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COLLOQUIUM 2

METHOD AND EVIDENCE: ON EPICUREAN PRECONCEPTION¹

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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

The problem begins when we have to define the *status* of an idea. Let us distinguish between psychological status and logical status. In respect to psychological status, we may inquire whether an idea is a kind of image, that is, a kind of accessible mental trace—in our case, i.e., the epicurean theory of knowledge, a representation derived from sensation—or else a movement, an act of thinking, and whether an idea is a proposition or reducible to a proposition. As for logical status, we may ask whether an idea can be in itself true or false, or is only true insofar as it depends on other terms, for example as logically connected with other terms in a proposition. We may equally wonder about its methodological function: is an idea simply a linguistic convention, a pre-knowledge which, because it derives from earlier experiences, may anticipate experiences yet to come, or else a criterion of self-evidence that can confirm, after the fact, the validity of our opinions concerning a given experience?

Let us begin with the problem as it is stated in the epicurean texts. It is clear that ancient Epicureanism is empiricist. For the Epicureans, sensation is the first criterion of truth and the origin of all knowledge.³ Sensations are, accordingly, in themselves irrefutable.⁴ But Epicureanism also allows for the existence and for the epistemological use of ‘ideas,’ and it is not ‘anti-intellectual’ in this sense. The Epicureans did not at all seek to reduce the knowledge of hidden entities to a direct extension of the perception of phenomena, for example via a simple addition of sensible experiences. Our eyes see shade and light, but they do not instruct us as to the difference between them: “this falls to the mind’s reason (*ratio animi*) to discern. The eyes cannot discover the nature of things (*natura rerum*).”⁵ The *natura rerum*, the ‘nature of things,’ which constitutes the very object of Lucretius’ poem, only reveals itself truly, then, to the eyes of reason. E. Asmis, in her fundamental book of 1984, showed that the Epicurean canon was not just an epistemology (a theory “which proposes sense perceptions and concepts as criteria for testing the truth of beliefs”), but also a methodology, that is a theory “which proposes two rules that govern the conduct of an inquiry from the beginning.”⁶ The subtlety of Epicurean methodology resides precisely in the explanation of different modes of

whatever it is, which the mind can be employed about in thinking; and I could not avoid frequently using it.”

³ Cf. Diog. Laert., X, 31; Epicurus, *KD (Key Doctrine)* 24.

⁴ Lucretius, *DRN (De rerum natura)*, IV, 469-521; Diog. Laert., X, 32.

⁵ *DRN*, IV, 384-385 (transl. Long & Sedley).

⁶ See Asmis 1984, esp. 24. The two rules, according to E. Asmis, are: “a requirement for initial concepts to demarcate the problem,” and “a requirement for empirical facts to provide a solution.”

inference, that is of the move from sensations to concept (ἐπίνοια): by confrontation, analogy, similarity or combination.⁷ The procedures of inference, which permit the verification and, ultimately, the validation of opinions, provide in principle sufficient guaranties for us to make use of representations of things that are not immediately perceivable by the senses. Moreover, the Epicureans have available a very rich arsenal of terms, often difficult to distinguish clearly from one another, to designate the various kinds of ideas or general notions.

The most important of these terms is πρόληψις: ‘preconception’ (in Long & Sedley’s translation), or ‘presumption.’ It seems that this word, which, Cicero affirms, was introduced into philosophy by Epicurus himself,⁸ is a generic term, which includes others that designate abstract notions or mental operations, in contrast to sensations and affects. We read at the beginning of a fundamental text on this question:

[1]

Preconception, they [the Epicureans] say, is as it were a perception (κατάληψις), or correct opinion (δόξα ὀρθή), or conception (ἔννοια), or universal “store notion” (καθολικὴ νόησις ἐναποκειμένη), i.e. memory of that which has frequently become evident externally: e.g. “such and such a kind of thing is a man”. For as soon as the word “man” is uttered, immediately its delineation also comes to mind by means of preconception, since the senses give the lead. Thus what primarily underlies each name is something self-evident. And what we inquire about we would not have inquired about if we had not had prior knowledge of it. For example: “Is what’s standing over there a horse or a cow?” For one must at some time have come to know the form of a horse and that of a cow by means of preconception. Nor would we have named something if we had not previously learnt its delineation by means of preconception. Thus preconceptions are self-evident (ἐναργεῖς). 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?” (Diog. Laert., X, 33)⁹

The generic character of the preconception is not explicitly asserted. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that preconceptions are the basic material of all other notions, as they are also for the Stoics. These latter notions, as I have said, come in several forms:

⁷ Diog. Laert., X, 32.

⁸ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, 44.

⁹ Long & Sedley translation (as below), but in the first sentence, punctuation is mine.

[2]

Also, all notions (ἐπίνοια) arise from the senses (ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθήσεων) by means of confrontation, analogy, similarity and combination, with some contribution from reasoning too. (Diog. Laert., X, 32)

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.

I would like to show that the main problem with respect to preconception is not that of its psychological status, on which discussion has generally focused, so much as that of its logical and, related to this, methodological status. The question is, then, to understand what the methodological function of preconception is. *Prolépsis* has, in fact, several different functions, which are not reducible to the single function of a basic concept

¹⁰ Occurrences of these terms in Lucretius are : II, 124 ; 745 ; IV, 476 ; 479 ; 854 ; V, 124 ; 183 ; 1047.

that is necessary for any subsequent investigation.¹¹ Each of these functions consists in making some particular use of the self-evidence that is specific to preconception. This variety in the uses of preconception perhaps explains the differences among the texts in which it is discussed, and, correspondingly, the divergence of modern interpretations. At a deeper level, I would like to show that *prolépsis* is the ‘key concept’ in Epicurean methodology, and that the texts that have survived, even if they do not confirm it directly, allow us to reconstruct what amounts to a *proleptic method*. The logical status of preconception, in the activity of direct inference but also in the process or technique of confirmation or ‘witnessing,’ perfectly illustrates the advantage that Epicureanism seeks to derive from first ‘ideas’: preconception is not just a representation endowed with intrinsic self-evidence, like sensation and affect, but is equally a mental act in which thought is related to sensation. It is the condition without which one could neither establish nor confirm the connection between the invisible (ἀδελόν) and the manifest (φαινόμενον), whether in simple processes or in more complex ones. It thus reconciles the immediateness of self-evidence with the rational mediation of method. By referring to *prolépsis* as a ‘key concept,’ then, I mean that preconception links the various acts or states of knowledge together, so that it is not only the generic term, which includes the other abstract notions, but also that which correlates thought with direct experience. This does not mean that preconception would be a better criterion than sensation, which is, as we shall see, the first criterion of truth.

I. *The Psychological Status of Preconceptions*

Let us begin with the difficulties posed by the psychological status of preconception and the problem of the connection between preconception and sensation.

Two types of argument allow us to affirm that sensation is the primary criterion of truth: not only negative arguments, for example those that Lucretius proposes to establish the irrefutable nature of sensations, but also positive arguments, which have to do with the physical status of *aisthêsis* itself. As may be seen in the physiological account of sensations in the *Letter to Herodotus*, we do not even have to establish that the truth of sensation *corresponds* to reality: it *is* reality itself, or at all events a part of reality. Knowledge, prior to being a relation of correspondence with what

¹¹ According to Asmis 1984.

is known, or an equivalence to what is real, is a relation of belonging, of inherence in what is known. Thus, vision results from the reception of replicas (τύποι) or images (*simulacra*; εἰδῶλα) that are naturally emitted by the object that is seen. Since they are directly transmitted by effluences which, in ideal conditions, preserve the structure and properties of the aggregate from which they come, these replicas allow us to form a representation or impression (φαντασία) which remains in “sympathy” (συμπάθεια) with the object.¹² This same principle of sympathy is equally valid for the other senses.¹³ The impression is thus not strictly subjective and still less entirely mental: we perceive something that the object produces of itself, so that the impression *is* the shape of the body itself:

[3]

And whatever impression we get by focusing our thought or senses, whether of shape or properties, that is the shape of the solid body, produced through the image’s concentrated succession or after-effect. (Epicurus, *Hrdt.*, 50)

Under non-standard conditions, it is true, this sympathy will only be partial, a consequence, for example, of air that wears down the simulacra and is responsible for the effect that, seen from a distance, a tower that is in fact square seems round to us.¹⁴ But it nevertheless remains the case that the impression is constituted via an immediate sympathy with the flow of simulacra or images, and thus that it is constituted in sympathy with the objective conditions of their production.

