Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Julie Giovacchini


Julie Giovacchini’s book is the outcome of her PhD thesis, which she defended at the Ecole Normale Supérieure under the supervision of Professor Francis Wolff in 2007. The author investigates in depth the main coordinates of the empirical method of knowledge in the Epicurean philosophy, analysing some important evidence provided in particular by Philodemus, Diogenes of Oenoanda and Lucretius as well as by the indirect testimony of Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus. For this purpose, Giovacchini draws attention to some relevant parallels with the empirical method of ancient medicine, as attested in texts circulating under the name of Hippocrates, in Galen’s testimonies, and in Latin authors. Such an attention to medical sources is the most original and praiseworthy feature of her research.

The first chapter is devoted to the notion of “criterion” in Epicureanism. According to the famous *Canon* by Diogenes Laertius, the “criteria of the truth” are three: (a) sensation, through which one has the direct contact with the reality; (b) “prolepsis” or preconception, that is, the faculty of anticipating a notion: this process avails itself of the fundamental role of memory in collecting the stored perceptions of the past and recalling them to the mind; (c) “affections” or emotions, which imply an ethical choice between good and evil. This ethical connotation in the Epicurean philosophy is mutually connected to its epistemological aspect.

The empirical method in ancient medicine is the main topic of chapter 2. Giovacchini starts her investigation from the recognition of medicine as an “art”, focusing in particular on the treatises *On the Art* and *On Ancient Medicine*. Empiricism emerged as a well defined medical school in the Hellenistic age,
after the so-called “Herophilean revolution” in the Alexandria of the 3rd century BC: in this cultural context, permeated by the Aristotelian legacy, the medical experience and the daily observation acquired a scientific role of prime importance. Giovacchini analyses some relevant concepts of the Empirical school of medicine, namely the concept of “evidence” and the notions expressed by the Greek words τριβή (designating the routine of the experience) and ἐμπειρία (that carries an epistemological connotation).

After having outlined the main features of the empirical method, in the third chapter Giovacchini moves to the analysis of gnoseology. At the core of the theory of knowledge we find the formation and the role played by ἐπίνοια (“notion”). The first possible source of a “notion” is the “accidental contact” (περίπτωσις). In this regard, Giovacchini devotes a particular attention to the brief medical work entitled Precepts, usually neglected or underestimated by scholars. The first chapter of Precepts, in fact, presents a theory of knowledge with clear affinities to the Epicurean thought and a close parallel with a passage of Diogenes Laertius’ 10th book. In order to better explain the meaning of the term περίπτωσις, Giovacchini introduces the description of the evolution of the human society in two phases as it emerges in Diogenes of Oenoanda and Lucretius. During the first stage the primitives lived according to what nature offered them without any memory and any pre-conceptualising faculty (just according to the περίπτωσις). Then, humanity reached a second stage, when the acquisition of knowledge on the basis of a conscious and not just accidental experience led to the discovery of practical inventions. In the description of this two-stages process, the περίπτωσις represents the first step both in an ontological and in a chronological sense. However, in the case of lack of direct experience, the second possible source of a “notion” is taken into account, that is, a rational transfer-process (μετάβασις) from the evident to the non-evident. Such transfer can take place also in the form of a process of similarity, composition or analogy according to the description given by Sextus Empiricus.

The concept of preconception or anticipation is further analysed in the fourth chapter with regard to empirical semiology, that is, the method of taking inference from the signs. This is the subject of Philodemus’ book On Methods of Inference, in which the Epicurean inference through similarity (which is grounded on the empirical method) is contrasted with the Stoic inference through elimination (which has a deductive character). The Epicurean method of inference reveals its anti-teleological profile and is comparable to the medical prognosis, that is, a form of prognosis “desacralised” from any religious prediction as emerges in different medical texts and in Galen specifically.