BRILL

PHRONESIS 61 (2016) 160-221

PHRONESIS

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Epicurean Preconceptions

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive study of the Epicurean theory of 'preconception'. It addresses what a preconception is; how our preconception of the gods can be called *innata*, innate; the role played by *epibolai* (active mental focusing); and how preconceptions play a semantic role different from that of 'sayables' in Stoicism. The paper highlights the conceptual connections between these issues, and also shows how later Epicureans develop Epicurus' doctrine of preconceptions while remaining orthodox about the core of that doctrine.

Keywords

Epicurus – preconception – empiricism – innatism – gods – mental focusing – semantics – definitions

1 Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive study of Epicurean preconceptions.[1] It asks some new questions and also revisits aspects of the doctrine that have been under debate. It is motivated by two

1 There are only a few studies in the secondary literature entirely devoted to this topic: notably, Goldschmidt 1978, Glidden 1985 criticised by Hammerstaedt 2006, and Morel 2008 and the response by Konstan 2008. Discussion of preconceptions principally in connection to its methodological and epistemological functions is found in Asmis 1984, Striker 1996, Long and Sedley 1987. The role of preconceptions in language and semantics is explored by the seminal studies of Long 1973 and Barnes 1973

 | DOI 10.1163/15685284-12341304

sorts of concern, the one philosophical, the other historical. Philosophically, I am interested in Epicurean empiricism and, specifically, the ways in which the latter determines the school's approach to the formation and application of fundamental concepts. Historically, although the Epicureans are notoriously orthodox, and although it has always been assumed that their empiricism regarding preconceptions has remained equally robust throughout the history of the school, nonetheless later Epicurean texts contain evidence that invites us to alter that picture. I intend to take that evidence into account and outline the development of the Epicurean uses of *prolēpseis*, preconceptions, by later Epicureans of the first century BC.

These two kinds of concern intersect in a manner that bears on the resolution of the following issues: first, exactly what *is* a *prolēpsis*, preconception, and what kinds of things do we have a *prolēpsis* of? Secondly, assuming that all Epicurean preconceptions are acquired empirically, as our early sources attest, how are we to reconcile this with the claim of Velleius, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in *ND*, that our preconception of the gods is *innata*, a term commonly translated by 'innate'? Thirdly, if Epicurus is committed to the empiricist idea that preconceptions are formed passively through experience, how should we understand the emphasis that he places on *epibolai*, active focusings of the mind, in connection with the preconceptions? How do the latter relate to such focusings? Fourthly, given that Epicurus has been taken to ascribe to preconceptions a semantic role similar to that of 'sayables' in Stoicism, how can we explain later testimonies which insist that, according to the Epicureans, no third item like Stoic 'sayables' exists to mediate between words and things? I address these questions in turn in Sections 2-5 of the paper. Of course, discussion of each of these questions can be conducted independently. However, I choose to treat them in a single long paper, both because I wish to highlight the conceptual connections between them and because I want to examine whether some or all of these questions may admit of a single answer: namely, that Epicurus and his immediate followers were more strictly empiricist in their views about preconceptions, whereas some of the later Epicureans were less so, probably as a result of their philosophical interactions with the Stoics and other rivals. Section 6 defends that contention by reference to the Epicureans of the late Hellenistic era.

At the outset, I may as well confront the pedestrian objection that their preoccupation with orthodoxy precludes the Epicureans from breaking away from what Epicurus and his immediate successors maintained. There are different ways of understanding Epicurean orthodoxy but, surely, this latter must be a wrong one. For although Epicurus' later followers never criticise Epicurus and never declare departure from the foundational doctrines, nonetheless

they clearly feel free to explore underdetermined aspects of these latter as well as to develop new domains of philosophical activity.[2] Recall, for instance, Philodemus' significant contributions to moral psychology, practical ethics, and aesthetics. Many of these contributions might be considered deviations from orthodoxy, but Philodemus does not present them as such. On the contrary, he repeatedly indicates that these new endeavours conform to both the spirit and the letter of Epicurus' writings. The same holds for Lucretius and even more so for Diogenes of Oenoanda. Therefore, so far as my own argument is concerned, I assume that all Epicureans endorse the basic features of Epicurus' empiricism concerning concept-formation (as outlined in Section 2 below), but also I remain attentive to evidence about development and differentiation in the school.

2 The Formation and Nature of Preconceptions

Empiricism can be a misleading label. It is used to designate different philosophical approaches or to characterise different elements of such approaches. However, there is an obvious sense in which the Epicureans may correctly be viewed as empiricists: they hold that *all* knowledge ultimately derives from the senses and depends on them. In fact, they go further than any other empiricist on record, since they claim that all sensations are real or veridical and that they, together with certain concepts and with feelings, are the standards by which we test all other truths. These standards can reasonably be described as experiences both because, trivially, they involve the use of the senses, and because we are necessarily aware of them as being of a certain kind; we have a clear view (*enargeia*) of the facts that they deliver to us. Accordingly, the Epicureans advance a foundationalist model of knowledge: the truths of experience are the cornerstones from which all knowledge is to be built up. And although the mind or reason plays an important role in this construction, it wholly depends on the senses (DL 10.32) and is susceptible to error, whereas the senses are free from it. Empiricism has generally the tendency to be associated with a lean ontology, and this feature too is found in Epicureanism.[3] This holds not only

2 The account of Epicurean orthodoxy in Sedley 1989 leaves ample room for development within the school.

3 This does not imply that an empiricist cannot postulate entities unreacheable by experience (after all, Epicurus' basic principles, atoms and void, are unobservable; and the same holds for Quine's numbers). Rather, the point is that an empiricist ontology is typically developed within the constraints set by the corresponding empiricist epistemology.

for the principles of atomic physics, but also, as it were, for the contents of the mind, that is, concepts. Indeed, it can plausibly be claimed that Epicurus and his immediate followers subscribe to the idea that 'there is nothing in the mind which was not previously in the senses' and account for the formation of concepts without importing any extra metaphysical baggage. In particular, this appears to hold true of the aforementioned category of concepts that the Epicureans were the first to call *prolēpseis*, preconceptions (Cicero, *ND* 1.44) and to posit them as the foundations of thought.[4] Accordingly, *prolēpseis* constitute a key notion of Epicurean psychology, epistemology and scientific method, as well as theology and metaphysics, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and also aesthetics and theoretical and practical ethics.[5]

To begin, we may look at a passage from Diogenes Laertius (10.33), which summarises the most important aspects of Epicurean preconceptions and therefore is well-suited to serve as a frame for subsequent discussion:

> They say that preconception is a sort of cognition (*katalēpsin*) or right belief (*doxan orthēn*) or concept (*ennoian*) or universal notion (*katholikēn noēsin*) stored in the mind, that is, a memory of something presented on many occasions from outside, for instance that 'such and such a thing is a man'; for as soon as the word 'man' is uttered, the pattern (*tupos*) of it also comes immediately (*euthus*) to the mind by way of preconception (*kata prolēpsin*), even though sensations come first. Thus (*oun*), what primarily falls under every name is self-evident (*enarges*). And what we enquire about we would not have enquired about, if we did not first know it. 'What stands over there is a horse or a cow': [to say this,] we must indeed at some time have come to know by way of preconception the form (*morphēn*) of a horse or of a cow. Nor would we have named anything,

4 In *ND* 1.44, the Epicurean spokesman Velleius claims that Epicurus used the term *prolēpsis* in a sense in which no one had ever used it before, and that he employed that new word in order to introduce a new idea (*ibid.*). Velleius himself employs several different expressions in order to render the Greek term: *praenotio*, *anticipatio* (*ibid.*), *notio* (1.43), and *cognitio* (1.44) are some of them. It is worth adding that Lucretius translates *prolēpsis* as *notitia* or *notities* (*DRN* 2.124; 4.476, 479; 5.124, 183; and elsewhere) As we shall see, some of these terms are also used in a non-technical fashion to refer generally to concepts and, conversely, both Greek and Latin generic terms occasionally acquire the technical meaning of preconceptions.

5 For psychology, epistemology and method, see immediately below, Section 2. For theology and metaphysics, see Section 3. For philosophy of mind, see the remarks in Section 4. For semantics and the philosophy of language, see Section 5. All these domains are revisited in relation to later Epicureans in Section 6. Also in Section 6 there are remarks concerning the role of preconceptions in later Epicurean aesthetics and practical ethics.

> if we had not first learnt its pattern (*tupon*) by way of preconception. Thus (*oun*), preconceptions are self-evident. And what is believed is derived from something prior and self-evident, by reference to which we say, for instance: 'How do we know if this is a man?'

Preconceptions, then, are empirically formed concepts, which also involve patterns or delineations (*tupoi*) of a certain kind of thing. Learning the pattern of a man 'by way of preconception' (*kata prolēpsin*) might appear to indicate that the *prolēpsis* of man and the *tupos* of man are distinct items.[6] But, in fact, most sources suggest that these latter constitute one single item, which has both a conceptual aspect and an imagistic aspect.[7] In other words, the *tupos*, pattern or image, *is* the preconception, or rather an aspect of it (cf. for instance *ND* 1.43): a type of representation that also involves a concept, a stable outline of a certain kind of thing. Psychologically, the preconception is a sort of memory (*mnēmē*) of something external, which one has experienced many times in the past. From this perspective therefore, the visual, auditory or other sensations (*aisthēseis*) responsible for the formation of the preconceptual memory must be prior to the memory itself.

We are not told what is the exact mechanism by which a *prolēpsis* is formed, but it seems likely that it is rooted in atomism, and in particular the atomic explanation of mental functions such as sensation, imagination and memory. For example, as in the paradigmatic case of vision, which results from the eye's reception of numerous images (*eidōla, simulacra*) speedily emitted from a solid object and preserving more or less accurately its delineation, so in the case of *prolēpsis*, we may infer that the mental imprint results from the mechanical accretion of perceptual images of the same type and their superimposition upon each other.[8] As a concept, it captures what the images of the series, and what the objects from which the images are emitted, have in common. As a pattern, a *tupos*, the *prolēpsis outlines in the mind* these common characteristics. Like sensation, in one sense a preconception *represents* a certain kind of thing, e.g. man, but in another sense it *is* that thing. For it is formed by material extracted from the objects which underlie the preconception. The following

6 So Morel 2008, 41-2. Both Morel 2008 and Konstan 2008 make important advances in our understanding of Epicurean preconception Although I disagree with certain aspects of Morel's analysis (see Section 4 below), I am greatly indebted to both these authors.

7 This view finds parallels in the Stoics as well as Aristotle: cf. Cicero, *Acad.* 2.20-2, 30-1; Aristotle, *APo.* 2.19.

8 Stoic preconceptions should be explained in a similar manner: Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 47, 1084F-1085A; Cicero, *Acad.* 1.41-2; 2.145 These passages are discussed by Hankinson 2003, 63.

excerpt from Diogenes of Oenoanda emphasises *both* the representational *and* the physical and psychological aspects of memory functions, including the readiness of the mind to call forth the *prolēpsis* even when there is no perceptible image available (Diog. Oen. fr. 5.3.3-14 [Smith 1971], tr. LS 15E):

> What is viewed by the eyesight is inherited by the soul and, after the impingements of the original images, passages are opened up in us in such a way that, even when the objects which we originally saw are no longer present, our mind admits of likenesses of the original objects.

This much, I think, ought to be relatively uncontroversial. However, there is no consensus as to whether or how all preconceptions are natural nor as to whether they are, by and large, commonly shared. One reason explaining the disagreement is that the evidence is underdetermined. Simply, there is no text that explicitly addresses these issues in relation to the formation and application of preconceptions in general. Another reason lies in the fact that Velleius, the Epicurean character of *ND*, suggests that *only* our preconception of the gods is both natural and *innata*, 'innate' (whatever this latter term may mean), and hence is shared by the entire mankind (*ND* 1.43-5). So, at first glance at least, it does not seem unreasonable to infer, as certain interpreters have, that the preconception of the gods differs in those respects from all other preconceptions: it is, in some sense, natural, whereas in they are not; and all humans have it somehow 'innately', whereas no other preconception is possessed by all humans, because the acquisition of every other preconception depends on contingent factors. We shall return to this issue below (Section 3), but for the moment we should attempt to understand what it might mean of any preconception to be natural.