But sensation is not just the act of receiving a physical imprint: it also includes an act of attention or projection (ἐπιβολή)¹⁵ toward this condition of passive reception. This interior act, by which we apprehend the thing perceived within ourselves and relate to it, although it is in its own right strictly mental, may also be described as a kind of natural process. Unfortunately, the Epicureans have not given us a clear physical account of ἐπιβολή, nor again of other mental operations. Thus, it is difficult to know whether they followed up on their physical explanation so as to include ἐπιβολή. In any case, on the epistemological level, their position is clear: whatever its exact nature, the ἐπιβολή that is included in sensation is direct. It is therefore different from the judgment, which can be false, that is applied to this sensation and its objective correlate. Focusing on the

affect of blue or red is *not* the same as the opinion or judgment that *this thing* is blue or red.

Sensations are, in any case, true in themselves, because they testify directly and physically to the actual presence of the thing sensed. As Lucretius puts it, “whatever impression the senses get at any time is true.”¹⁶ In fact, sensation does not require *logos*—reason or discourse—or even memory in order to establish the truth of what it expresses. According to Diogenes Laertius, “all sensation, he [Epicurus] says, is irrational (ἄλογος) and does not involve memory.”¹⁷ Epicurean epistemology thus depends at bottom on what I would call a ‘principle of immediacy’ or ‘currency.’ The word ‘immediacy’ here embraces both the unmediated nature of an experience, and its direct connection with objective reality.

However, can mental states that are distinct from sensations, and which refer to a past or future sensation, satisfy this principle, to the extent that they no longer have the advantage of the immediacy of sensation? The problem poses itself all the more urgently when these states are presented as criteria, on the same level as sensations and affects. This is precisely the case with preconceptions. How can they be true in themselves, although their objective correlate (a man, a cow, justice, the divine) is no longer or not yet present?

There are some texts that may relieve our doubts as to the intrinsic validity of preconceptions. Thus, the summary that Diogenes offers of the Epicurean ‘canon’ associates them directly with sensations and affects:

[4]

Thus Epicurus, in the *Kanōn* (Yardstick), says that the sensations, preconceptions, and the feelings are the criteria of truth. The Epicureans add the “focusings of thought into an impression.” (Diog. Laert., X, 31)¹⁸

An easy solution to the problem, then, would be to recall that preconceptions are not radically distinct from sensations. This is doubtless true. Long and Sedley hold, quite rightly, that Gassendi’s insertion of the definite article before *prolēpseis* is needless:¹⁹ even though they constitute a distinct class among the several criteria, preconceptions are closely tied up with sensations. There is indeed a natural continuity between sensation and preconception. That is why, as Diogenes Laertius specifies (text [1]):

¹² See *Hrdt.* (Letter to Herodotus), 50, l. 2.

¹³ *Hrdt.*, 49-53; *DRN*, IV, 462-468.

¹⁴ Lucretius, *DRN*, IV, 353-363.

¹⁵ Long & Sedley: “focusing”; Asmis: “application.” Both seem acceptable to me. In this context, since I am using Long & Sedley’s translation, I chose “focusing.”

¹⁶ “Proinde quod in quoque visum tempore, verumst”, *DRN*, IV, 499.

¹⁷ Diog. Laert., X, 31.

¹⁸ See also Cicero, *Academica*, II, 142.

¹⁹ See the Greek text edited by Long & Sedley, who—like Hicks, H.S. Long, Arrighetti, Marcovich—delete the “καί” inserted by Gassendi.

For as soon as the word 'man' is uttered, immediately its delineation also comes to mind by means of preconception, since the senses give the lead. Thus what primarily underlies each name is something self-evident. (Diog. Laert., X, 33)

However, even if the association between the *prolēpsis* and the word is direct, it does not have the same type of immediate presence that sensation does. We immediately grasp in thought the preconception of 'man,' but this operation cannot take precedence over an *objective* immediacy: it is not *presence*, and still less the physical inherence in us of the thing that is seen, that testifies to the validity of the preconception. I can certainly judge that this here thing is true, because it results from a sensible impression whose *physical* traces are still present in me. That is a necessary consequence of Epicurean physicalism, which Diogenes of Oinoanda expresses quite clearly:

[5]

and after the impingements of the first images, our nature is rendered porous in such a manner that, even if the objects which it first saw are no longer present, images similar to the first ones are received by the mind [...]. (Diogenes of Oinoanda, fgt 9.III.6-14 Smith)²⁰

Nevertheless, preconception always occurs *after* the sensation—or the set of sensations—from which it derives. It is even true that a preconception, notably that of the gods, may occur in us without any previous perception, as an *innata cognitio*,²¹ which poses the problem of how to explain generally the origin of preconceptions.²² More globally, from an epistemological point of view, that which constitutes the basis of proleptic self-evidence is not the sensation from which it derives: it is rather, on the one hand, the spontaneity of the association between a preconception and, on the other, the word or the object that approaches me, for example a horse or cow, to take the examples given by Diogenes Laertius. Text [1] is entirely clear on this score. What testifies indeed to the truth and self-evidence of a preconception is not its physical and sensible origin but:

- (a) the fact that a preconception appears to us “as soon as (ἄμα) the word 'man' is uttered” and “immediately” (εὐθύς);

²⁰ μετὰ δὲ τὰς τῶν πρώτων ἐνπτώσεις εἰδώλων ποροποιεῖται ἡμῶν οὕτως ἡ φύσις ὥστε, καὶ μὴ παρόντων ἔτι τῶν πραγμάτων ἅ τὰ πρώτων εἶδεν, τὰ ὅμοια τοῖς πρώτοις τῇ διανοίᾳ δεχθ[ῆ]ναι φάσμα [...]. Smith's translation.

²¹ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, 44.

²² We can partly solve this problem if we assume (for example with Goldschmidt 1978, 157-158), that preconception results, in any case, from a material and external event: the fact that images enter the body through his pores. In the case of gods, it seems that the εἰδῶνα act directly on the mind (see in this sense Modrak 2006, 655).

- (b) the very principle of the signifying relation: “Nor would we have named something if we had not previously learnt its delineation by means of preconception.” In other words: there is a signifier of *x*, if and only if there is a preconception of *x*. Seen this way, the following sentence, which gives as a consequence the self-evidence of a preconception, is quite clear: “Thus (οὖν) preconceptions are self-evident.”

Thus, it is perhaps not true that what appears to me at a distance is a horse; perhaps it is a cow; but if I am thinking of a horse, then it consists in spontaneously representing to myself, at the moment of the perception, a correct preconception of what a horse is. The truth of the preconception does not reside, then, in contact with the object, really present or merely named, with which it is related; it resides rather in the spontaneous association of what is actually present with what no longer is (the past sensation) and/or with what is not yet. Still more simply, although sensation “does not accommodate memory” or “is incapable of memory,” preconception (text [1]) is a “memory of that which has frequently become evident externally.”²³ Let us add that preconception is a certain kind of *doxa*—a correct one—, and that accordingly it has a ‘propositional structure’ of the type ‘such a thing is a man’ or ‘the gods are happy and indestructible creatures.’ We will have to deal more precisely with this point later but, in any case, the same is not true of sensation.

Defined this way, preconception seems to constitute a kind of representation, that is a mental image that is simultaneously distinct both from its original source and from the object to which it can be applied. Now, not only does its quality as memory (the fact that it is a recollection of something past) contrast with the immediacy that gave the sensation its force, but, once again, it is not a substitute for the direct grasp of a real, external thing. In no case can the *prolēpsis* of a sensible object (a man, a horse, or a cow) take precedence over the actual perception of the thing when it is actually present. How could it be a criterion of truth, that is, something that is immediately true in itself, if it depends originally on the truth of sensation?²⁴ In other words, of what value is the recollection of the actual condition (the recollection of the sensation) if only the actual condition is a guarantee of truth?

