COLLOQUIUM 2

METHOD AND EVIDENCE: ON EPICUREAN PRECONCEPTION

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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 immediate openness 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.1

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2 As does John Locke at the beginning of the Essay Concerning Human Understanding (I, 1, 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. Sensations are, accordingly, in themselves irrefutable. 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).”

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.” The subtlety of Epicurean methodology resides precisely in the explanation of different modes of

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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.”