The most helpful evidence for that purpose is provided by Demetrius Laco's semantic analysis of what it is for something to be 'by nature'. Something is natural or exists 'by nature' (*phusei*) if it is instinctive and spontaneous, or if it is compelling and unavoidable, or if it is in some way advantageous to us, or if it somehow involves truth or / and correct understanding (cf. *P.Herc.* 1012, coll. 67.1-68.10). As we shall see below, Epicurus strongly suggests that preconceptions are natural in the first sense of being spontaneous and unmediated, and also in the third sense of criteria establishing truth and understanding (Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 37-8, 82; *KD* 24), as well as in the fourth sense of being prudentially important for our survival and well-being.[9] For present purposes

9 For instance, the preconception of justice covers both social utility and personal benefit: *KD* 31-8.

however, we should focus on Demetrius' second sense of what it is to be 'by nature': in accordance with it, preconceptions are natural in so far as they are compelling and unavoidable. Clearly, the point cannot be that we necessarily acquire a *prolēpsis* of gold in a land where the metal is not known, nor that the preconception of justice it necessarily imprinted on the mind of the Cyclops. The necessity involved is, I suggest, conditional. If there are golden objects around, one cannot help receiving successive sense-impressions and eventually forming the concept and image of gold. If there are horses around, it is unavoidable that repeated sense-perceptions of them will form in the mind the concept and delineation of horse. And, hopefully, if one belongs to a society of free people, one is bound to receive sufficient perceptions of acts of justice to acquire the relevant preconception.

On that reading, I propose, all preconceptions are both natural and 'innate' in the Aristotelian sense of being *emphutoi*: we are naturally constituted in such a way as to acquire them, assuming that the relevant conditions obtain. Our psychological make-up is such that, given the appropriate stimuli, these concepts will be born in us. If so, then the difference between other preconceptions, which presumably are not shared by all men, and our preconception of the divine, which all men do share, is not that the latter is natural and 'innate' while the former are not. Rather, as I argue in the next section, the difference lies in this: the conditions enabling the formation of our concept of the divine are such as to always obtain, whereas those leading to the formation of every other preconception do not always obtain. In any case, we should register an interesting fact: the extant remains of Epicurean texts never address the query how empirical contingencies determine the kinds of preconceptions that different persons or groups acquire. Nor do they indicate that differences in empirical input must cause differences in the conceptual equipment of individuals or groups of people. Rather, so far as we can tell, the Epicureans seem to presuppose that normal men are constituted in such a way as to form preconceptions and, moreover, that they acquire the same or similar preconceptions. This observation too is of some significance for the debate concerning our *prolēpsis* of the divine, and also bears on the broader question whether the empirical stance of earlier Epicureans regarding our acquisition of basic concepts may have been modified by later doctrinal needs.

Throughout the history of the school, the Epicureans appear to assume that preconceptions are *enargeis*, self-evident.[10] Not only does Diogenes state that 'what primarily falls under every name is self-evident (*enargeis*)'

10 On the notion of *enargeia* see, most recently, Ierodiakonou 2012.

(10.33), but also the Founder advances the same idea in a key passage of his *epitomē* of natural philosophy (*ad Herod.* 37-8):[11]

> First, then, Herodotus, we must grasp the things which fall under the words, so that we may have them as a reference point against which to judge matters of opinion, enquiry and puzzlement, and not have everything undiscriminated for ourselves as we attempt infinite chains of proofs, or have words which are empty. For the primary concept corresponding to each word must be seen and need no additional proof, if we are going to have a reference-point for matters of enquiry, puzzlement, and opinion. Secondly, we should attend in every way to our sensations and, generally, to the present focusings (*epibolai*) whether of the mind or of any one of the criteria, and similarly to our actual feelings, so that we may have the means of drawing sign-inferences about not yet confirmed or non-evident things.

This passage bears on both scientific methodology and semantics, and will be revisited below. For present purposes, the point to retain is this: assuming that 'the things which fall under the words' or 'the primary concepts' refer to the preconceptions,[12] Epicurus implies that they are grasped or perceived in a direct and unmediated manner and asserts that they need no proof to be established. They are self-evident and entirely trustworthy—a characteristic that preconceptions share with sensations and that crucially bears on their epistemological value. However, Epicurus and his followers do not explain *why* preconceptions are self-evident or what their *enargeia*, self-evidence, consists in. As a result, there is room for debating the question where preconceptions derive their self-evident character from. Broadly speaking, there are two alternatives on the table. According to one, preconceptions derive their *enargeia* from their unmediated link to *aisthēseis*, sensations: because of their origin in sensation, they take on, as it were, the self-evidence and trustworthiness of sensation itself.[13] (I call this the 'Lockean view'.) According to the other, the self-evidence of

11 Asmis 1984 offers a thorough study of this passage. Although aspects of her account have been challenged, her book remains standard reading on the topic.

12 See e.g. the analysis in Long and Sedley 1987, 100-1.

13 See Long and Sedley 1987, 89, who emphasise, however, that, although the ultimate justification of the trustworthiness of preconception lies in its empirical origin, nonetheless the more general ground offered to justify the criterial role of preconception is 'its indispensability as a starting-point in philosophy' (cf. Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 37-8 and below, p. 172).

preconception lies, not so much in a natural continuity between preconception and sensation, as in the spontaneity of the association between the preconception and the corresponding object as well as the word that denotes that object. For example, as soon as we hear the word 'horse', the preconception of a horse comes automatically to mind, and it is precisely in virtue of this *association* that the preconception captures 'both the unmediated nature of an experience and its direct connection with reality'.[14] (I call this the 'Kantian view'.)[15] So, according to this latter approach, the preconception *cannot* directly and immediately present itself to the mind simply in virtue of the fact that it is rooted in *aisthēsis*. For it does not have the 'immediate presence' that sensory impressions have. On the contrary, it must be posterior to these latter and may even occur when no sensory impressions take place (see Morel 2008, 32). The issue is all the more complicated because it involves taking a position with regard to *epibolē*, mental focusing, and its relation to *prolēpsis*. For what I label the Lockean view typically involves the idea that preconceptions are formed passively, without any movement of thought, whereas what I call the Kantian view is accompanied by the contention that *epibolē*, a mental focusing, is an integral component of the formation of basic concepts.[16] I take it that the former approach is more strictly empiricist than the latter and, immediately below, I argue in its favour. In Section 6, however, I suggest that later Epicureans give attention also to the importance of mental focusings and attribute to them a prominent epistemological role.

Recall that Epicurus and his followers argue for the veridicality of all *aisthēsis* partly by pointing out that they are *alogoi*, non-rational: the mind plays no role in sensations, whose trustworthiness depends, precisely, on the fact that they are non-rational events involving no interpretation at all (DL 10.31-2). Given the psychological process by which preconceptions are formed, as well as the truthful content of preconceptions, it is reasonable to expect that their trustworthiness is also due to the same factor, namely their

14 See Morel 2008, 32-3. Morel's interpretation of the self-evidence of preconception bears on his view that a preconception is not merely a representation but also an active movement of the mind, a 'focusing' (*epibolē*). See below, Section 4.

15 I use the labels 'Lockean' and 'Kantian' as shorthand which is convenient for present purposes. I do not intend in any way to say that the Epicurean doctrine of *prolēpsis* occurs either in Locke or in Kant. Also, I am aware of the fact that there are different variations of Lockean and of Kantian approaches to concept formation, in a broad use of these terms. In short, what I try to capture by 'Lockean' is the entirely passive character of *prolēpsis*; and what my use of 'Kantian' is intended to catch is, conversely, the suggestion that the mind makes a crucial contribution to the formation and use of *prolēpsis*.

16 Goldschmidt 1978; Morel 2008. See also Section 4 below.

unmediated empirical origin. Indeed, many Epicurean texts confirm that *prolēpsis* and the other criteria ultimately depend on sensation. Moreover, it is attested that, according to Epicurean doctrine, 'all reason (*pas logos*) depends on the senses' (DL 10.32; cf. Lucretius, *DRN* 4.482-5). 'All reason' must refer to all the concepts constituting reason, which of course include the preconceptions.[17] The message is clear, I think: the stuff of reason derives from experience and, unlike other concepts, preconceptions are entirely reliable only because they are formed exclusively on the basis of experience without any mediation whatsoever. Next, while the proponents of the so-called Kantian view point out that, according to Diogenes Laertius (10.33), preconceptions are self-evident in virtue of the fact that they immediately come to mind as soon as the corresponding word is uttered, nonetheless it seems to me that that claim does not cast doubt on the passive character of the preconceptions or their total dependence on experience. Quite the contrary: Diogenes emphasises the natural and automatic manner in which the name of the thing, e.g. 'man', evokes the relevant concept without necessitating a separate mental act. Let me be clear: I do not deny that the application of a *prolēpsis* entails the association of that *prolēpsis* with the corresponding object and name. What I do deny is, first, that the *prolēpsis* is self-evidently trustworthy *just in virtue of* that automatic association; and secondly that the aforementioned association involves a distinct active movement of the mind, i.e. some sort of focusing. (More on this latter contention in Section 5.) In any case, as we shall see below (in both this section and Section 6), Epicurus' interest in the self-evidence of *prolēpseis* has more to do with epistemology and scientific method and less to do with the philosophy of mind. On the other hand, later Epicureans appear interested in the latter as well, although they remain orthodox in considering preconceptions a fundamental tool of scientific enquiry and in expanding its functions and scope.

Two further issues have scarcely received attention in the literature but nonetheless are of importance for the Epicurean conception of *prolēpsis*: what kinds of things do we have a *prolēpsis* of? And what kinds of properties fall under a given *prolēpsis*? While these two questions are interrelated, they are separate and distinct, and I shall address them in turn. Before doing so, I wish

17 Diogenes Laertius also reports that 'all our notions arise from the senses either by means of confrontation (*kata periptōsin*), or by analogy, or similarity or composition, with some contribution from reasoning (*logismos*) as well' (*ibid.*). However, if the notions arising by confrontation were identical with the preconceptions, as has been maintained, it would be difficult to find grounds for differentiating between preconceptions and other concepts.

to point out that, to my knowledge, no Epicurean text explicitly formulates or answers them, and therefore my own account must be tentative regarding both Epicurus' views on these matters and the modifications that, as I claim in Section 6, have been brought about by later members of the school.

In the first place, an examination of early Epicurean texts intimates that the range of objects of which we have preconceptions includes: natural kinds, such as man, horse and cow; abstract entities, for instance justice, utility and truth; moral and psychological attitudes like responsibility and agency; and non-perceptible items, such as gods and atoms. Preconceptions of these objects always have an evidential basis. One acquires the preconception of cow through repeated clear impressions of cows, that of justice by perceiving many just acts, that of moral responsibility by being exposed to acts of praise and blame, and the *prolēpsis* of atoms as constantly moving by observing corpuscula dancing in the light. However, the evidence makes it reasonably clear that *only some* of our concepts are preconceptions formed in the aforementioned way, while all other concepts are formed by internal mental processes in which the mind plays a role. 'All notions arise by means of confrontation, analogy, similarity and combination, with some contribution from reasoning as well' (DL 10.32). In fact, it is possible that the Epicureans were the first to offer a detailed account of the mechanics of concept-formation, which was also adopted by the Stoics (DL 7.53), and which crucially bears on the acquisition of the concept of the divine. Whether and at what point the latter qualifies as a preconception will be discussed in the next section, but for the moment the inference to draw is this: not all concepts are acquired in the way in which preconceptions are acquired; and one important difference is that the latter have been acquired passively from repeated experiences of the same sort of thing, whereas the former involve mental operations that can be deliberate, and that consist in the mind's active manipulation and modification of impressions. Again, these are additional grounds for inferring that the preconceptions are always veridical because they represent the corresponding sort of object in a passive and direct manner, whereas all other concepts can be misleading because of the interference of reason. If I may venture a further suggestion, all Epicureans probably assume that the preconceptions are significantly less numerous than the other concepts. For they are both empiricists and foundationalists, and it is a typical feature of such theories of concept-formation that the basis consisting of fundamental concepts is simpler and narrower than the corresponding superstructure.

In the second place, concerning the kinds of properties involved in a *prolēpsis*: typically we have a *prolēpsis* of a kind of object *x* as possessing certain attributes F, and the *prolēpsis* entails the proposition '*x* is F'. We have

the preconception of man as a rational mortal animal, and thereby hold the true belief that man is a rational mortal animal. The self-evidence of the preconception guarantees *that* these attributes belong to the subject, but it does not provide an explanation *why* they do so. This explanation can be pieced together, I suggest, by turning to Epicurean ontology, and in particular the distinctions between *per se* substances, permanent attributes and accidents.