Mustn't we, then, again question the notion, according to which a preconception is a simple representation or a mental image? Understood not only as that which persists after repeated sensations of a single object, but

²³ Diog. Laert., X, 33.

²⁴ As Mannwald 1972, 114, points out, sensible perception is the guarantee of the value of the preconception as criterion.

as a cognitive operation or a movement of thought, it might have the same kind of actuality (or currency) as the sensible experience, in the strict sense. In fact, πρόληψις sounds like an active substantive: the act of ‘grasping in advance.’²⁵ To support this hypothesis, we may consider the possibility, as David Glidden has done, that preconception is a form of ‘apprehension of thought,’ an ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας.²⁶ This hypothesis has been severely criticized by Jürgen Hammerstaedt,²⁷ who has well illustrated the difficulties that it bumps up against, and to which I shall return. Let us begin by analyzing the terms and presuppositions of this debate.

There is no doubt that *prolēpsis* is, to some extent, a certain type of representation, insofar as it is a stable term of comparison, to which we can refer particular instances that we encounter. Several texts that are authentically Epicurean clearly suggest as much. Thus, when Epicurus, in paragraph 72 of the *Letter to Herodotus*, contrasts the perception of time to the way in which we process other things (doubtless he means bodies here, as Anke Manuwald maintains), he specifies:

[6]

We should not inquire into time in the same way as other things, which we inquire into in an object by referring them to the preconceptions envisaged in ourselves (ἐπὶ τὰς βλέπομένας παρ’ ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς προλήψεις). (*Hrdt.*, 72)²⁸

The preposition ἐπὶ indicates clearly that we relate to something that we already contain within ourselves and which we can even ‘perceive’ or ‘envisage’ (βλέπομένας)²⁹ in ourselves. Although there is no objective substratum of time, preconceptions determine the permanent properties of stable substrata, or at least those that are relatively permanent. The same preposition ἐπὶ is used to express a relation to preconceptions in a rather

²⁵ See “προλαμβάνω” in Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

²⁶ Glidden 1985. See also Annas 1992, 166-168.

²⁷ Hammerstaedt 1996.

²⁸ Long & Sedley’s translation modified. About the knowledge of time in Epicureanism, see my Morel 2002. According to Sedley 1973, it could be that *Hrdt.*, 72-73, on time, “was not included in the original version of the Letter, but was added at a later date, following a controversy in which Epicurus perhaps replied to the charge that his theory of properties could not account for our understanding of a term like ‘time’” (15). In Sedley’s view, the inclusion of preconceptions as truth-criteria comes later than the *Letter to Herodotus*. Accordingly, *Hrdt.*, 37-38 would contain “only the germ of the notion of *prolēpsis*” (14). On the latter point, see my following footnote. Regarding the former, I confess that I don’t put any new hypothesis forward about the very difficult and controversial problem of the chronology of Epicurus’ works.

²⁹ In *Hrdt.*, 37-38, the same verb βλέπεσθαι designates the perception of first notions, which are probably preconceptions. On this text, see further, pp. 46-47.

difficult passage in book XXVIII of the *Peri Phuseōs* of Epicurus, the purpose of which is to expose human error, an error that does not reside in preconceptions and appearances (φαινόμενα), but is produced in relation to preconceptions and appearances:

[7]

Supposing that in those days we thought and said something equivalent, in the terminology which we then employed, to saying that all human error is exclusively of the form that arises in relation to preconceptions and appearances because of the multifarious conventions of language [...]. (Epicurus, *On nature*, Long & Sedley 19 D ; Arrighetti 31.10.8-9)

Again, the *Letter to Menoeceus*, in paragraph 123, invites us not to add to the ‘common notion’ (κοινή νόησις) of God (a notion of which we have the outline in ourselves) an opinion that contradicts it, that is to say, an opinion that is contrary to the idea that the gods are happy and incorruptible. Now, we learn next that this common notion is a preconception,³⁰ as opposed to the false assumptions that the majority of men make:

[8]

For there are gods—the knowledge of them is self-evident. But they are not such as the many believe them to be. For by their beliefs as to their nature the many do not preserve them. The impious man is not he who denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to gods the beliefs of the many about them. For they are not preconceptions but false suppositions, the assertions of the many about gods. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123-124)

It is clear, from this text, that we have in ourselves a stable representation of the gods, however we may have acquired it, a representation to which we must refer in order to compare with it the various opinions that we may have concerning the gods. All these texts that insist on the presence of preconceptions in us go to show the same thing. This is particularly true of the exposition by Velleius, who insists repeatedly on the inherence of a notion of the gods, as nature itself has inscribed them in every mind,³¹ whence the proposition: “we have ingrained, or rather innate, knowledge of them” (*insitas eorum vel potius innatas cognitiones habemus*).³² In all these cases, a *prolepsis* appears as a mental given, as knowledge constituted in advance, and it is in this sense comparable to a representation.

³⁰ See Philodemus’s use of πρόληψις and προλαμβάνω about preconception of gods in Philodemus, *On Piety*, I, 441-443 ; 1300 ; 1887 (Obbink).

³¹ I, 43 : *in omnium animis eorum notionem impressisset ipsa natura*.

³² I, 44

The situation is analogous to the case of the *prolēpsis* of justice. We have two maxims of Epicurus on the topic, which are essential to my argument, since they make explicit reference to the preconception of justice:

[9]

What is legally deemed to be just has its existence in the domain of justice whenever it is attested to be useful in the requirements of social relationships, whether or not it turns out to be the same for all. But if someone makes a law and it does not happen to accord with the utility of social relationships, it no longer has the nature of justice. And even if what is useful in the sphere of justice changes but fits the preconception for some time, it was no less just throughout that time for those who do not confuse themselves with empty utterances but simply look at the facts. (Epicurus, *Key Doctrine* 37)

Where without any change in circumstances the conventional laws, when judged by their consequences, were seen not to correspond with the preconception of justice, such laws were not really just; but wherever the laws have ceased to be useful in consequence of a change in circumstances, in that case the laws were for the time being just when they were useful for the social relationships of the citizens, and subsequently ceased to be just when they ceased to be useful. (Epicurus, *Key Doctrine* 38)

The idea we have of political utility (that is, of what is useful to a given political community in a given place and time, so that people do not do each other harm) must adapt itself to the preconception of justice. This must be, then, sufficiently stable to serve as an invariant and as a point of comparison.³³

The following question now poses itself: if a preconception is a representation, what kind of representation is at stake and what does it show about the thing it represents? As I have said, we desperately lack systematic texts which can help us answer this question. The variety of terms and concepts that Cicero offers in connection with preconception (*notio, anticipatio, informatio, opinio, innata cognitio, prae-notio*),³⁴ just where he states that Epicurus introduced the term and specified its sense, only accentuate the problem.

Anke Manuwald has clarified the situation neatly, by electing—it is true—to privilege certain texts of Epicurus over the doxographical tradition and other later sources. This author has shown that what characterizes *prolēpsis*, apart from its function as a criterion which it shares with other modes of knowledge, is that its content is always something general—a god is always incorruptible and happy; body is not conceivable without a determinate number of constant properties, such as shape or size—and that

this content consists in the essential determinate idea that corresponds to the word, thanks to which the *prolēpsis* is apprehended.³⁵ This point is nicely confirmed by Philodemus, who specifies that preconception takes the place of definition:

[10]

There is also the meaning that this is the particular definition of that, and this is the preconception, as when we say that body as body has bulk and resistance, and man as man is a rational animal. (Philodemus, *De signis*, 52 ; xxxiv-xxxv De Lacy)³⁶

Let us say, in a very general way, that *prolēpsis* is a primary concept, beyond which we must not go (since it is self-evident) at the risk of finding ourselves in an infinite regress toward some supposed prior self-evident thing.³⁷

It is just here, however, that we begin to see the inadequacy of the representational approach, taken alone. If preconception is only the representation or mental image of a person or a horse, what guarantees that this image is the best and final one—irreducible—of the reality that it looks to? In other words, for *prolēpsis* to be a criterion and self-evident in a final way, it must be something other than one mental image among others, an image which could otherwise be confused with illusory representations, such as a chimera or a centaur. This is why Gisela Striker³⁸ distinguishes two points of view in her analysis of *prolēpsis*: insofar as it is ‘seen,’ it naturally appears to us as an image; but insofar as it can be described as something demonstrated or as an indemonstrable, it functions as a criterion which, according to her, turns it into a proposition. Thus, for justice, the preconception associated with the word ‘just’ would have for its content the proposition, ‘what is useful for a human society is just’; the *prolēpsis* of god would have for its content the proposition, ‘gods are happy and immortal.’³⁹ By privileging their epistemological or logical function over their psychological character, G. Striker assigns to preconceptions, according to her, a status comparable to that of first premises in Aristotle’s theory of science.

