "Cassius" of July 3, 2025 at 1:30 PM

I think it's very relevant to point out that Velleius pretty clearly divides the core attributes of blessedness and imlterishability from any other speculations, diving that from what the mind strives for further:

Quote

We have then a preconception of such a nature that we believe the gods to be blessed and immortal. For nature, which bestowed upon us an idea of the gods themselves, also engraved on our minds the belief that they are eternal and blessed. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus truthfully enunciates that "that which is blessed and eternal can neither know trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and accordingly cannot feel either anger or favor, since all such things belong only to the weak."

If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshiping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

And later on he says:

XVIII. With regard to his form, we are directed **partly by nature** and **partly by reason**

Post by “DaveT” of July 3, 2025 at 5:41 PM

Do our learned friends here take issue with the following discussion by DeWitt? Please be specific and explain why the below is inapposite to this thread.

I ask because the posts discussed earlier are overwhelming me. The following comments and quotations in DeWitt seem to respond to the original query in this thread.

“EVIDENCES FROM SPECIFIC CONTEXT

In the extant texts of Epicurus the term prolepsis occurs four times in a specific context. The first has reference to the divine nature and the second and third to justice; the fourth applies to the concept of time.” P.146 DeWitt

“The discussion of the divine nature is found in the letter to the youthful Menoeceus.⁴⁴

It is there declared “that the pronouncements of the multitude concerning the gods are not anticipations (prolepseis) but false assumptions.”” p.146

“The second and third examples of the term prolepsis are found in Authorized Doctrines 37 and 38; the topic is justice. Just as in the case of the divine nature, the first requisite is to discern the essential attribute or attributes. It is Nature that furnishes the norm and implants in men the embryonic notion or prolepsis of justice in advance of all experience. Hence it is called “the justice of Nature,” as in Doctrine 31: “The justice of Nature is a covenant of advantage to the end that men shall not injure one another nor be injured.” Setting aside the idea of the covenant, which is a separate topic,...” p.147

Post by “Cassius” of July 3, 2025 at 7:47 PM

Yes Dave those are several of the most key references to prolepsis in the major texts. I would say that any good interpretation of prolepsis needs to be reconcilable with them. I don't find that DeWitt's choice of words is always the best, in that he sometimes comes close to calling them innate "ideas," but his list of the examples there is as I understand it correct.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 6, 2025 at 10:43 AM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

The following comments and quotations in DeWitt seem to respond to the original query in this thread.

My post [#43](#) is just a collection of the sources De Witt cites.

So, no issues taken, there! He's accurate.