According to Epicurus and his followers, of things that exist, some are *per se* (body, void), while others belong to *per se* things as attributes. And, of attributes, some are inseparable from the thing of which they are attributes, while others accompany it only temporarily and contingently. The former are called permanent or fixed attributes but the latter are usually called accidents (cf. Epicurus, *ad Herod*. 68-73; Lucretius, *DRN* 1.445-82; Sextus Empiricus, *M* 10.219-27). Later Epicurean sources suggest that a further distinction can be drawn between what may be considered essential permanent attributes and non-essential permanent attributes.[18] For instance, blessedness and immortality may be considered essential permanent attributes of the gods, while speaking Greek may be viewed as a non-essential permanent attribute of them.[19] Ontologically, the permanent attributes, and especially the essential ones, belong to body in virtue of its own nature: body cannot exist without these attributes and cannot be separated from them on pain of being destroyed. Conceptually, things that exist *per se* are inconceivable without their essential attributes; and they are determined as the kinds of things they are by virtue of their essential attributes. We may infer, then, that a genuine *prolēpsis* of a *per se* substance contains only its essential attributes. Semantically, the subject-term of a proleptic proposition picks out a substance, while the predicates said of the subject pick out the essential characteristics of that substance. For example: body has tangibility as an essential attribute; the corresponding *prolēpsis* is of body as tangible; and the proposition entailed by that *prolēpsis* predicates 'tangible' of 'body', the subject term. By contrast, accidents cannot belong to the *prolēpsis* of the object with which they happen to be associated. For, since they are not permanent features of that object, they cannot be used to mark it out as the kind of object it is. And since they are not general features but

18 I am grateful to James Warren for pointing out the importance of this distinction and for his comments on it.

19 On the one hand, for example, Philodemus relies on the essential characteristics of the gods in order to make the positive inferential move of attributing to them anthropomorphism as well. On the other hand, the content of the preconception is also used in a negative direction to rule out certain features that one might consider permanent, e.g. divine interventionism.

context-dependent peculiarities, they cannot regulate anything at all. These views too, as we shall see in Section 6, were subject to revision and expansion by later Epicureans, notably, Philodemus.

There is no need to linger over the role of preconceptions in Epicurean epistemology and scientific method, for it has received ample discussion in numerous studies. I only wish to stress that preconceptions constitute a thoroughly empiricist answer to Meno's paradox (DL 10.33), serve in order to ultimately ground on experience every scientific and philosophical enquiry (Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 37-8), and, generally, constitute the indemonstrable starting points of all reasoning. For, in their capacity as criteria of truth, they test the truth or falsehood of other things without being tested themselves in the same way. Epistemically, Epicurus says that we should decide on the truth of our beliefs by 'referring' them to the relevant preconceptions (*ibid.*) without explaining, however, how our decisions are to be reached. Presumably, we may 'refer' to our preconceptions either in the weaker sense of entertaining our *prolēpsis* of an object when the latter gets problematised, or in the stronger sense of *deducing* from the proposition entailed by the preconception other truths.[20] In either case, in such contexts the preconceptions must be understood as entailing true and indemonstrable *propositions* which serve as premises in scientific proofs. And, as argued above, they derive their epistemic legitimacy from their origin in sensation, not the mental act of association of the preconception with its corresponding word and the object that that word names.

Methodologically, no surviving Epicurean text determines in what sort of cases we are supposed to employ the preconceptions as criteria, or what sort of procedure we are supposed to follow. However, it seems plausible to surmise that the procedure is essentially the same as in the case of sensations (Epicurus, *ad Herod.* 51; DL 10.34; *M* 7.211-16) and that it is thoroughly empiricist.[21] If this

20 On the other hand, in so far as the preconceptions 'must be seen', they are naturally understood as images. On the distinction between preconceptions as images and preconceptions as propositions, see Striker 1996.

21 According to Sextus (*M* 7.211-16), attestation and non-attestation mostly apply to observable facts, whereas contestation and non-contestation mainly apply to unobservable things. The opinion 'it is Plato' is attested to be true if Plato comes close and it becomes evident that it is Plato, while it is false if it becomes evident that the man whom I believed to be Plato is not Plato. Such direct perceptual confirmation is not available regarding non-evident things. So, in the latter sort of cases, an opinion counts as false if it is plainly contradicted by the evidence: for example, the hypothesis that void does not exist is contradicted by the observation that things move. It is harder to understand what exactly the procedure of non-contestation involves. It may merely consist in establishing the consistency of an explanatory theory with the phenomena or, alternatively, the Epicureans

is correct, then the Epicurean account may be roughly the following. As sensations, so preconceptions principally serve to test two categories of beliefs, the one concerning evident facts, the other concerning non-evident matters. Regarding the former category consider for example the case in which we refer to the preconception in order to assert: 'This is a man' or: 'This is a horse, not a cow.' Such demonstrative propositions get confirmed or refuted by 'fitting things to the preconception' (cf. *KD* 37), i.e. by making sure that the particular object has the properties that man or horse must have according to the corresponding *prolēpseis*. Epicurus draws explicitly the connection between attestation and *prolēpsis* in his remarks concerning the nature of justice. The legally just is truly just, if it is attested to be socially useful (cf. *epimarturoumenon*); and even if what counts as useful changes, so long as it 'fits the preconception' it will be just (*KD* 37). As I understand this passage, a proposition of the sort 'this law is just' is true if this law exhibits a permanent attribute of the preconception of justice, namely social utility; but if it becomes evident that this law is not socially useful, the proposition should be declared false. In sum, in this first category of cases, the preconceptions test opinions concerning facts of experience, which occur in ordinary as well as in theoretical contexts. We should note that Epicurus acknowledges that one or more permanent attributes of the *prolēpsis* may gradually acquire a different extension, but even so they will belong to the *prolēpsis*. This is as it should be. Since preconceptions are criteria, we should measure things against preconceptions, not the other way around.

As for the latter category of opinions, i.e. opinions concerning non-evident things, it seems plausible that the Epicureans 'refer' to *prolēpseis* in the same way in which they 'refer' to *aisthēseis*, namely by following the procedures of contestation and non-contestation. Claims such as 'bodies have no shape', 'the world is eternal', 'the gods are malevolent' can be demonstrated to be false on the grounds that they contradict the relevant preconceptions. On the other hand, quasi-empirical generalisations such as 'atoms move downward', 'void implies motion', 'all men are rational', or 'some bodies are animate, some inanimate' can be established as true either in the weaker sense of being consistent with the corresponding *prolēpseis* or in the stronger sense of being verified to be true. In fact, the evidence indicates that the Epicureans would regard many such propositions as necessary truths. For, assuming that they fit the *prolēpseis*,

may take it to establish that a given theory *follows* from the phenomena and that it is true. On Epicurean methods of testing beliefs, see, notably, Asmis 1984; Striker 1996, 42-51; and Long and Sedley 1987, 94-7.

they are taken to exhibit a necessary connection between the subject and the predicate reflecting the content of the relevant preconceptions.

Whether or not the above account is endorsed, it is clear that, insofar as the *prolēpseis* are concerned, epistemology and scientific methodology exhibit Epicurean empiricism at its staunchest. Nonetheless, even in these domains there are modifications in respect of the functions of *prolēpseis* that take place in later stages of the Epicurean school. As I suggest in Section 6, these developments too corroborate the hypothesis that Philodemus and his contemporaries held a less strict empiricism than the Founder's.

3 Dispositional Innatism and the Preconception of the Gods

There is one preconception that calls for special comment, however, namely our preconception of the gods. For, according to Velleius, the defender of Epicureanism in Cicero's treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*, this preconception is natural, shared by all men, and *innata*, a term that might appear to indicate that we are *born with* that preconception or, more generally, that we somehow acquire that preconception independently of experience. The question is, then, whether or how Velleius' report can be reconciled with the strictly empiricist account of concept-formation presented above. The situation is all the more complicated because Velleius is a fictional character serving Cicero's purposes, not a straightforward proponent of Epicureanism.[22] And, while Cicero sees the attractions of both Academic scepticism and Stoic providentialism in matters of theology, he has no sympathy with the Epicurean view of the matter. Moreover, Velleius' account of our *prolēpsis* of the divine has been judged to bear on the controversy between the idealists, who claim that the Epicurean gods are moral ideals constructed by the human mind, and the realists, who contend that Epicurus as well as his later followers attributed to the gods real being as well as ethical significance.[23]

22 I owe this point to Brad Inwood. On Cicero's rhetorical conception of 'perfect philosophy' combining wisdom with persuasive force (*Tusc.* 1.7), as well as Cicero's argumentative strategies, see, notably, Inwood 1990 and Schofield 2008.

23 This debate has its roots in antiquity: Philodemus' *On Piety* supplies ample evidence about the reasons why some people considered the Epicureans atheists, whereas the Epicureans themselves repudiated that charge. In the modern era, the idealists include, in addition to Sedley 2011 (see below), Long and Sedley 1987, Obbink 1996 and, in a qualified manner, Purinton 2001. Defenders of realism include, notably, Mansfeld 1993, Scott 1995, Santoro 2000 and Babut 2005.

Given the complexity of the problem, it may be helpful to outline at the outset what I wish to achieve in this section. I shall engage in some detail with the seminal argument of Sedley 2011, which maintains that Velleius' testimony constitutes good grounds for tracing back to Epicurus both a certain version of psychological innatism and the argument of *consensus omnium*, universal agreement. And relatedly I shall discuss the further suggestion that the naturalness, innateness and universal agreement regarding our preconception of the gods lends support to the theological interpretation according to which the Epicurean gods are not existing beings but mental constructs. My contention will be, first, that, in fact, there are reasons for questioning the historical reliability of Velleius' account as evidence for the view of Epicurus and his associates. Secondly, even if Velleius' testimony is accepted, it can be interpreted in two different ways which are not necessarily incompatible with each other: namely, even if the early Epicureans considered 'innate' our preconception of the gods, this view is likely to have been underdetermined and therefore susceptible to different later interpretations. In both this section and Section 6, I submit that Lucretius' account of dreams as a main source of our concept of the divine probably represents a later development effected by Lucretius himself but absent from Philodemus' writings. While the former can (but need not) be taken to detach the concept of the divine from the standard mechanism by which other preconceptions are formed, the latter presupposes that the gods exist and describes in realist terms their mode of sustenance and life. Both Lucretius and Philodemus, then, represent plausible ways of interpreting Epicurus' views concerning our notion of the divine, although Lucretius' approach appears to abide by the strict empiricism of the Founder less than Philodemus' explanation does.

The single piece of evidence attesting that, according to Epicurus, our preconception of the gods is natural as well as 'innate' is Cicero, *ND* 1.43-5:

> Epicurus alone saw that, first, there are gods, because nature herself has imprinted a concept (*notionem*) of them on the minds of all men. For what race or what nation of men is there that does not, without being taught, possess some preconception (*anticipationem*) of the gods? Epicurus calls this *prolēpsis*, i.e. a kind of delineation (*informationem*) of a thing preconceived by the mind, without which nothing can be understood, investigated, or debated. The force and utility of this reasoning we learn from that heavenly book of Epicurus about the yardstick and the criterion. So you can clearly see that that which is the foundation of our present inquiry has been signally laid. For, since belief in gods has not been established by some authority, custom or law, and the unanimous

> consensus about it stands firm, it must necessarily be understood that there are gods. For we have implanted (*insitas*) or rather innate (*innatas*) cognitions of them. But what the nature of all men agrees about must necessarily be true. Therefore it must be admitted that there are gods. And since this is more or less a matter of agreement among all men, not only among philosophers but also among the uneducated, we admit also this point of agreement, that we have a preconception (*anticipationem*), as I called it before, or prior notion (*praenotio*) of the gods—(for new things require new names, just as Epicurus himself called *prolēpsis* that which no one had called before by this name)—we have, then, a preconception such as to make us consider the gods eternal and blessed. For the same nature which gave us the delineation of the gods themselves also engraved (*insculpsit*) it on our minds that we should consider them eternal and blessed. If this is so, the well-known maxim of Epicurus truthfully says that that which is blessed and eternal can neither have any trouble itself nor cause trouble to another, and thus can feel neither anger nor gratitude, since all such things belong only to the weak.

As indicated, David Sedley defends the historical reliability of Velleius' testimony and argues that the above passage enables us to trace back to Epicurus both the doctrine of theological innatism and the argument of universal consensus (*consensus omnium*) in support of that doctrine.[24] In rough outline, his reading of the passage is the following. According to Velleius, all men have a preconception of the gods which entails the existential belief that there are gods.[25] This has been imprinted in our minds by nature, as opposed to convention and culture. Since we have an innate preconception of the gods as existing, our knowledge of them is innate as well. All men believe that there are gods, and what all men believe must be true. Thus Velleius infers there are gods on two interrelated grounds: our *prolēpsis* of the gods, which is a criterion of truth; and *consensus omnium*, the universal agreement of all men. The universal belief in the existence of the gods is vindicated, precisely because it is naturally engraved in everybody's mind. And the natural agreement of all men can be taken as *evidence for* the existence of the corresponding *prolēpsis*.

24 I summarise here, as best I can, the relevant part of David Sedley's sophisticated defense of theological innatism in Sedley 2011. While other contributions to the scholarship advance aspects of the same or some similar interpretation, I focus exclusively on Sedley's argument because it is by far the most thorough and attractive.

25 Velleius first introduces preconception as *notio*, but very soon afterwards he specifies it as *anticipatio* and explains that Epicurus' technical word for it is *prolēpsis*.