³⁵ Manuwald 1972, 103-105.

³⁶ [Κ]αὶ τὸ λόγον ἴδιον εἶναι τὸνδε καὶ ταύτην πρόληψιν, ὡ[σ]περ ὅταν εἴπωμεν τὸ σῶμα καθὸ σῶμα ὄγκον ἔχειν καὶ ἀντι[τυ]πίαν, καὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἢ ἀνθρώπου ὄν λογικόν. De Lacy’s translation.

³⁷ Therefore I think that preconception corresponds to the “primary concept” in *Letter to Herodotus*, 37-38. See text [13] below.

³⁸ Striker 1996.

³⁹ Striker 1996, 41.

³³ On this difficult question, see Goldschmidt 1977 and, more recently, my Morel 2000.

³⁴ *De natura deorum*, I, 43-45.

It is undeniable that *prolēpsis* fulfills this function, if we associate it with Epicurus' mention of primary notions which allow us to dispense with demonstration. And I too believe, like Striker, that what most interests Epicurus is not the psychological explanation of the origin of preconceptions, but their logical function. That having been said, as G. Striker herself indicates, in contrast to first premises in Aristotle's theory of science, *prolēpsis* do not constitute the point of departure for demonstrative syllogisms. They serve rather to support the method of evaluating opinions that consists in comparing opinions with the self-evident truth.⁴⁰ For example, the *prolēpsis* of justice, even if it bears on what is useful to society, does not permit us to *deduce* the best means of encouraging economic growth while preserving social safeguards. It would permit us to test and evaluate, according to the situation, the different opinions or options that might present themselves on the matter, for example a Keynesian economical politics vs. the option of spontaneous regulation via the competitive development of the free market.

One may, nevertheless, wonder whether the assimilation of preconception to its propositional content really solves the problem. Let us note, first of all, that the Epicureans, and Epicurus in particular, insist on the immediate significance of words, as opposed to definitions and ways of speaking that distance us from their manifest sense.⁴¹ We know, furthermore, that they criticized the value of definitions and that Epicurus, according to an anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus*, held that the names are clearer than definitions and ridiculed the absurdity of saying, instead of "Hello Socrates!," "Hello, rational mortal animal!"⁴² More radically still, I can certainly associate with a preconception a proposition that will enunciate its attributes, but that does not tell me in what way this proposition will be better than any other proposition concerning the same subject, for example, "the gods are mortal, greedy, and blood-thirsty." There again, one must assume something more than the simple 'content' of a *prolēpsis* in order to understand how it can serve as a criterion of truth, since the content of a *prolēpsis*, as opposed to the content of a sensation, is not immediately guaranteed by the actual presence of its objective correlate. That is why the term *prolēpsis* seems to me to contain as well a certain movement of assent, which represents the *ἐπιβολή*, and must in this respect be taken as an active substantive.

⁴⁰ See Long 1971, 120: "(...) *prolēpsis* are necessary for the formation and testing of all assertions and objective judgements."

⁴¹ See especially *Peri Phusikōs*, Book XXVIII; Long & Sedley 19 D-E.

⁴² *Anonymous Commentary to Plato's Theaetetus*, 22, 39-41; Long & Sedley 191.

David Glidden⁴³ has emphasized, from this perspective, the implicit connection that Cicero proceeds to draw, in Book I of *De natura deorum*, between preconception and the process that the Epicureans traditionally designated by the expression *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας*.⁴⁴ The connection is in fact quite explicit in Lucretius. He maintains that there can be an *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας*, which he translates as *injectus animi*, toward invisible things, in the case of colorless bodies such as atoms. He calls this *ἐπιβολή*, precisely, a *notitia*.⁴⁵ In fact, as Glidden notes, the *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας*, like *prolēpsis*, requires something more than a simple passive presentation of what is carried by the flow of simulacra: they require the organization of this material, an organization that demands the active intervention of the spirit.⁴⁶ Preconception, then, would be a certain kind of *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας*, characterized by the general nature of its content.⁴⁷ A testimony by Clement of Alexandria clearly goes in this direction, specifying that Epicurus understands preconception as "a focusing on something evident and on the evident notion (*ἐπίνοια*) of the thing."⁴⁸ Preconception here is a movement of thought, an active perception and no longer a simple representation.

This solution is supported by the presence of *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας* among the criteria of truth, at least if one trusts Diogenes Laertius, who attributes this *doxa* to Epicureans whom he does not identify.⁴⁹ In fact, *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας* seems to constitute, like sensation, a self-grounding act of thought, true by itself, and in this sense a criterion of truth. This act

⁴³ Glidden 1985, 188-194.

⁴⁴ See especially *De natura deorum*, I, 49.

⁴⁵ *DRN*, II, 739-745: "And if by chance it seems to you that the mind cannot project itself into these bodies <e.g. the atoms>, you wander for astray. For since those born blind, who have never descried the light of the sun, yet know bodies by touch, never linked with color for them from the outset of their life, you may know that for our mind too, bodies pointed with no tint may enter our comprehension <or: 'preconception'>" (Bailey's translation).

⁴⁶ Glidden 1985, 191.

⁴⁷ Glidden 1985, 194.

⁴⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*, II, 4, 157.44; H. Usener, *Epicurea*, Leipzig 1887 (quoted below: Us.). 255.

⁴⁹ Diog. Laert., X, 31. Assuming that *ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας* has been inserted later in the list of the criteria, one could think that it is a distinct criterion, and then, that it is distinct from the preconception. But this addition — which Sedley 1973, 16, calls a "mystification," actually due to Diogenes Laertius — is probably neither so crucial, nor so rigorous. It could be explained by the aim to extend the list of the criteria, in order that all the true ideas should be included in it.

is distinct by nature from judgments that add non-confirmed opinions to our initial impressions:

[11]

If you are going to reject any sensation absolutely, and not distinguish opinions reliant on evidence yet awaited from what is already present through sensation, through feelings, and through every focusing of thought into an impression, you will confound all your other sensations with empty opinion and consequently reject the criterion in its entirety (...). (Epicurus, *Key Doctrine* 24; first sentence)⁵⁰

Preconception, if we assimilate it to a certain type of ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας, thus recovers an immediacy or presence which turns it into a kind of generic perception. Its epistemological value, as I have said, is guaranteed by the immediacy of the first movement of thought, in response to a given stimulus. That can be a word, or the sensory perception of an outline that appears in the distance. This means that it is not true in virtue of being assimilated to something real or of a physical sympathy with its object, nor again in virtue of a capacity, necessarily random, for the physical preservation of past experiences, but that it is true in virtue of the spontaneity by which the mind associates with an exterior stimulus bits of knowledge that have been previously acquired.

I see at least one textual indication that favors, if not the assimilation pure and simple of preconception to an ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας, then at all events the active interpretation of the substantive, in a formula in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, § 124 (text [7]): “For they are not preconceptions but false suppositions, the assertions of the many about gods.” By this contrast, πρόληψις is placed on the same level as ὑπόληψις, judgment or supposition. Now, the latter is here a kind of ἀπόφασις, that is, a declarative act, which is surely not the same thing as a simple representation.⁵¹ That does not mean that πρόληψις and ὑπόληψις are two species of ἀπόφασις nor that πρόληψις is equivalent to a declarative act, but it confirms that preconception is a certain form of thinking about the object that it denotes.

Glidden’s thesis, nevertheless, has some difficulties which, as I have said, were exposed by J. Hammerstaedt in the 1996 article that he devoted to the role of Epicurean preconception. First of all, if, as he believes,

⁵⁰ About the distinction between, on the one hand, the spontaneous and immediate movement of ἐπιβολή and, on the other hand, the movement we produce in addition by ourselves, see Long 1971, 118.

⁵¹ In X. 34, Diogenes Laertius points out that δόξα is an ὑπόληψις which is true or false. Now δόξα is not reducible to a mental image: it’s certainly more of a movement of thought than a static image.

prolēpsis must be identified with the πρῶτον ἐννόημα mentioned in paragraph 37 of the *Letter to Herodotus*, that means that it can be designated by a term that is certainly not an active substantive: it is a notion that we ‘contemplate’ or ‘look at’ (βλέπεσθαι), from the moment when we hear the word that corresponds to it. Besides, Hammerstaedt believes that, in the text of Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, the perception of divine images mentioned in § 49 cannot be assimilated to *prolēpsis*, which is described in § 43 as ‘an already-formed notion.’⁵² He rejects, more generally, the interpretation of *prolēpsis* as an *act* of perception.⁵³

Without entering into detail concerning these two positions, we should at least ask whether these two points of view—the traditional idea of preconception as a representation, and the idea of preconception as a movement of thought—are really incompatible. Nothing prevents us from considering preconception as a way of making use of stabilized traces of past sensations, that is, a way of actualizing or re-actualizing a memory *in accord* with a specific situation. We can further suppose that *prolēpsis* is structured like sensation, which contains at the same time a purely passive affect, the effect of an impression coming from outside, and an active focusing (ἐπιβολή) on this affect. Preconception very probably embraces, at the same time, representation—the trace that is preserved of past experiences—and attention or the focusing on this representation.

II. *The Logical Status of Preconceptions*

The question hence becomes the following: what types of knowledge deliver preconceptions to us? The answer, in my view, is given both in the testimony of Diogenes Laertius and in the texts of Epicurus where preconception is, if not defined, at least operative. This reply touches simultaneously upon both the nature and the function of *prolēpsis*.

We may note first of all (text [1]) that it is that in virtue of which an outline (τύπος) presents itself to us, whether of a man, a horse, or a cow. One point here is not very clear: we may be tempted to assimilate *prolēpsis* to an outline, to the degree that there is not a doubling of the image—the preconception and then the outline—but a single image. Nevertheless, the

⁵² “una nozione già formata,” p. 235.

⁵³ See in this sense Manuwald 1972. Nevertheless, when Hammerstaedt (236, n. 64) quotes the most relevant texts—i.e., *Men. (Letter to Menoeceus)*, 124 and *Diog. Laert.*, X, 33, he doesn’t give real arguments: he just maintains that “è difficile interpretare *prolēpsis* come un atto di percezione.”

τύπος presents itself to us “in virtue of the preconception” (κατὰ πρόληψιν), which seems to presuppose that it is distinct from it. We must, I think pause a moment to consider the significance of τύπος in Epicurean epistemology and physiology. To that end, we may refer to two passages in the *Letter to Herodotus*, paragraphs 35-36 on the one hand, and paragraph 46 on the other. The first, as we know, mentions “an outline of the totality of the doctrine,” that is a condensed epitome of Epicurean philosophy that can be of help to us in all circumstances, whatever our level of competence in the area of natural philosophy. The second explains the transmission by means of simulacra of the solid shapes from which they emanate. More precisely, Epicurus says: “these delineations we call ‘images.’” It seems, then, that the physico-epistemological category of τύπος looks to its origin as well as it designates an immediate representation. It is a trace that preserves the immediacy of its origin thanks to its density, whether it is a question of the transmission of teachings or of simulacra. The term πύκνωμα appears elsewhere in two contexts, in paragraphs 36 and 50 of the *Letter to Herodotus*. Returning now to preconception, we may suppose, then, that the τύπος—the manifestation of which occurs in virtue of preconception—is the actualization or the putting in place of the content of the preconception. The density of the outline thus accounts for the fact that the qualities that define this content cannot be dissociated, for example the essential attributes of divinity: incorruptibility and blessedness.

The question, finally, is to understand what precisely “in virtue of preconception” means: is it a pure initial representation that serves simply as a point of departure⁵⁴ for other mental operations, or does it play an active role in the presentation of the τύπος? The answer is, I think, given in the first passage of the *Letter to Menoeceus* which appeals to the preconception of the gods:

[12]

First, think of god as an imperishable and blessed creature, as the common idea of god is in outline, and attach to him nothing alien to imperishability or inappropriate to blessedness. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123)

There is no doubt, as I have said, that the subject here is that of *prolēpsis*, which appears explicitly in paragraph 124. Now, this text shows that

⁵⁴ The Epicurean theory of preconception stands probably for a response to the question of Plato’s *Meno* concerning the possibility of choosing a starting point in the search of knowledge, if we don’t know anything. See, in this sense: Diog. Laert., X, 33; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, 43; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II, 4, 157.44 and, generally, Usener 255.

prolēpsis has two essential and inseparable functions: on the one hand, it produces an outline of that with which it is associated,⁵⁵ because it sketches it in a general and so necessarily approximate way; on the other hand, it establishes a rule for the attribution of predicates to the subject, in this case, god. In that very particular case of the preconception of gods, preconception serves first of all as a negative criterion for characterizing its content: it defines what the gods are not. Conversely, it has, by virtue of its very imprecision, a positive function: a *prolēpsis* is the condition for the validity and legitimacy of our statements concerning its object. Thanks to it, I can accept various representations of the gods, and concede some points to the traditional, imagistic theology, for instance that the gods have this or that shape and in particular a human shape,⁵⁶ or that they live in a community and speak Greek,⁵⁷ or even that some things in nature may be called by the names of gods. Lucretius makes this quite clear in Book II:

If anyone is resolved to call the sea Neptune and corn Ceres, and likes rather to misuse the title of Bacchus than to utter the true name of the vine-juice, let us grant that he may proclaim that the world is the Mother of the gods, if only in very truth he forbear to stain his mind with shameful religious awe. (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II, 655-660)

The fact that we may spontaneously attribute a human shape to the gods poses no problem in itself, provided that we do not ascribe to them anything that is incompatible with their essence, which we grasp in the *prolēpsis*. The *prolēpsis* of the gods is at once both sufficiently imprecise and sufficiently constraining so as to define the limits within which we can allow for different representations of the gods. The same obtains in connection with the *prolēpsis* of justice, following *KD* 37-38 (text [9]): the conception of what is useful can change according to the circumstances—better, it *must* change—even as it remains consistent with the *prolēpsis* of justice. This does not suffice, in and of itself, to *define* justice in a way that applies to all times and all places, but **it constitutes a framework for its variation or a rule of evaluation for particular situations in which the question of legal justice may arise.** Because the preconception outlines and traces its boundaries, it corresponds well to the τύπος, to which it adds a regulatory function or capacity.

⁵⁵ For this reason, Goldschmidt 1978 interestingly compares the Epicurean preconception with the Kantian schema (‘scheme’).

⁵⁶ See Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, 46.

⁵⁷ Philodemus, *De Dis*, III, Kol. 14 (H. Diels, *Philodemus über die Götter*, 1917).

Now, if we are speaking of a rule, we are no longer speaking merely of a mental image, but also of an active principle, whether it is a matter of a purely mental activity or of a practical activity. We are speaking of a way—at once depictive and active—of producing a representation and making use of it. Thus, a *prolēpsis* is, as a sensation and an affect, a *κάνών*, a criterion, that is, a rule, in the sense in which it serves both, on the one hand, as a point of departure and of comparison and, on the other hand, as an active principle in the use of our cognitive faculties. At all events, it is in this respect, according to Lucretius, that sensation is a *regula*: it is like a carpenter's square in architecture,⁵⁸ in that it is a instrument used at the beginning—but an absolutely necessary one—for the design of a building which, when accomplished, no longer has need of it. Now, sensation is surely not reducible to a pure representation, stripped of activity. *Prolēpsis*, if it is a representation, is thus a representation that is at once approximate and active, and not one that is finally fixed and perfectly adjusted to its object. Correspondingly, it is at once a representation and the primary use—a regulatory use—of this representation.⁵⁹ At the same time, preconception satisfies the 'principle of immediacy,' like sensation, because it is an act that refers to some experience, whether this is internal (for instance, contemplating within oneself the nature of the gods) or external (recognizing that the silhouette that is coming from a distance is that of a man and not of a cow).