In the next phase of the argument, Velleius spells out the content of the *prolēpsis* by pointing out that we all conceive of the gods as eternal and blessed; these attributes too are engraved on our minds by nature. Epicurus' further claim that the gods are serene and unaffected by emotion is also grounded in our universal *prolēpsis* of the divine and therefore must be true. For present purposes, it is important to note the following: Sedley's account accurately reflects the fact that Velleius connects the *prolēpsis* of the divine both with the existential belief that there are gods and with the predicative claims concerning their essential properties. Universal consensus is supposed to confirm the existential as well as the predicative aspects of the *prolēpsis*: we all agree that the gods exist, and also that they are eternal and supremely happy.

On the above interpretation, then, we are all naturally born with the *predisposition* to conceive of the gods as existing and as eternal and blessed. Taken in that way, the innateness of our preconception of the divine is consistent with Epicurean empiricism. For we do need also external input in order to have that predisposition activated and to think of the gods as we do. This input consists of an influx of atomic images penetrating our minds from the outside. As for the likely source of such images, we should turn to Lucretius' explanation of the first religious experiences of primitive men and of the nature and causes of dreams. On Sedley's interpretation of the relevant passages, primitive men came to acquire the *prolēpsis* of the gods as immortal and blessed living beings in the following manner: they visualised the gods, mostly in their dreams, as alive, beautiful, huge, strong, moving and speaking, and on the basis of these images, which always remained the same, they inferred that the gods must also be immortal and supremely happy (*DRN* 5.1169-82). Such dream experiences can be considered 'innate' because, according to Lucretius (*DRN* 4.722-822, 962-1036), the images that we see in our sleep are formed from extremely fine films of atoms, which enter the mind from the outside and provide the materials of dreams as well as of imaginings and other mental functions. These images are fictions of the mind. In sleep as much as when we are awake, we select from these countless films of atoms the ones that in some way concern us, e.g. images that correspond to our activities, worries, desires and wishes. In fact, primitive men select in their sleep certain images of the gods over others, mainly because they wish or want to (cf. *voluntas*: *DRN* 4.984).[26] And this holds of the gods' movements as well as of their other properties or deeds. To summarise, the dream images of the gods do not derive from actual living gods and do not give any evidence about them. Innatism purports to explain, precisely, why *all* early men visualise the gods in the same way: because they are

26 See Sedley 2011, 46. Other interpreters too defend similar positions.

predisposed to do so, they have an innate propensity to envisage such beings, which is independent of all previous experience. Correspondingly, the *prolēpsis* of the gods is the one single preconception that is determined by that innate propensity of the subject, not by the nature of the object that that *prolēpsis* might be supposed to represent. Viewed in that manner, the latter provides a decisive argument for idealism (see Sedley 2011, 36-41).

I do not have the space to do justice to the subtlety and merits of David Sedley's argument. Therefore, I proceed at once to indicate our points of agreement as well as the reasons why I am reluctant to endorse certain inferences and implications of his account. Then I shall make a suggestion, which I hope to elaborate in another paper.

Epicurus' extant remains confirm that he appeals to our clear knowledge of the gods (*enargēs gnōsis*) as evidence for the fact that there are gods. Presumably, our knowledge is related to the common notion (*koinē noēsis*) of the god, which indicates that the god is a living being (*zōion*), indestructible and blessed (*ad Men*. 123-4). As Epicurus' subsequent contrast between *prolēpseis* and *hupolēpseis* suggests (*ad Men*. 124), our knowledge that there are gods as well as the ascription of indestructibility and blessedness to the gods belong to the preconception of the gods, whereas every other belief about the gods is derivative and can be true or false depending on its consistency with the content of the preconception (*ad Herod*. 76-7; *KD* 1). On these grounds, it is reasonable to attribute to Epicurus the assumptions that the preconception of the gods is natural and that all or most men share it: it is natural in so far as it is a preconception and preconceptions are naturally formed in the mind; and a plausible way of understanding the expression *koinē noēsis*, common notion, is that all or most men share that notion. I would go as far as agreeing with Sedley that Epicurus thinks of the preconception of the gods as 'innate' in the sense that we are naturally disposed to acquire it. But I should like to emphasise that he does not explicitly make these claims. Nor does he say that our preconception of the gods is the only preconception formed because of our innate tendency to acquire it. Moreover, and importantly, Epicurus does not make explicit the exact content of the preconception, with the result that there are two possible ways of interpreting it. The one corresponds to the standard structure of the propositions entailed by all other preconceptions: we have a notion of an object *x as having certain attributes*. In the present case, then, Epicurus' claim can be taken to be that we have a common notion of the gods as *indestructible and blessed*. The other way of interpreting Epicurus' claim deviates from the standard pattern in that it includes the existence of the relevant object among the attributes: we have a preconception of the divine *as existing*, and also as indestructible and blessed. Velleius clearly opts

for the latter reading, and Sedley's interpretation relies on it. But although, as I should like to stress, it is a *possible* reading of Epicurus' text, it is not the only reading nor is it similar to the way in which Epicurus unpacks the content of other preconceptions.

Furthermore, recall that the general account of preconceptions provided by Epicurus and his followers does not differentiate our preconception of the gods from other preconceptions on the grounds that the latter alone is natural and 'innate' and possessed by all. In fact, one can think of other preconceptions as well that fulfil these three criteria, for instance, our preconception of water, i.e. of a sort of thing necessary for survival. Rather, Epicurus suggests that the former is unique in virtue of the peculiar nature of its object: it is an intelligible object unavailable to direct sensory perception (*ad Men*. 123; *RS* 1; Philodemus, *De piet*. 16.1-29 Obbink) unlike the objects of the other preconceptions which are sensible;[27] and therefore the *prolēpsis* of the gods has no obvious evidential basis, whereas all other *prolēpseis* do. Again, assuming that one follows Sedley's reading of Cicero's passage, one should be aware of the fact that Velleius highlights elements that are not prominent in Epicurus' known account.[28] For the possibility remains open that, according to Epicurus, *all* our preconceptions, *including* our preconception of the gods, are natural and 'innate' in the sense indicated by Sedley: they are the natural outcome of empirical input imprinting them on the mind, and every human being has the disposition to acquire these concepts when the relevant empirical conditions obtain. If there is a difference between these two sorts of preconception, it has to do primarily with the source of the empirical input, not some special disposition that, when appropriately activated, leads us to form a conception of the gods. Finally, we should note that Epicurus' extant writings tell us nothing explicit about the god's shape, atomic structure and eternal preservation of that structure. Perhaps he addressed these questions in his now lost treatises *On the Gods* and *On Piety*, or perhaps he did not feel compelled to clarify such matters. His primary interest may have been to determine the right conception of the gods and contrast it with the wrong ones for ethical purposes, not to describe the gods in any detail. On the other hand, Lucretius' account of

27 There are also other intelligibles in Epicurus' ontology but, in all probability, they are not objects of *prolēpsis*.

28 Velleius also reports, however, that, according to Epicurus, the force and nature of the gods is the sort of thing that is primarily viewed not by sensation but by the mind, because it does not have the solidity and numerical distinctness of *steremnia*, solid objects (*ND* 1.49). The interpretation of *ND* 1.48-9 passage is controversial: see Mansfeld 1993, especially 190-210.

dreams refers to special features of our images of the gods, and Philodemus' work *On the Gods* offers an account of the gods' material substance, sustenance, and mode of life. Once more, both these later authors appear to move beyond Epicurus' known doctrine, albeit in strikingly different ways. More on this below and in the last section of the paper.

Further questions arise from a closer reading of *ND* 1.43-5. At the outset, we should remember that neither Velleius' claim that our *prolēpsis* of the gods is *innata* nor the *consensus omnium* argument occur in any other piece of evidence concerning Epicurus. However, the assertion that the preconception of the gods is *innata* is so striking that we should expect to encounter it in other sources as well, especially in the light of the fact that it counts as a special case: its object is grasped by reason rather than the senses (*KD* 1), and also it has an enormous moral impact on our life (Epicurus, *ad Men.* 123-24, 135; Lucretius, *DRN* 6.68-79). Yet, except for Cicero's spokesman, no other ancient source justifies the unique features of the *prolēpsis* by appealing to its 'innate' character. As for the argument from universal agreement: it was so well known in antiquity that, if the Epicurus had used it, we would probably be better informed about that fact.

Another group of worries bears on Cicero's tactics and methods of composition. As mentioned, Velleius is a literary character who cannot be automatically identified with either Cicero or the latter's Epicurean sources. He plays a role in a complex work of 'philosophical rhetoric' concerning theology that Cicero has carefully planned and masterfully executed. Not only it is not unusual for Cicero to assign to his rivals ideas foreign to their own doctrines in order to discredit them, he also does not recoil from attributing such strategies to the Epicureans. Velleius' disrespectful and biased presentation of Presocratic doctrines earlier in *De natura deorum* 1 is a case in point.[29]

In addition to these general reasons for caution, there are also specific grounds for doubting whether Velleius actually does attribute to Epicurus the claim that the *prolēpsis* of the gods is 'innate' and the argument from *consensus omnium*. In fact, I submit, *ND* 1.43-5 seems to me to indicate that these two elements of Velleius' account are presented as his own *reflections* on Epicurus' *Kanōn* rather than a *report* of its contents. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that Epicurus also held these views. But it does preclude attributing the belief in dispositional innatism and the *consensus omnium* argument to Epicurus solely on the strength of Velleius' testimony.

29 See McKirahan 1993. The point holds, I think, even though Velleius is not a spokesman for the Presocratics, but for Epicurus and his system.

The first three sentences (*solus enim . . . nec disputari possit*) name Epicurus twice and unquestionably refer to Epicurus' own tenets: the concept of the gods is natural; all men have it; and it is the kind of concept that Epicurus calls *prolēpsis*. The same holds for the last few sentences (roughly from *fateamus constare illud* to *imbecilla essent omnia*). Epicurus is again mentioned by name. The novelty of his use of *prolēpsis* is emphasised. And the theses put forward certainly belong to Epicurus: we have a preconception of the gods as everlasting and blessed; and it is given to us by nature. Both these passages refer to the preconception of the gods as natural, but neither describes it as 'innate'. And neither passage mentions the *consensus omnium* argument.

In fact, the latter occurs in a strand of reasoning which looks very much like a free commentary on the Epicurean body of doctrine cited above (cf. *cuius rationis . . . sed etiam indoctos* or thereabouts). There (cf. *cuius rationis . . . accepimus*) Velleius invites us to evaluate Epicurus' teachings about our preconception of the gods by studying the *Kanōn*. He urges us to gain a vantage point from which we may appreciate its worth. Assuming that we have already done so, or alternatively are eager to hear someone who has (cf. *quod igitur . . . videtis*), Velleius goes on to justify his claim that the basis of the present enquiry is well founded. He indicates fairly clearly, I think, that he does not report or paraphrase Epicurus, but speaks as himself, i.e. as a person who has studied the *Kanōn* and understood it. And it is in this latter capacity that he introduces the following contentions and inferences: our belief in the existence of gods has a natural but not a cultural origin; our cognitions of the gods are 'implanted or rather innate'; all men believe that there are gods; what all men believe must be true; and therefore there are gods. At this point, Velleius' elaboration appears to come to an end. In the sequel of the passage (*fateamur constare . . . imbecilla essent omnia*), he names Epicurus once again in connection with the further point we all preconceive the gods as blessed and immortal. No one can be in any doubt that these attributes genuinely belong to the *prolēpsis* of the divine and that they represent a faithful report of the Founder's doctrine.

It remains to address the issue of how to interpret Lucretius' account of primitive religious experiences which implies, as Sedley and other authors claim, that primitive men acquire their preconception of the gods from dream-images formed by fine films of atoms penetrating the mind from the outside but not (or not necessarily) from any real gods; in sleep or when awake, the mind selects certain films but not others, in accordance with one's daily occupations and concerns. As mentioned above, the relevant passages of Lucretius have been believed to support the idealist interpretation of Epicurean gods, in so far as they imply that the *prolēpsis* of the gods can be explained, jointly, by reference to random atoms entering the mind and certain mental operations,

but without reference to existing gods. I do not wish to propose an overall interpretation of the passages under debate nor to argue in defence of the realist case, for my present concern is not theology. I only want to draw attention to the fact that Lucretius' account has no close parallel in the extant writings of Epicurus and the other early authorities of the school. Moreover, in addition to the idealist and the realist interpretations of the relevant material in *DRN*, I should like to air the possibility of a third line of interpretation.