It is not necessary to refer to later conceptions—such as the Kantian critique—of schematizing and of the regulatory function of the faculties of knowledge: the Epicureans themselves provide sufficient signs that point clearly in the direction that I have just outlined, and they have no need to analyze the *a priori* conditions of knowledge of diverse phenomena. In spite of its cleverness, there is a basic mistake in the interpretation proposed by Goldschmidt,⁶⁰ namely that of imposing on Epicurean empiricism a Kantian solution: he must have been persuaded that a concept wholly derived from experience could not play, actually, the role of an epistemological rule.

It remains to understand why Epicurus and the texts relating to his canonic treat *prolēpsis* in such different ways: simple recollection, anticipation and rule of variation, linguistic criterion of self-evidence, and crite-

tion of confirmation or witnessing. As we have seen, this diversity is implied and presupposed by the psychological status of preconception, which in itself is not a problem. The answer may be found, I believe, in what I have called the 'proleptic method': the various uses of preconception in respect to their several logical functions. We may distinguish five functions (*f*) or kinds of use, often interconnected, of preconceptions:

- (*f1*) preconception as recollection: the 'natural' use of preconception as a recollection or retention of previous experiences: texts [1], [5], [6].
- (*f2*) linguistic function of preconception: the 'conventional' use of linguistic self-evidence, the self-evidence of the connection between the thing and the preconceptions: texts [1], [7], [10] and probably [8] and [12].
- (*f3*) preconception as an indemonstrable principle: the first principle of discovery or beginning, which avoids a *regressus ad infinitum*: texts [1], [6].⁶¹
- (*f4*) the regulatory function of preconception: preconception as a principle concerning variation in sensory experiences: texts [4], [8], [12].
- (*f5*) preconception as mean of confirmation: preconception as a criterion of witnessing or attestation of our opinions and inferences, on the basis of sensory experience: [9]. On this point, the basic text is that by Sextus Empiricus on the Epicurean method of witnessing.⁶²

Let us pause a moment on this last point. When beliefs are related to the object of a direct sensory experience, their truth is established by attestation (*ἐπιμαρτύρησις*) and their falsity by non-attestation (*οὐκ ἐπιμαρτύρησις*). Thus, when I believe that Plato is coming toward me, I still need attestation or its opposite, non-attestation, which sensory experience will provide me when the man I see has come near. When beliefs relate to hidden things, they can be the subject of a non-disconfirmation (*οὐκ ἀντιμαρτύρησις*) or a disconfirmation (*ἀντιμαρτύρησις*). In this case I must establish a relation of consequence between the invisible and the

⁶¹ See, also, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II, 4, 157.44 (Us. 255). Asmis 1984 has focused on this function, which is, according to her, the "first rule" of Epicurus' method: "Epicurus demands that at the very beginning of an inquiry the investigator have concepts corresponding to the words that are used" (20). According to her, this is the specific function of the preconception: "literally, a *prolēpsis* is a 'grasp' that has been obtained 'before' an inquiry" (22). I hope I have begun to show, in what precedes, that preconception is not only useful "before an inquiry".

⁶² Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, φ, VII, 211-216.

⁵⁸ *DRN*, IV, 513-514.

⁵⁹ See, on that point, the illuminating conclusion of Goldschmidt 1978, 160: "la prénotion ne vaut que dans et par son application."

⁶⁰ See Goldschmidt 1977 and 1978. Goldschmidt claims that the use of the *prolēpsis* is something like a 'subsumption' ('subsumption' in Kant's terminology).

sensory evidence. Take for example the existence of the void. This cannot be directly confirmed, but it can be established by non-disconfirmation. We assume the existence of motion. But this implies the existence of the void.⁶³ Therefore we posit the existence of the void. Thus the contrary hypothesis is disconfirmed and the conclusion is warranted. Sextus makes no direct reference to preconceptions, and with good reason, since he is considering here the possibility of false opinions or judgments, whereas preconception is always true. Let us note, however, that when Diogenes Laertius alludes to this method of attestation,⁶⁴ it comes right after the mention of preconception (text [1]). Besides, it is clear, from the summary I have given of Sextus, that every anticipatory judgment is based on a preconception, at least in respect to function (*f1*): for example, that of a man, which is the class under which I locate Plato. Also, the notion of movement, directly derived from sensible experience, is clearly considered here to be a preconception. It permits us, in turn, to establish the existence of the void, which is in itself imperceptible. There we encounter function (*f5*), which is operative in text [9] as in those texts relating to the gods, because it serves as a point of comparison for our opinions, whether about laws or about representations of gods, with a primary notion that is inherent in our minds. The proof of this lies in the explicit reference at the beginning of text [9] to what "is attested (τὸ ἐπιμαρτυρούμενον) to be useful in the requirements of a social relationship." Preconception thus continues to operate as a criterion throughout the process of discovery, and not just as a point of departure.

The best way to conclude, now, is to refer to Epicurus himself, who, in one text, that in which he defines 'primary concepts,' explains what one must expect of those 'ideas' that are the preconceptions. This text is very dense and elliptical, and it has been the object of numerous commentaries. In one way, the book already mentioned by E. Asmis is wholly dedicated to elucidating it. I have inserted into the text possible connections with my table of the methodological functions of *prolēpsis*:

⁶³ See *Hrdt.*, 40

⁶⁴ *Diog. Laert.*, X, 34 (Long & Sedley 18 B)

[13]

First, then, Herodotus, we must have grasped (εἰληφέναι)⁶⁵ the things which underlie words [(*f1*)-(*f2*)], so that we may have them as a reference point against which to judge matters of opinion, inquiry and puzzlement [(*f5*)], and not have everything indiscriminated for ourselves as we attempt infinite chains of proofs [(*f3*)], or have words which are empty [(*f2*)]. For the primary concept (πρῶτον ἐννόημα) corresponding to each word [(*f2*)] must be seen and need no additional proof, if we are going to have a reference point for matters of inquiry, puzzlement and opinion. Second, we should observe everything in the light of our sensations, and in general in the light of our present focusings whether of thought [probably: (*f4*)-(*f5*)] or of any of our discriminatory faculties, and likewise also in the light of the feelings which exist in us, in order to have a basis for sign-inferences about evidence yet awaited and about the non-evident. (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 37-38)

There is much to say about details in this passage. But it suggests, at all events, that 'primary concepts' are preconceptions. Although this point has been variously interpreted, it seems undeniable to me,⁶⁶ in light of the table of the various functions of Epicurean preconception. Accordingly, it seems to me highly probable that *prolēpsis* is included, at the end of the passage, in the formula "or of any of our discriminatory faculties"—if not in the "focusings of thought." If that is true, it confirms that preconception is required, not only as a fresh start, *at the beginning* of an inquiry, but also *during* the inquiry.

A preconception is not only a mental image, whose immediacy is second-order or derived. Nor is it just a cognitive act. It must be considered under both aspects, mental image and movement of thought. From this perspective, it satisfies the 'principle of immediacy,' like sensation, but in a different way: like every rule, it is effective at the time of its application. It is in a given situation, at the moment that we refer and adapt our experiences and our judgments to it, that it really plays the role of a criterion. It is in this sense a regulatory schema, that is a minimal representation, approximate but sufficient. It is characterized by an incompleteness that is both necessary and positive. Thus, what is crucial to it is less its psychological nature and its content than its methodological function. The Epicurean theory of preconception permits us to identify at least five functions, which constitute what I have called the *proleptic method*. The table of

⁶⁵ Here, the verb is λαμβάνω, the very verb that is used to form the word πρόληψις. In the first sentence, Long & Sedley translate "we must grasp." I follow the referee's suggestion. I agree with her/his idea that the perfect indicates that "we must have acquired a knowledge," for example of what a man is, before we ever recognize that what is approaching is a man.