As I mentioned, the argument by David Sedley outlined above appears to me implicitly to make the strongest case to date in support of the idealist view that the Epicurean gods are mental constructs. Notwithstanding the reservations that I have expressed, I realise that it retains a great deal of plausibility and persuasive force, even in the light of my contention that dispositional innatism and the *consensus omnium* argument derive from a later Epicurean reading of underdetermined aspects of Epicurus' text. On the other hand, defenders of the realist view often stress that Lucretius' treatment of dreams does not contradict the hypothesis that some of the fine images entering the mind derive from real gods, while others of course do not. Moreover, it has been powerfully argued that the fact that the gods are not *steremnia*, solid objects, does not entail that they are two-dimensional films lacking ontological substance.[30] More conceptual work is required, however, in order to answer the question how the human mind would distinguish the veridical images coming from the gods from non-veridical images deriving from the impingement of random atoms or from the workings of human imagination. It is beyond the scope and intentions of this paper to address such problems. But I do wish to suggest that, in many places, Lucretius' narrative of the religious experiences of primitive men and of their concept of the divine gives the impression that the authorial voice of *DRN* does not talk at all about the *prolēpsis* of the gods, but rather about some *hupolēpsis*, a primitive conception of the gods of subjective origin and dubious content; and the same holds for certain aspects of Lucretius' analysis of dreams.

Lucretius' explicit purpose is this: 'to explain what cause spread the authority of the gods through the wide world, filled the cities with altars, and led to the institution of holy rites, which now flourish in great states and places. From these rites even now is implanted in mortal men the awe (*horror*) which raises new shrines to the gods all over the world, and which compels them to join the rites on festal days' (*DRN* 5.1161-8). The explanandum, then, is not the universal belief in gods, but the universal awe or even fear (cf. *horror*) related to the authority and expansion of state religion. The story of how primitive

30 On this issue see especially Mansfeld 1993.

men formed dream images of gods accounts for exactly these features. It is not a story of how early men acquired a *true* conception of the gods, which leads to tranquillity and has nothing to do with customary rituals (5.1198-203). Rather, it reveals the roots of religious falsehood and superstition, showing how primitive men were *misled* by their dreams and, alongside immortality and blessedness, they attributed to the gods also strength and wrath, the ordering of the heavens, the rotation of the seasons, astronomical and meteorological phenomena, and so on (5.1169-97). Lucretius' explanation of dreams suggests that, indeed, no *prolēpsis* can derive from them. For, although the mind remains awake in sleep, neither sensation nor memory function and, therefore, no criterion is available to refute falsehood with the true facts (4.757-67).[31]

Why do all primitive men have the same dream images of the gods? While Velleius explains the formation of the *prolēpsis* of the divine by reference to men's natural predisposition and corroborates it by the *consensus omnium* argument, Lucretius invites a range of different answers to the question of how the first men came to acquire a common concept of the gods on the basis of mental images. Mainly these answers have to do with the causes determining the content of dreams. Early men were dreaming of pleading in courthouses, fighting battles, sailing against the winds, participating in the games and practising philosophy (4.962-83); of victory, defeat and death, of falling from the heights and crushing to the ground, of being devoured by beasts and being involved in conspiracies, of quenching their thirst, preparing to urinate or having sex (4.1011-36).[32] Likewise, the characteristics of the gods in early men's dreams appear to reflect the values, emotions and concerns shared by all or most of them: they were dreaming of the gods as beautiful and strong, blissful and immune to death, ruling the world and causing natural phenomena, objects of hope and fear. It is possible that primitive men received the same dream images because they had mostly the same desires, activities and concerns, or because they shared the same natural predisposition, or both. The text is not explicit regarding these matters, nor does Lucretius assert or explicitly preclude that there might be some relation between real divine beings and our dreams. However, there is no doubt that Epicurean gods as Epicurus describes them lack the characteristics that primitive men ascribe to them. And this is why I am inclined to think that the above passages of *DRN* do not

31 Recall that the mind and other means of cognition are not criteria. The only criteria are sensations, preconceptions and feelings, and perhaps also 'the focusings of thought into an impression' (cf. DL 10.31).

32 It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that these lists of activities do not concern the gods of early men or any other reference to religion.

explore the anthropological origins of men's *prolēpsis* of the divine, but rather of some non-proleptic concept involving both truths and falsehoods.

To pull some threads together: first, I have argued that Velleius' account is not presented as a verbatim report of Epicurus' view about our *prolēpsis* of the gods, although that is one plausible interpretation of that doctrine. For, in his extant texts, Epicurus does not explicitly assert that all human beings are born with the tendency to form the preconception of the gods, while all other preconceptions depend on contingent factors; nor does he use the argument from universal agreement as evidence supporting the belief in gods' existence. Secondly, Velleius suggests that the preconception of the gods establishes the gods as existing (whether in reality or in the mind), and also as having the properties of indestructibility and supreme happiness. However, this way of spelling out the content of the preconception is rare and occurs only in late Epicurean texts. Usually, preconceptions do not establish *x* as existing, but rather establish that *x* is F. Thirdly, the fact that Epicurus never mentions the contingency of our preconceptions of empirical objects, but rather focuses on their utility, indicates that he may not have raised that problem at all. It seems probable that Epicurus assumed that we are born to acquire preconceptions of all sorts, and that we do acquire them when the relevant empirical conditions obtain. If this is correct, then the formation of our preconception of the gods has the same dispositional origin as all other preconceptions. Moreover, Epicurus is not recorded to have claimed that the preconception of the gods is the *only* preconception that all humans share. He might also agree that, e.g. we all have the preconception of water and of other things necessary for survival. Fourthly, Velleius need not be accused of infelicity in respect of Epicurus' writings, however. For certain features of Cicero's text indicate that Velleius does not actually ascribe to Epicurus the idea that preconceptions are 'innate' nor the *consensus omnium* argument: he presents these views as his own elaboration of Epicurus' doctrine, not as verbatim reports of the doctrine of the Founder.

What do these observations imply for Epicurean empiricism regarding concepts? I suggest that they make attractive the hypothesis that Epicurus' account of the preconception of the gods is generally consistent with his strictly empiricist approach to concept-formation: we are born with a disposition to acquire such concepts and this disposition is activated by the appropriate empirical stimuli. The fact that all of us do have the preconception of the gods whereas, presumably, we do not share in common some other preconceptions is due, precisely, to the peculiar nature of its object: since it is intelligible, all of us can grasp it independently of the features of our respective environments. In

his extant writings Epicurus does not work out the details of his account and thus leaves room for further elaboration and interpretation. According to my argument, Cicero relies on some later Epicurean source in order to compose Velleius' account. And perhaps he adds his own touch by correcting *insitas* to *innatas* for his own dialectical or philosophical purposes. So far as I can tell, *ND* 1.43-5 does not particularly favour the idealist over the realist interpretation of Epicurean theology, but rather remains neutral between the two. The same may hold of Lucretius' account of dreams, if I am right in believing that it explains the acquisition of some common notion of the divine, not of the *preconception*. In any case, however, Lucretius' account highlights the contingent elements involved in concept-formation far more than Epicurus' writings. In Section 6, I suggest that Lucretius may have relaxed his empiricism in that respect.

By way of an appendix, I should like to put on the map an idea that I hope to pursue in the future. There may be an intermediate path in between idealism and realism, first indicated by Hobbes, whose stance toward religion invites close comparison with that of Epicurus. Hobbes distinguishes two different theisms corresponding to two different genealogies of belief. The one involves superstitious belief in non-observable beings, whereas the other results from proper mental activity establishing god as a *supposed being* or *posit* supported by theory. In this latter case, there is an important sense in which god is not a fiction of the mind: for the natural philosopher investigating causes there is a sense in which he *must* believe in a first cause, namely god (*Leviathan* 11.25; 12.6) Given that Epicurean gods are not natural causes, the idea that I propose to retain is that of gods as *supposed beings*: not fictional constructs, but also not enjoying their metaphysical status independently of a theory postulating it. Like Hobbes, Epicurus *supposes* the existence of god both by assuming the truth of atomism and by attending to a criterial concept, namely the preconception. And also, like Hobbes (*Lev*. 1.2; *Anti-White* 26.2, fol. 287), he develops the idea of *supposed* divine beings within the constraints of a stringent empiricism. Given our dispositional constitution, this posit is inevitable for human beings. And also it is real, though the belief in its reality is not unconditional but depends on a special sort of mental act.[33]

33 There are different interpretations of Hobbes' views on religion, and I am aware that this is only one of them. An impressive argument in its defense is developed by McIntyre *forthcoming*. I thank the author for giving me access to that manuscript, and also for extensive discussion on many points.

4 Preconceptions and Focusings

Whether the object of *prolēpsis* is intelligible or sensible, Epicurus intimates that the use of *prolēpsis* in philosophical and scientific enquiry is somehow related to a certain sort of movement of the mind: *epibolē*, usually rendered as mental focusing. This latter notion is very little studied, mainly because there is scarce evidence about it.[34] However, Epicurus himself highlights its epistemological importance for Epicurean theoretical thought. Having pointed to the necessity of grasping the preconceptions as the indemonstrable starting points of every enquiry (*ad Herod*. 37), he adds: 'Second, we should attend in every way to our sensations and, generally, to the present focusings (*epibolai*) whether of the mind or of anyone of the criteria, and similarly to our actual feelings, so that we may have the means of drawing sign-inferences about not yet confirmed or non-evident things' (Epicurus, *ad Herod*. 38). In this passage, *epibolai* occupy the place that, normally, *prolēpseis* should have occupied among the Epicurean criteria of truth. And Epicurus stresses the critical importance of such focusings for scientific inference: he urges to pay attention to them in order to derive truths about non-evident things.

However, he does not sufficiently clarify just how an *epibolē* is related to the corresponding *prolēpsis*. Consequently, two different interpretations have been developed, each of which claims to draw support from Epicurus' *ipsissima verba* as well as other sources. According to the one (what I call the Lockean view), Epicurus held that we acquire our preconceptions in an entirely passive manner, by receiving repeated sensations or sense-impressions of the same sort of thing without the intervention of the mind. Since the preconceptions arise directly and immediately from sensations and since the mind plays no role, it follows that the preconceptions preserve the veridicality and trustworthiness of sensations and hence enjoy the status of criteria of truth.[35] On the contrary, according to the other (which I dubbed the Kantian view), a mental focusing (*epibolē*) is also a necessary aspect of the preconception, which enables us to appropriate the content of any given preconception.[36] There the matter rested, until the fairly recent publication of a pioneering

34 I thank David Sedley for allowing me to read an unpublished piece of his on *epibolē*.

35 So, for instance, Long and Sedley 1987, 89-90.

36 So Goldschmidt 1978; also Glidden 1985. Goldschmidt indicates that his interpretation is inspired by Kant insofar as it implies that, for Epicurus as for Kant, our perception and conceptualisation of the world is always mediated by the mind. Berkeley's repeated criticisms against Locke are pertinent to this matter: the ideas cannot play the role that Locke wishes to ascribe to them, if they are determined in the way in which Locke determines them, i.e. as inert images in the mind.

study by Pierre-Marie Morel (2008), which presents us with a novel and powerful defence of what I call the Kantian view. Except for Konstan's brief but incisive response to Morel (Konstan 2008), Morel's arguments have not yet received due attention. And the same holds of earlier defences of the same view, which now need to be revisited in the light of Morel's contribution.

Therefore, I intend to re-open this debate to the extent that it bears on the central topic of this paper: the nature of Epicurus' empiricism in respect of the acquisition of preconceptions, and also the question whether it gets modified by later Epicureans. I assume that while what I dub the Lockean view can plausibly be characterised as a narrowly empiricist position, the so-called Kantian view recently revived by Morel points to a more relaxed empiricism which attributes to reason a significant role in concept-formation. I argue afresh, principally vis-à-vis Morel but also vis-à-vis Goldshmidt and others, that in fact Epicurus and his followers do not treat *epibolē* as an aspect of *prolēpsis*, but rather as a distinct and separate mental act. In this respect, I contend, all members of the school are strict empiricists: they believe that preconceptions are the passive outcome of repeated experiences and have criterial power precisely for that reason. However, as I suggest in Section 6, the principal Epicureans of the late Hellenistic period do develop the Founder's attitude with regard to *epibolē* in ways that indicate a more moderate empiricist bent. In what follows, first, I explain why I reject what I call the Kantian view on philosophical grounds and secondly I assess the textual evidence that has been adduced in its defence. Thus, the support that I hope to bring to the rival and more traditional interpretation is rather oblique: it mainly consists in undermining the grounds on which the so-called Kantian view rests.

As I understand it, the case for treating *epibolē* as an integral aspect of *prolēpsis* is roughly this. Since *prolēpsis* must serve as a criterion of truth, we need to grasp it beforehand (*pro* + *lambanein*). In effect, this amounts to the apprehension or cognitive appropriation of the content of the *prolēpsis*, in other words, the active engagement of the mind with its object. Furthermore, since *prolēpsis* is a criterion, it must satisfy the so-called principle of immediacy (so Morel 2008: 30-2), namely the requirement that the criterion should deliver direct and unmediated evidence about an object actually present to awareness. But if *prolēpsis* were the mere memory of past sensations, it would not satisfy that requirement. *Prolēpsis* meets the requirement under discussion *only if* it is understood as an *epibolē*, i.e. a mental act of focusing by which we apprehend a concept or image *actually present*.[37] Next, all defenders of this interpretation, I believe, agree that the object of apprehension is *something*

37 Morel 2008, 30, and others, make a similar claim about *aisthēsis*: it is contended that *aisthēsis* too is not just the passive reception of a physical imprint from the outside, but

within ourselves: we focus on an imprint or an image in our own mind, not on an external object. Furthermore, Morel (2008, especially 39-41) makes the attractive suggestion that this active 'apprehension of thought' is a sort of assent: it expresses the spontaneous association of the *prolēpsis* with its actual object, but makes no factual judgement about the world. Why is assent important in that connection? Because, it is argued, assent serves to explain why the proposition entailed by the *prolēpsis* is criterial, i.e. self-evidently true and more reliable than the content of any other proposition about the same subject. The same holds for the imagistic aspect of the *prolēpsis* as a *tupos* ('pattern'). If the *prolēpsis* were only a passively-formed representation, there would be no grounds for treating it as a criterion, namely as the best image of what it represents. On the other hand, if the *prolēpsis* also consists of a focusing, i.e. an assent to its own content, then we are entitled to use it as a criterion. For such focusings assert the direct association of the *prolēpsis* with an actually present object and hence justify the criterial function of the *prolēpsis* as self-evidently the best image and as self-evidently true.[38]

Defenders of what I call the Kantian view claim that some or all of the following passages lend strong support to the contention that *epibolē* is an inseparable and indispensible feature of *prolēpsis*, or even that the latter is identical with the former. (1) The excerpt from the *Letter to Herodotus* cited above (*ad Herod.* 38) is taken to indicate that, according to Epicurus, the *epibolai* constituting the basis for inference do include the *prolēpseis*; hence Epicurus considers the latter a species of *epibolē*. (2) In *Letter to Menoeceus* 124, Epicurus contrasts the assertions (*apophaseis*) of the many about the gods with our *prolēpseis*, genuine preconceptions, of the divine. Therefore, it has been claimed, Epicurus treats both preconceptions and false beliefs as species of assertion, i.e. of active thinking as opposed to mere representational reports. (3) Epicurus, *KD* 24 (DL 10.147) urges us to distinguish 'opinions which await confirmation' from 'that which is already present in accordance with sensation, feelings and every focusing of thought into an impression (*phantastikēn epibolēn tēs dianoias*)'. In this passage too, *epibolē* has been believed to be virtually identical with *prolēpsis*, namely a self-evident mental act distinct from unconfirmed judgements.

Further evidence is drawn from first century BC Latin sources. (4) In the opening book of Cicero's *ND*, Velleius first maintains that our preconception

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also an active movement by which the mind grasps the content of that imprint and relates to it.

38 Again, this reasoning is intended to lend support to the claim that preconceptions satisfy the so-called principle of immediacy only if they entail the mental act of *epibolē*.

of the gods is natural and universal, then defends anthropomorphism, and subsequently argues as follows (*ND* 1.49):

> These discoveries of Epicurus are so perceptive in their own right and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be able to appreciate them. However, I am relying on your intelligence and make my presentation briefer than the matter requires. Epicurus then, who not only sees hidden and profoundly obscure things with his mind's eye, but also, as it were, handles them with his fingertips, teaches that the power and nature of the gods is such that, first, it is perceived (*cernantur*) not by the senses but by the mind, possessing neither the solidity nor the numerical distinctness of those things which Epicurus calls *steremnia* because of their concreteness; but that we perceive images through their similarity and succession, since an infinite series of extremely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods; and that our mind, by fixing itself intently (*mentem intentam infixamque*) on those images with the greatest pleasure, acquires an understanding (*intellegentiam*) of what a blessed and eternal nature really is.

According to the interpretation outlined above, the perpetual process in question is none other than the *prolēpsis*, and the fixation of the mind (*mens intenta*) on the divine images corresponds to what the Greek sources call 'a focusing of the mind' (*epibolē tēs dianoias*).

(5) Even if the connection between *prolēpsis* and *epibolē* is only implicit in Velleius' speech, it has been suggested that it becomes explicit in Lucretius, *DRN* 2.739-45:

> You are quite mistaken, if you happen to think that the mind cannot be focused (*animi iniectus*) on such particles (sc. the atoms). For since those who have been born blind and have never seen the light of the sun nevertheless, from the day they are born, know bodies by touch without any association of colour, you may be sure that our mind too can form a concept or preconception (*notitia*) of bodies without any touch of colour.

The point has seemed to be this: there can be an *epibolē* of colourless bodies, which is equivalent to our preconception (*notitia*) of them.

Two further Greek texts are usually taken into account. (6) DL 10.31 cites *epibolē tēs dianoias* as a fourth criterion, distinct from sensations, preconceptions, and feelings. If he is right, then of course *epibolē* is not an active aspect of the preconception, but a distinct and separate mental state. However, the

defenders of the Kantian view typically deny that the testimony of Diogenes is trustworthy and, in fact, attribute the inclusion of *epibolē* among the Epicurean criteria to Diogenes himself. Diogenes' motivation, it is surmised, may have been the fact that he wished to extend his list of criteria so as to make that list richer and more detailed. (7) A final passage comes from Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 2.4.157.44):

> Epicurus, who very much preferred pleasure to truth, takes belief to be a *prolēpsis* of the mind. And he renders *prolēpsis* as a focusing (*epibolē*) on something self-evident and on the self-evident concept (*epinoia*) of that thing. Moreover, he says that no one can enquire into, puzzle over, or indeed believe anything, nor even refute anything without having a preconception.

This passage has been taken to seal the case, since it defines *prolēpsis* as an *epibolē* onto something within us, namely onto a passively formed representation received from an evident thing in the world. This is exactly what the interpretation put forward, notably, by Goldschmidt and Morel purports to have established.

Compelling as it may seem, however, I submit that what I designate as the Kantian view is philosophically problematic and not corroborated by the texts. Philosophically, what is at stake is nothing less than the nature of Epicurean empiricism and what it implies for the constitution of human rationality and the search for truth.

At the outset, consider the roots of the terms *prolēpsis* and *epibolē*. They point to two contrary kinds of activity: *prolēpsis* (*pro* + *lambanein*) indicates receiving or seizing in advance, whereas *epibolē* (*epi* + *ballein*) evokes the activity of throwing or casting upon.[39] As we shall see in Section 6, the meaning of *epibolē* varies in Epicurean texts.[40] Nonetheless, Epicurus as well as other members of the school make it reasonably clear in various contexts that what casts itself forth is one's thought or mind (*dianoia, noēsis, animus*); it is not the *prolēpsis*. Even at that preliminary level then, the lexical and semantic aspects of the relevant terms indicate that preconceptions and focusings correspond to different mental conditions: the former are received by the mind, the latter are projections of the mind onto something.

Turning to substantive matters: in the first place, it seems to me that preconceptions do fulfil the so-called requirement of immediacy both in virtue

39 See the reply to Morel 2008 by Konstan 2008.

40 Sedley *unpublished* also notes this.

of their causal relation to sensation and in virtue of their natural availability to awareness. Both these characteristics are related to the self-evident character of preconception (*enargeia*) but neither appears to presuppose *epibolē*, a focusing of some sort. Although Epicurus recommends that we attend to the present *epibolai* of the mind or of any one of the criteria (*ad Herod*. 38), he does not say that we should do so because *epibolai* are more immediate and direct than the criteria themselves are. Nor indeed does he make clear how the focusings are related to the criteria or what exactly their role is in sign-inference. (More on this passage below.) In the second place, however, I think that it is a mistake to expect that preconceptions should have the same sort of immediacy that sensations have. On the contrary, Epicurus suggests that they do not. For while he attributes to both self-evidence and criterial power, nonetheless he emphasises different aspects of each: while *aisthēseis* and *pathē* enable us to distinguish beliefs reliant on future confirmation from what is already self-evidently present (*ad Herod*. 82: the same holds for 'every focusing of thought into an impression', *KD* 24), the criterial value of *prolēpseis* has less to do with their present immediacy and more to do with their content, i.e. the indemonstrable truths that serve as the ultimate reference points of theoretical enquiry (*ad Herod*. 37-8). To put the matter differently, a principal function of *aisthēsis* is the testing of particular beliefs against particular sensations. On the other hand, the cardinal role of *prolēpsis* is to test theories and to provide the cornerstone of philosophical and scientific research. In fact, if *prolēpsis* did have the sort of actuality and immediacy that sensation has, then it would not be able to do its own job.

In the third place, an Epicurean criterion is a distinct and independent test for truth. As such it be must be able to accomplish its function in its own right, not in virtue of some other factor as well. If *epibolē* is a distinct mental act and if its occurrence were necessary for the function of the corresponding preconception, it would appear to follow that the latter would not be a proper criterion: even if it could be distinguished from the corresponding mental focusing, nevertheless it would not be independent with regard to it. However, since Epicurus and his followers all declare that *prolēpsis* is a criterion of truth, we should assume that the counterfactual cannot hold. Preconceptions do qualify independently as self-evident and self-presenting states, and they are privileged precisely because they contain in themselves sufficient warrant for the truth of their content. However important the role of *epibolē* may be, it does not determine nor can it improve the criterial achievements of the preconceptions. In the fourth place, I find somewhat alien the idea that the object of *epibolē* is something within ourselves, i.e. a concept or an image. For the Epicurean criteria are directed outwards, not inwards. We use them to

apprehend truths about the world, not features of our own mental and psychological life. If *epibolē* were equivalent to *prolēpsis* or an aspect of *prolēpsis*, one's mind would not project itself onto its own concept or image, but rather on a feature of reality: for instance, one would not focus on one's concept of dog nor on the delineation of that sort of animal, but rather on the dog Spot. Finally, I find equally awkward the contention that *epibolē* is a sort of assent that concerns the relation of the preconception to its object but implies no factual judgement about the world. In fact, both Epicureans and Stoics conceive of assent as a judgement that we take to be true. And, arguably, truth applies primarily to states of affairs in the world, not to mental occurrences such as the association of a concept with its object.

My final task is to re-examine the passages adduced in support of the interpretation under criticism and to suggest that, in truth, they either support or are consistent with the strictly empiricist view that I favour. I contend that *all the relevant texts except one* (the passage from Clement of Alexandria) treat *prolēpsis* as distinct from *epibolē* or, in some cases, do not refer to *prolēpsis* at all.[41]

Briefly then: (1) In *Letter to Herodotus* 38, Epicurus recommends that we pay attention to 'the present focusings (*epibolas*) whether of the mind or of any of the other criteria', so that we may determine things non-evident or not yet confirmed. The talk is relatively loose, but one thing is clear: the *epibolai* are distinguished from the criteria; even if the *epibolai* of the mind are associated with the preconceptions, they are not a part or aspect of them. (2) *Letter to Menoeceus* 124 gives no indication that Epicurus classifies preconceptions and false opinions at the same level, as species of assertion (*apophasis*). On the contrary, the preconceptions are incomparably superior to the opinions of the many in terms of truth-value: the propositions that they entail are always true, whereas the opinions of the many are, in this case, false. Moreover, only the false beliefs of the many are related to *apophasis*; the preconceptions are not. Hence we cannot conclude that, as species of *apophasis*, the preconceptions and the beliefs of the many equally involve active thinking. (3) The meaning of 'focusings of thought into an impression' (*phantastikai epibolai tēs dianoias*: *KD* 24) is, I think, the same as that of *epibolai tēs dianoias* in *Letter to Herodotus* 38. And the message is also comparable. We should attend to what is presently given in experience and distinguish it from other beliefs, for otherwise we shall be unable to tell truth from falsehood. These texts neither say nor imply that the *epibolai* under discussion belong to, or are identical with, the *prolēpseis*.

41 See passage from Cicero, and perhaps Lucretius.

Regarding the Latin authors: (4) In my view, the much debated passage from Cicero (*ND* 1.49) does not refer to *prolēpsis* at all. Velleius' description of the process by which we perceive the images of the gods contains no reference to the *praenotio* or *anticipatio* that we have of the gods. In any case, the perception of the divine images cannot be assimilated to the preconception of the gods, which is an already formed notion. (5) Lucretius *DRN* 2.739-45 appears to use *animi iniectus*, the Latin translation of *epibolē*, in the sense that our mind focuses on the atoms regardless of the fact that they have no colour. Translators disagree about the meaning of *notitia*. Even if it is the equivalent of *prolēpsis*, the poet does not suggest that *notitia* and *iniectus animi* amount to the same thing.