⁶⁶ I agree, on that point, with Asmis 1984, 23 and note 9.

these different functions allows us to understand why the relevant texts treat preconception from such different angles. It shows as well what Epicurean empiricism expects of an 'idea': not a simple, memorized trace of previous sensory experiences, and still less an intelligible entity distinct from the sensible world, but a way of referring to our mental images that connects them, as closely as possible, with the observation of phenomena. The Epicurean conception of an idea, in the case of preconception, is thus not a simple faculty psychology. It is above all a methodology, because the general function of *prolēpsis* is to articulate, in a single cognitive act, the particular sensible object and its general character. It is, for this reason, the fundamental condition for any connection between the invisible and the manifest. Is this too much to ascribe to a primary and basic form of knowledge such as preconception? It seems to me, on the contrary, proper to a rigorous empiricism to be able to return, at each moment in the process of discovery or recognition, to the primary self-evidence of basic forms of knowledge.

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COMMENTARY ON MOREL

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ABSTRACT

It is argued here that Epicurean *prolēpsis*, as a criterion of truth, are necessarily incorrigible, like perceptions and the *pathê* or sensations of pleasure and pain. *Prolēpsis* are the result or precipitate of successive perceptions or *aisthêseis*, but may represent complex ideas, including a notion of the gods as immortal, that are not reducible to simple images.

It is clear that *prolēpsis* was a fundamental concept in Epicurean epistemology, but it is notoriously difficult to pin down just what its function may have been. Pierre-Marie Morel explains why: *prolēpsis* has multiple uses, and comes in two different forms—it is both a “mental image” and a “movement of thought.” Morel’s careful analysis has without a doubt advanced the discussion greatly, and any interpretation of *prolēpsis* from now on can safely take his treatment as a starting point. Nevertheless, by way of engaging with Morel’s argument I shall attempt to restore a certain unity to the idea—with what success the reader will have to judge.

Prolēpsis was included by Epicurus among his so-called “criteria of truth.” Thus, in the passage from Diogenes Laertius (10.31) cited by Morel, we read: “And so, Epicurus appears in the *Canon* as saying that sensations [*aisthêseis*], *prolēpsis*, and *pathê* are the criteria of truth, and Epicureans add imaginative projections of thought [or projections of thought capable of producing images: τὰς φανταστικὰς ἐπιβολὰς τῆς διανοίας]” (my translations throughout). Let us begin, then, by seeing whether we can infer something about *prolēpsis* by the company it keeps. In the same paragraph, Diogenes quotes Epicurus as saying that “every sensation is non-rational [ἄλογος], and is receptive of no memory whatever.” Diogenes reports (10.66 = fr. 311 Usener) that, according to Epicurus, “one part of it [i.e., the soul] is non-rational [ἄλογον], and dispersed throughout the rest of the body, whereas the rational part [τὸ λογικόν] is in the chest, as is evident from fears [φόβοι] and from joy [*khara*].” It is a reasonable inference that sensations are located in the non-rational part of the soul. What about *pathê*? Diogenes tells us (10.34) that, according to the Epicureans, “there are two *pathê*, pleasure [ἡδονή] and pain [ἀλγηδών], which exist in every animal, the one pertaining to what is one’s own [οἰκεῖον], the other pertaining to what is foreign [ἀλλότριον], by which choices and avoidances are distinguished.” That these two *pathê* exist in all animals, and not just in human beings, makes it likely that they too pertain to the

non-rational part of the soul. True, fears and joys clearly are located in the rational part, that is, in the chest, according to Epicurus (in *Principal Doctrines* 10 they are said to pertain to *dianoia* or thought; cf. also 18); but they are not *pathê* in the special sense that Epicurus gives to the term. For him, the *pathê* are just pain and pleasure, not more complex forms of awareness such as fears and joys. The latter have some cognitive content, which is why they partake in rationality or *logos*; the former—pleasure and pain—do not: they are simply responses to the affective quality of things in the world, just as sensations are responses to the sensory qualities of things—their redness, hardness, and so forth. As a result, they are incorrigible: just as “all sensations are true” according to the Epicureans (cf. Lucretius 4.499), so all experiences of pain and pleasure are correct. You cannot tell me that I am not seeing red (though you can tell me that my attribution of red to a particular object is mistaken), and likewise you cannot tell me that I am wrong in saying that I feel pain. The information of our five senses, together with our capacity to feel pleasure and pain, gives us the basic information with which we know the world (see Konstan 2006 for further discussion).

What, then, is the status of *prolēpseis*, which are sandwiched in between sensations and *pathê* in Diogenes’ report? Unlike sensations, they involve memory: they are, Diogenes tells us, “a memory of what has appeared often from outside” (10.33). This would suggest that *prolēpseis* do not pertain exclusively to the *alogon* or non-rational part of the soul. And yet, as Morel notes, “preconceptions are always true,” or rather, to use Epicurus’ own vocabulary, they are “clear” (ἐναργεῖς): the Epicureans apparently reserved the terms “true” and “false” for what they called *doxa* and *hypolēpsis*, that is, belief and supposition, and belief evidently pertains to the rational part of the soul. A matter of belief (δοξαστόν), according to Epicurus, “depends upon a previous thing that is clear”—this is no doubt a *prolēpsis*—to which we refer it when we say, ‘How do we know whether this is a human being?’” So, beliefs—which may be true or false—depend for their truth value on *prolēpseis*, which are clear; and *prolēpseis*, as we have seen, result from repeated sensations, which are incorrigible. What is more, while a *prolēpsis* depends on sense impressions, it is typically triggered by a word or name: for when we hear a word, then, in accord with a *prolēpsis*, we conceive of an imprint (τύπος) of a thing, and in this process, moreover, “the senses lead.” This is getting complicated, but the whole operation would seem to work as follows. Something—a horse or a cow—is standing in the distance. How do I know what it is? Let us say I believe that it is a horse: this may be true or false. At the word “horse,” which I either say or think, I conceive of an imprint of horse, which I refer to the *prolēpsis* of “horse” which I have formed from repeated sense im-

pressions of horses—impressions which, in themselves, are always accurate, in that they are just what they are. Now, I could be wrong and discover that, on close inspection, it really was a cow. No problem: my initial belief was false, in that I matched the impressions I was receiving with the wrong imprint and *prolēpsis*. So I correct my belief, and all is well.

Now, several questions arise. First, how do sensations produce those *prolēpseis* that are clear and are the basis of our knowing what things are? Here again, I think Morel has got it right. Sensations are not just random; they correspond to the way things are constituted in the world. A cow really is different from a horse or a human being, and the *eidōla* or films that are emitted from it, and which preserve its essential properties in regard to one or another of the senses, likewise differ from those emitted by horses or human beings (cf. de Lacy 1969). So the *prolēpseis* registered in memory as a result of successive sensations are clear and distinct from one another, and can be trusted to discriminate things properly—provided we stick to the *prolēpseis* and do not add to them extraneous suppositions—and (this is a second matter) provided we stick to the primary concept associated with each word or name.

But what belief could we add that would get in the way of our recognizing a cow by reference to the *prolēpsis* that we have formed on the basis of sensation? How do we go wrong in such identifications? Here, I think, we see the weakness of conceiving of a *prolēpsis* or an imprint strictly in the form of an image. When I hear the word “cow,” I do not simply conceive of a thing that has the shape of a cow; if that were the case, I might well confuse a cow with a statue of a cow; worse, I would have no basis for distinguishing the cow from the statue. I have to know rather more about what a cow is, and the imprint and *prolēpsis* of a cow need to contain a good deal of this information. And yet, it must all ultimately derive from the senses, for it is through repeated sense impressions that the *prolēpsis* is formed in the first place. The answer must be that sense impressions carry a lot more information than the mere shape of a thing, or smell or feel. But what?