As for later Greek authors: (6) There are absolutely no grounds for discarding the testimony of DL 10.31 that the followers of Epicurus added the 'focusings of thought into an impression' as a fourth criterion. On the contrary, that testimony ought to be taken very seriously, as I shall show in Section 6. (7) The only ancient author who explicitly identifies *prolēpsis* with *epibolē* is Clement of Alexandria (*Strom*. 2.4.157.44). But how much weight can we give to that text? Very little, I propose, for it is confused as well as confusing. The text begins with the blatant mistake of attributing to Epicurus the idea that belief (*pistis*) is a preconception (*prolēpsis*) of the mind. Even if by 'belief' Clement meant 'true belief', there is more confusion in the next sentence. For Clement defines preconception (*prolēpsis*) as a focusing (*epibolē*) on both something self-evident (which I take to be an object) and 'the self-evident concept (*epinoia*) of that thing'. But what Clement calls *epinoia* is, properly speaking, a preconception. So, the definition is circular, unless 'preconception' in the place of the definiendum means (true) belief. And even then it would be difficult to make sense of that sentence. If we retain something from Clement, it does not have to do with the relation between preconceptions and 'focusings', but rather with the epistemological and methodological function of preconceptions: as Epicurus points out (*ad Herod*. 37-8), no perplexity, argument or investigation can take place without them.

5 A Puzzle in Epicurean Semantics

Whether the association of preconceptions with the corresponding objects is spontaneous and passive or involves an active mental projection, all Epicureans appear to acknowledge that the actual application of the preconceptions is related to the correct use of language. Of course, a general discussion of the Epicurean theory of language and semantics lies far beyond the scope of this

study. Nonetheless, I should like to address a specific aspect of Epicurean semantics which has implications for both the early Epicurean approach to concept-formation and the hypothesis that the latter is subject to clarifications and developments during the later phase of the history of the school. Namely, what is the exact semantic status of the preconceptions? On what grounds do ancient authors compare them with the Stoic *lekta* (sayables, meanings, significations)? And, especially, how can we explain the fact that early Epicurean texts are taken to support that comparison, whereas later authors reject it?

At the outset, we should appreciate the importance of this latter discrepancy for the nature of Epicurean empiricism. If Epicurus conceives of preconceptions like Stoic *lekta*, there are grounds for suspecting that his semantics is at odds with his metaphysics. For the Stoic *lekta* constitute distinct incorporeal entities that do not exist but subsist, and Epicurean preconceptions too could be viewed as something of that sort.[42] So, in the first place, Epicurus could be accused of disregarding in his semantics the concern for metaphysical economy which nonetheless is attested by other aspects of his system including psychology and physics. And, in the second place, he could be charged with negligence regarding the sort of entities that might be allowed into his doctrine. Not only would an Epicurean version of *lekta* unnecessarily burden Epicurean ontology, but such significations would also be incorporeals and therefore ought to have no place in Epicurean metaphysics. On the other hand, these problems do not plague the view suggested by later authors, namely Sextus Empiricus (*M* 8.13, 258) and Plutarch (*adv. Col.* 1119F). For these sources explicitly remove the *lekta* from Epicurean semantics, leaving only words and things. Arguably, this two-tier view entails the metaphysical leanness that generally characterises Epicurus' empiricism, and it preserves the basic ontological postulates of his system.

Interpreters generally favour the former view, which they read in Epicurus, but consider unreliable the testimonies of Sextus and Plutarch.[43] In what follows, however, I intend to suggest a different approach: Epicurus does not in fact articulate that view, although he does say things that can reasonably be taken to amount to it. But also, the position stated by Sextus and Plutarch

42 To my knowledge, the proponents of a three-tier view of Epicurean semantics do not consider that possibility. However, it seems to me that, if one wished to raise that objection, one would be entitled to do so on philosophical grounds. The ontological independence of the Stoic *lekta* provides a relevant example.

43 Long and Sedley 1987, 101 state, with admirable caution, the following: 'If, then, [sc. preconceptions] can be taken to serve as the meanings of words in the Epicurean theory, Plutarch's criticism (which looks Stoic-inspired) will prove to be ill-founded.'

could equally be traced back in Epicurus. In fact, these two treatments of preconceptions in relation to the meaning of words and the use of language appear dictated by different philosophical motivations and dialectical needs, as they arise in different periods of development of the Epicurean school. If the relevant changes of focus and emphasis are taken into account, the apparent inconsistency in the sparse evidence about the role of preconceptions in Epicurean semantics can explained away.

One important piece of evidence taken to establish that Epicurus identified the preconceptions with meanings comes from Epicurus' *epitomē* of physics, *ad Herod*. 37-8 as cited in Section 2 above. According to the interpretation that I call, for obvious reasons, the three-tier interpretation, 'the things which fall under the words' and 'the primary concepts' to which that passage refers are the preconceptions,[44] and they are the *meanings* or significations of our words. If an utterance is meaningful, it must be accompanied by the corresponding preconception. And if an utterance is not accompanied by the corresponding preconception, then it has no meaning; it is 'empty' in precisely that sense.[45] To say meaningfully that 'this is a man', the preconception of man must *mediate* between the use of the word 'man' and a relevant item in the world. Conversely, the utterance will not have meaning, if there is no preconception corresponding to an intermediate item playing that role. So, according to this view, Epicurus' semantics consists of three basic items: for instance, the word 'man'; the preconception of man, which is identical with its signification and *ipso facto* with the corresponding Stoic sayable; and of course the thing to which the preconception is applied, i.e. a man.

Additional support for the three-tier view has been drawn from Epicurus' account of the origins of language and his treatment of ambiguity.[46] To refute the view that language was artificially created by one or more name-givers who artificially assigned names to things, Epicurus argues that, in a first stage, primitive men uttered different sounds in order to express individual feelings and impressions. In a second stage, different social groups determined by consensus their own linguistic conventions, so as to attain semantic clarity and conciseness. Moreover, knowledgeable people enriched the vocabulary of their own social group by rationally positing new, abstract entities and by

44 See e.g. the analysis in Long and Sedley 1987, 100-1.

45 The evidence of Diogenes Laertius (10.33) has also been adduced in support of that interpretation. When I say 'This is a man', I associate immediately and spontaneously my present sense-impression with something previously experienced and remembered. The word 'man' brings to mind an important aspect or description of the preconception.

46 See the impressive argument advanced by Long 1973.

coining the corresponding words for them (*ad Herod*. 75-6; cf. Lucretius, *DRN* 5.1028-90).[47] According to Epicurus, correct linguistic usage entails respect for both the preconceptual meaning of a word and the linguistic and semantic conventions related to its use (*On Nature* XXVIII, 31.13.23-14.12 = LS 19E). Moreover, error is always and exclusively 'in relation to preconceptions and appearances'.[48]

The upshot of the interpretation under discussion is fairly clear: Epicurus' sketchy explanation of the origin of language has been taken to highlight preconceptions as the distinct mediating factor that turned primitive vocal sounds into language: they are the single natural meanings of words, which have derived from the individual impressions of primitive men and have been enriched or distorted by social convention. One principal philosophical advantage of the three-tier view lies in the distinction attributed to Epicurus between meaning and reference, as well as the idea that meaning is the preconception and it is what our words primarily reveal.[49] We can meaningfully use 'unicorn' or 'dinosaur', although there is no existing thing to which these words refer. The same holds for sentences such as 'the gods are vengeful': Epicureans can understand them, even if they do not believe in any avenging gods or in any gods at all. To conclude, interpreters who defend versions of the three-tier approach tend to disqualify the testimonies of Sextus and Plutarch on both textual and philosophical grounds: textually, they claim, the three-tier view occurs in Epicurus' own writings; philosophically, it is incomparably superior to the rival alternative because it foreshadows the Fregean distinction between meaning and reference.

We now turn to the two-tier view. The testimonies are as follows. In his presentation of the dogmatists' controversy concerning the bearer of truth-values, Sextus reports that 'the followers of Epicurus and of Strato the physicist admit of only two items, namely the signifier (*to sēmainon*) and the name-bearer (*to tunchanon*)' (*M* 8.13), but reject a third item present in the corresponding Stoic

47 Sketchy or more complete reconstructions of the evolution of Epicurus' theory of language are found in Long 1973, Long and Sedley 1987, 100-1, Verlinsky 2005 and others. Atherton 2005 focuses on Lucretius' account of the nature and origins of language and explores its philosophical limitations.

48 Epicurus himself identifies this view as his own earlier view, which he probably reiterates using a different vocabulary in his treatise *On Nature* (XXVIII, 31.10.2-12 = LS 10D). The papyrus breaks off at a crucial point, and therefore we cannot be sure whether Epicurus has altered his earlier view in matters of substance as well. However, in the surviving text, he does clearly indicate that his later view is somewhat different, if only in matters of vocabulary.

49 See the remarks of Long 1973.

theory, namely the *lekton*, sayable or signification (*ibid*). Furthermore, in the context of his attack against the Stoic sign, Sextus relates that the Epicureans 'abolished the existence of sayables (*lekta*)' (*M* 8.258). Plutarch attests much the same thing (*adv. Col.* 1119F):[50]

> If even this kind of error [sc. error concerning words] undermines life, then who is more in error than you [sc. Epicureans] about language? You abolish entirely the class of sayables, to which speech owes its being, leaving only words (*phōnai*) and name-bearers (*tunchanonta*), and denying the very existence of the intermediate items signified, by means of which learning and teaching and preconceptions and thoughts and impulses and assents come about.

Plutarch spells out an idea implicit in Sextus as well: the Epicureans did away altogether with meanings as the Stoics understand them, namely distinct items which mediate between words and things and are responsible for the transformation of vocal sounds into meaningful speech.[51] The contrast with the three-tier view attributed to Epicurus could not have been more plain. But is it certain that Epicurus really held this latter? And in particular, is there conclusive evidence that he attributed to the preconceptions the very role that the Stoics ascribe to sayables?

Before addressing these questions, two remarks are in order. One concerns my own intentions: my purpose is not to deny that preconceptions importantly bear on meaning; it is only to establish that Epicurus does not *identify* them with meanings *taken in an ontological sense* and, therefore, does not take them to be equivalent to the Stoic *lekta*. The other remark has to do with the philosophical merits of the sort of two-tier approach attested by Sextus and Plutarch. And, since these merits have already been defended in Barnes 1993, I confine myself to a bare outline of the case. The two-tier view, positing only words and things, is a crude version of a fairly influential modern view, according to which the meaning of an utterance is determined by the conditions under which that utterance is true. 'Socrates' means Socrates, and that is to say that 'Socrates' truly applies to an item if and only if that item is Socrates. 'Man' means man: the word is true of an item if and only if that item is a man. 'Unicorn' means unicorn: 'unicorn' is true of something if and

50 In 'Meaning and Reference', Frege discusses a similar sort of objection. My thanks to Robert McIntyre for his comments on this point.

51 On the use of Stoic terminology in these testimonies, see Long and Sedley 1987, 101.

only if that something is the relevant fictional entity. To summarise the point, a preconception is not a meaning, but nonetheless it *determines* meaning: it determines the conditions enabling one to say, appropriately, that an object is of such-and-such a kind. Which of these two rival theories is philosophically preferable depends on many factors, intuition as well as argument. This is not the place to debate the matter, but only to suggest that both theories have sound philosophical credentials and neither can be discarded out of hand on philosophical grounds.

I should like to contend that Epicurus' known texts do not decisively show that he held the three-tier view. Rather, although he suggests that preconceptions are crucially relevant to naming and speaking, nonetheless he leaves underdetermined their precise role. To begin with *ad Herod.* 37-8 again, Epicurus claims, among other things, that we must grasp the primary concepts falling under the words so as to be able to judge matters of enquiry and not use empty words. And he justifies that claim by pointing to the self-evidence of the first concept and its indemonstrable character. While it is not unreasonable to infer that Epicurus considers the first or primary concepts to be the meanings of the corresponding words, nonetheless the text is susceptible to other interpretations as well: notably, that the first concepts could be the necessary conditions of meaningful speech or, as suggested earlier, the determinants of the truth-conditions of our utterances. However, to my knowledge, no surviving text of Epicurus clarifies this issue. And therefore, we cannot be certain about the exact point that he makes when he relates, one the one hand, one's failure to grasp the preconception to the use of empty words and, on the other hand, presumably, one's success in grasping the preconception to meaningful language.