Now, I must confess that Epicurus speaks (according to Diogenes) of recognizing “the shape [μορφή] of a horse or a cow by way of *prolēpsis*” (10.33). And perhaps this is enough, at least in some circumstances. But Philodemus tells us, as Morel points out, that the *prolēpsis* of a human being involves the quality of being a rational animal (*On Signs* 52), and that the *prolēpsis* of body involves its having bulk and resistance. These qualities cannot be inferred from a static image. The repeated sense impressions that result in a *prolēpsis* of a human being must include evidence of rational behavior, not just of the human form. Just how successive sensations produce the conception of a human being as rational, or of a cow

as whatever a cow essentially is, is difficult to say; but I think that we can assume that the *prolēpsis* of a cow includes, for example, the fact that a cow does not possess reason. If we add to the *prolēpsis* of a cow the supposition that it is rational, then we have a false belief about cows. And in that case, we must return to the *prolēpsis* and eliminate the false belief.

The way it works becomes clearer when we proceed to a more abstract *prolēpsis*, namely that of the gods. According to this *prolēpsis*, the gods are blessed and immortal, and we know this because our recognition of them is “clear” (*Letter to Herodotus* 123)—the same word that is applied to imprints and *prolēpseis*. How could we derive this knowledge from sense impressions—especially since we cannot readily perceive immortality? For we do have sensations of the gods—if not through our usual sense organs, then via images that impinge directly on the soul (I am not sure whether it is the rational or irrational soul that such simulacra stimulate, but I incline to think it is the irrational: they enter us particularly when we are asleep, and cause dreams)—and as a result of successive experiences of these sensations we form a *prolēpsis* of them. Whatever the process, acquiring a clear conception of the gods as immortal by way of the senses does not seem to me to be in principle different from acquiring a *prolēpsis* of human beings as rational—or of a cow as being whatever it is that defines a cow. One can at least imagine how complex sequences of moving images might lead to the formation of such concepts (Santoro 2000, 37 argues that our idea of the gods’ immortality is based on inference, but it is unlikely that inference enters into the formation of *prolēpseis*). We must not, however, attach to the gods opinions or beliefs that are not derived directly from the sensations themselves, for example, that they are perturbed by human behavior, have passions, and the like, any more than we should ascribe reason to non-rational animals; Epicurus employs the terms *doxa* and *hupolēpsis* as opposed to *prolēpsis* for such suppositions, just as he did when speaking of humans and cows (124).

Now, not only are there *prolēpseis* of cows, human beings, and gods, but also of such general concepts as justice. Thanks to this *prolēpsis*, we are in a position to recognize what is and is not just, not only in specific acts but also in respect to entire law codes. Such codes may be just in some social contexts, but not in others; it is thanks to the *prolēpsis* of justice—one that we must have formed on the basis of sensation—that we can evaluate when the laws of our own society, for example, have ceased to be just. This is a highly sophisticated view; but what kind of *prolēpsis* is at stake here? Certainly, it cannot take the form of a simple image, such as we might have imagined in the case of cows, human beings, or even gods. Are we dealing then with two different kinds of *prolēpsis*? I am inclined to think not, just because, as I have indicated, I do not think that

the *prolēpsis* even of a cow is merely an image. We form a conception of what a cow essentially is, just as we do in the case of justice. I leave aside the question of whether a *prolēpsis* necessarily takes the form of a proposition, e.g., “a human being is a rational animal,” “gods are immortal,” “justice is what is advantageous to society,” and the like, since the status of propositions in Epicurean epistemology is highly uncertain. Whatever the answer to this question, I would argue that the *prolēpseis* of a cow and of justice are not fundamentally different.

Morel adds a further stipulation concerning *prolēpseis*: “one must assume something more than the simple ‘content’ of a *prolēpsis* in order to understand how it can serve as a criterion of truth, since the content of a *prolēpsis*, as opposed to the content of a sensation, is not immediately guaranteed by the actual presence of its objective correlate. That is why the term *prolēpsis* seems to me to contain as well a certain movement of assent, which represents the *epibolē*, and must in this respect be taken as an active substantive” (38). The nature of the *epibolē* is even more vexed than that of *prolēpsis*, and I am not at all confident that I understand it. Nevertheless, I think that the two concepts must be kept more distinct than Morel suggests. First, the roots indicate two contrary kinds of activity: *prolēpsis* derives from *pro-* and *lambanō*, that is, to “seize” or “grasp” in advance; *epibolē* is composed of *epi-* and *ballō*, to “throw” or “cast” upon. The one is a gesture of receiving, the other of tossing out. What, then, is cast forth? Most often, it is thought or *dianoia*, although Epicurus affirms that one can perform this *epibolē* also with other criteria (*Letter to Herodotus* 38; cf. 51). We may note in passing that if what is cast out is a criterion, then the *epibolē* or casting forth itself is unlikely to be one, and the idea that it is a criterion may really belong to later Epicureans, unless Epicurus was speaking loosely here. What are the other criteria, apart from *dianoia*, that might be cast forth? Not sensations or *pathē*, I would say, since they are mentioned independently in this passage, although Morel takes a different view: “sensation is not just the act of receiving a physical imprint: it also includes an act of attention or projection (*epibolē*) toward this condition of passive reception” (30). A better candidate is *prolēpsis* itself, since we know that it is a criterion, and it is not otherwise mentioned here. But why should a *prolēpsis* be projected? What we are told is that the name of a thing causes us to conceive of the imprint in accord with the *prolēpsis*: there is no hint of casting the *prolēpsis* forth here. We would do better, I think, to focus on the sense of *dianoia*, which we know to be the chief thing subject to *epibolē*.

Now, Epicurus sometimes treats *dianoia* as the mental parallel to sensory experience, such as *opsis* or sight (*Letter to Herodotus* 49); thus, at *Letter to Herodotus* 50, Epicurus says that we can grasp (*lambanō*) a

phantasia of a thing's shape (μορφή) or of its attributes (συμβεβηκότα) either by way of *dianoia*—in this case via *epibolê* (he uses the adverb ἐπιβλητικῶς)—or else by the sense organs (αἰσθητήρια). If this analogy were the entire story, then *dianoia* should be incorrigible, like the senses, and pertain to the *alagon* or non-rational part of the soul: it would not mean “thought,” but rather something like “mental sensation.”¹ Is *dianoia* a criterion, like sensation, the *pathê*, and *prolēpsis* itself? If so, how does it differ from *prolēpsis*, and why is it projected?

The best I can suggest is that *dianoia* or thought is at a somewhat higher cognitive level than *prolēpsis*, perhaps involving the processes of “colliding, analogy, similarity and synthesis” that Epicurus says are associated with *epinoiai* or concepts (the root *noi-*, from *nous*, is common to both terms). In this respect, *dianoia* is part way toward supposition and belief, which may, as we have seen, be false as well as true: indeed, one of the terms that Diogenes (10.33) tells us is equivalent to *prolēpsis* is “correct belief,” as well as *ennoia* and “general conception” (καθολικὴ νόησις). If *dianoia* too involves, or may involve, such combinatory mental processes, then it would not be a direct product of sensation, the way *prolēpseis* seem to be, and hence it would not automatically correspond to some object in the world and the effluences it emits. Rather, it would be a notion that we project. In one fragment of the *Peri phuseôs* (fr. 26.42 Arrighetti), Epicurus seems to allow for such a distance between sensation and *dianoia*: “. . . defined [or divided] by some distance; in this way thought will more securely grasp stability for the earth, and in a way more in tune with what appears to our senses” ([ὕ]πὸ τιν[ος] διαστήματος ὀριζομένης: ὅτω γὰρ ἀσφαλέστερον ἢ διάνοια τὴν μονὴν τῇ γῆ λήψεται, κα[ὶ] συμφωνότερον τοῖς κατὰ τὰς αἰσθήσεις φαινόμενοις). But the precise status of *dianoia* in Epicurus' epistemology, and consequently the nature of its projection or *epibolê*, seem to me to be still in need of clarification.

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¹ I had formerly supposed that the casting forth of thought was a way of explaining how we can attend to a particular object at will (cf. Lucretius 4.779-817); among the innumerable simulacra pouring in upon us, we project our minds onto those we wish to think about, and this is just the *epibolê* or projection of our thought. But the notion of projection is not in fact alluded to in this context

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