More generally, we cannot be sure as to whether Epicurus explicitly confronted the basic semantic issue whether language primarily represents the contents of the mind or the structure of the world. For in fact, although his treatment of *prolēpsis* importantly bears on semantics, nonetheless his driving concerns have to do less with semantics and more with epistemology and scientific method. In *ad Herod.* 37-8, he emphasises the importance of grasping the things falling under the words, 'so that (*hopōs an*) we may have them as a reference point against which to judge matters of opinion, enquiry, and puzzlement' (37). What interests him primarily is the evident and indemonstrable character of such primary concepts (38), not their semantic aspects. Likewise, Epicurus' explanation of the origins and development of language, as well as Lucretius' own account, concentrate on the refutation of the conventionalist view that language was artificially created by one or more individuals, and on

the defence of the Epicurean theory of the natural origin of language.[52] The latter postulates an exact correspondence between words and sorts of things and tries to avoid the chasm between the emotive vocalisations of primitive men caused by the impact of externals and the proper use of language for intentional communication. Even if we suppose that Epicurus and Lucretius both took for granted the greater complexity of human mental processes in comparison to those of animals, including the capacity to form *prolēpseis*,[53] nonetheless their primary focus of attention is the capacity of primitive language to designate objects, not the *prolēpseis* and their semantic contribution to successful reference. For instance, Epicurus explains how names originally came into being as exhalations of breath, peculiarly emitted in natural response to external stimuli, and how at a later phase terms were clarified and disambiguated by consensus (*ad Herod*. 75-6). However, he says nothing about preconceptions or meanings in that context. And when he does mention the *prolēpseis* in connection to language, it is to make the vague remarks, first, that all error arises over (*epi*) preconceptions and appearances because of the many habitual uses of words (*On Nature* XXVIII, 31.10.2-12 = LS 19A), and secondly that linguistic aberrations are due to the fact that people attend to concepts other than the one truly corresponding to the relevant words (*to nooumenon kata tas lexeis*: *On Nature* XXVIII, 31.13.23-14.12 = LS 19E). The former passage points to the criterial function of preconceptions, the latter to their relevance regarding the correct application of names to things. But neither clarifies further the semantic implications of these claims. As for Lucretius, he refers to *prolēpsis* in connection to language in order to make a negative point unrelated to semantic issues: the origins of language cannot have been conventional, because no name-giver could have possessed the preconception of the advantages of language prior to its actual use (*DRN* 5.1046-9). In this case too, the remark has to do with the genealogy of language and serves a dialectical purpose. It is not about

52 On certain significant differences between the two accounts, see Atherton 2005. Verlinsky 2005, 90-8 relies on both accounts in order to attempt a novel reconstruction of the second phase of linguistic development. One striking feature is, I think, that Lucretius does not appear to take note of the semantic and linguistic work that had been effected in the Garden by Zeno of Sidon and his associates; nevertheless, that work could be considered relevant especially to the second, artificial phase of the development of language. If this is correct, it constitutes grounds for raising again the question whether Lucretius was a loner who kept himself insulated from the work of his near contemporaries. Regarding the controversial topic of Lucretius' insulationism, I find particularly helpful the comments offered by Sedley 1998.

53 See the incisive comment of Verlinsky 2005, 69 with n. 34.

semantics. Tentatively, I infer that, although Epicurus (and probably Lucretius) acknowledge that preconceptions closely bear on meaning, they do not press that issue further. The school's founder and his Roman follower are not concerned, first and foremost, with meaning and intentional communication, but with reference and truth.[54]

Several other passages corroborate this suggestion and indicate, generally, that the semantic intuitions of the Epicureans point to a two-tier scheme of words and things. By all accounts, the primitive men were compelled by their own impressions and feelings to emit vocal sounds *to designate things*, much as a very small child uses gestures *to point to things* (*DRN* 5.1030-2). Presumably, whether the designation of a sort of thing is correct is governed by the preconception, but the basic semantic items are two, not three: the word and what it refers to. Likewise, the signalling of the child also involves two items, the pointing finger and what it points to. The same pattern remains in the second stage of linguistic development: experts introduce newly coined terms to refer to newly posited non-evident entities. Again, words refer to things, and there is no distinct mention of preconceptions (*ad Herod.* 76). Several centuries after Epicurus, Diogenes of Oenoanda too appears to endorse the same assumption (fr. 10.2.11-5.15 [Chilton 1967] = LS 19C). The anonymous commentator on Plato's *Theaetetus* (col. 22.39-47 = LS 19F) further enriches our perspective on the matter: 'Epicurus says that names are clearer than definitions, and that indeed it would be absurd if instead of saying "Hello Socrates!", one said "Hello rational mortal animal".' While the purpose of the example is to illustrate Epicurus' methodological remark that names are clearer than definitions, nonetheless it has semantic implications as well: the proper name 'Socrates' designates the addressee of the greeting far better than the proleptic formula that, on the three-tier view, would correspond to a signification. 'Socrates' picks out Socrates, as the definition spelling out the preconception could not. The real reason, of course, is that the preconception is of man, not of Socrates. It is significant, however, that Epicurus gives an example of successful communication in which *prolēpsis* cannot be involved, and also shows that intersubstitution would turn the phrase into nonsense. Finally, Diogenes Laertius attributes to the Epicureans the claim that, of enquiries, some are about things, others about mere utterance (*peri psilēn tēn phōnēn*: DL 10.34 = LS 19J). And he also reports that they reject dialectic as redundant, contending that 'it is sufficient that natural philosophers should proceed under the

54 At the very least, he does not draw a sharp distinction between epistemology and semantics or between the historical issue of the origins of language and the semantic issue how words or sentences are meaningful.

guidance of words designating things'. Both the implicit denunciation of investigations of 'mere utterance' and the Epicurean rejection of dialectic are warnings against concentrating on language but losing connection with reality. And although Epicurus makes clear elsewhere that attending to *prolēpsis* ensures, precisely, that we remain grounded in reality, nevertheless, in the present instance as well as in others, he chooses to highlight only words and things. He does not mention preconceptions—namely, on the two-tier view, the concepts governing the conditions under which our utterances are true.

To conclude, the attribution by Sextus and Plutarch of the two-tier view to Epicurus is philosophically creditable and consistent with, or corroborated by, independent evidence. Also, it is consonant with the strict empiricism of the Founder and his early followers, since the two-tier view does not treat meanings in ontological terms and, therefore, cannot be suspected of introducing subsisting incorporeal entities into the Epicurean system. In fact, the semantic intuitions underlying the two-tier view manifest themselves in later as well as earlier Epicurean texts. Why did the two-tier view not receive explicit formulation by Epicurus? Because, I have suggested, his extant remains indicate that he did not have an intrinsic interest in semantics proper, as the Stoics did. Nor did Lucretius, as far as the evidence goes. In sharp contrast, however, the evidence of Sextus and Plutarch points to a worry about the way in which semantics may bear on ontology. In the next section of the paper, I shall comment further about this last point and I shall speculate on the probable origin and dialectical purpose of the move attested by Sextus and Plutarch.

6 Preconceptions in Late Epicureanism: Speculations and Remarks

Epicurus' doctrine of *prolēpsis* lies at the core of his system and, as such, it was never abandoned by his later followers. However, contrary to common assumption, the Epicureans of the late Hellenistic and Roman period elaborate in different ways the original concept and its uses. To conclude the present study, I wish to outline some of these developments and speculate on the reasons that may have motivated them. To the extent that this is possible, I shall discuss the different aspects and problems of the preconceptions in the order followed above.

At the outset, it is useful to register that, while Epicurus and his early associates are known to use *prolēpsis* in a rigorous technical sense, this is not always the case in late Epicureanism. Cicero's characters as well as Philodemus in his extant works, for the most part, employ *prolēpsis* or its Latin equivalents (*prenotio, anticipatio*) in a technical manner to refer to empirically formed

fundamental notions serving as criteria of truth.[55] They include pleasure (Cicero, *De fin*. 1.31; 2.16), god (*ND* 1.43-5; Philodemus, *De piet*. 5.131-44 Obbink), but also poverty (Cicero, *De oec*. 5.1-4) and property management (*De oec*. 20.1-32). However, Lucretius uses *notitia* or *notities* (his preferred renderings of *prolēpsis*) sometimes in a rigidly technical manner to refer, narrowly, to preconceptions, but other times in a looser way to indicate preconceptions or other types of concepts.[56] On the one hand, for instance, when the poet asserts that 'you will find that it is, first of all, from the senses that the concept of truth (*notitiem veri*) has come, and that the senses cannot be refuted' (Lucretius, *DRN* 4.478-80), his mention of the sensory origin of the *notities* and of the irrefutability of the senses confirms that, here, *notities* corresponds to *prolēpsis*. Something similar holds for the following anti-creationist argument: 'Wherefrom was a pattern (*exemplum*) for making things and the preconception itself of mankind was first implanted (*insita*) in the gods, so that they would know (*scirent*) what they wished to make and they would see it (*viderent*) in their mind?' (*DRN* 5.181-3). On the other hand, for example, assuming that Epicurus' original notion of *prolēpsis* entails the proposition '*x* is F', Lucretius employs *notitia* in a non-standard way when he claims that many things, such as our senses and our limbs 'were first engendered and then gave rise to the (pre)conception of their usefulness (*notitiam utilitatis*)' (4.853-4). For, strictly speaking, we have a preconception of *x* such as to consider *x* useful, not a preconception of the usefulness of *x*.

The same observation applies to the poet's attack against the conventional origin of language (5.1046-9):

> If others had not used these terms between themselves, wherefrom was that (pre)conception of usefulness implanted in him [sc. the original name-giver] and where from did he first gain such power as to know what he wanted to do and to see it in his mind?

Again, the *notitia* under discussion is not of language as useful, but of the usefulness of linguistic terms. So, in such cases, either Lucretius extends the scope of preconception to comprise new usages, or he sometimes employs *notitia*

55 Either Cicero uses Philodemus as a principal source on Epicureanism, or both he and Philodemus draw from the same sources that may be traced back to the version of Epicureanism favoured by Zeno of Sidon: see Tsouna 2001.

56 Perhaps the loss of any prefix to *notitia* or *notities* is, precisely, a sign of the fact that Lucretius moves from a more technical and specific notion of *prolēpsis* to a less technical or more general one.

in a different, more casual manner than his contemporaries.[57] One possibility is that this variation is due to poetic license. Another is that *prolēpsis* and its Latin counterparts have shed some of their rigidly empiricist connotations by around the first century BC.[58] This latter hypothesis draws support from the fact that Sextus' Epicurean sources employ *prolēpseis* and *ennoiai* (concepts) synonymously, in order to confront the Sceptic with a version of Meno's paradox (*M* 8.331-2a).[59] In a similar vein, later Stoic and Academic authors sometimes employ *prolēpsis* and its Latin equivalents to designate, indiscriminately, preconceptions or other types of concepts (cf. Cicero, *Acad.* 2.30-1).[60]

The first century BC also witnesses significant changes concerning the sorts of things that we have *prolēpseis* of, as well as the domains to which these latter apply. First of all, although the papyrological evidence is uncertain, nonetheless it seems that Philodemus introduces preconceptions of at least two new items, namely infinity and time. In a lacunose passage of *On Piety* (66.3-6 Obbink), he says that 'all . . . is thought of as a *prolēpsis*, just as time is defined'. So far as we know, the preconceptions of both 'all' and 'time' represent an innovation with regard to Epicurus. For he does not mention the former in his extant writings, whereas he explicitly states that there is no *prolēpsis* of the latter: time is 'a certain peculiar accident' associated with other accidents of body (*ad Herod.* 72-3) or, as Demetrius Laco phrases Epicurus' view, time is 'an accident of accidents' (Sextus, *M* 10.219). There is no basis for surmising what could be Philodemus' motivation for the above additions to the stock of Epicurean *prolēpseis*. However, 'all' is probably conceived as an incorporeal, and the same holds for time. And it is worth noting that time finds a parallel in the Stoic list of incorporeals. Furthermore, it is not impossible that two other items on that list, namely void and place, might be conceptually relevant to Philodemus' 'all' (*M* 10.218).[61]

Unlike the early authorities of the Garden who, at best, have sketchy views regarding areas such as rhetoric and aesthetics, Epicurus' later followers and especially Philodemus demonstrate a keen interest in these subjects, as do their Stoic rivals. Of course, Philodemus does not present his engagement in debates

57 Similar remarks apply to first century BC uses of *epibolē*, mental 'focusing' See below, pp. 213-15.

58 Very occasionally, Philodemus too opts for this usage.

59 In the same passage, Sextus too treats these terms as synonyms.

60 A notable exception is Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.22.1-3.9-10 (= LS 40S).

61 The Stoic ontological stemma contains four *asōmata*, incorporeals: void, place, time and *lekton*, sayable.

concerning rhetoric,[62] poetry, and music as departures from orthodoxy, but as sustained attempts to explore and elaborate aspects of the school's foundational writings. He adopts a similar attitude with regard to another domain of dialectical disagreement, namely the proper way of administering one's estate in accordance with the values of the philosophical life.[63] For, although the founders of the Garden confronted both the Socratics and the Peripatetics on that subject, Philodemus has to face new challenges resulting from the social and economic conditions of the late Republic. If he revives the older debate, he does so because it is philosophically pertinent to his own interests and because he wishes to show that his extensive immersion in the subject is orthodox and fully justified. In all these cases, Philodemus conducts his dialectical arguments in proper Epicurean fashion and following roughly the same method: he appeals to preconception where this is appropriate, and he contends that the view of his own school captures the relevant *prolēpsis* whereas its rival does not.

Before proceeding, it is useful to consider the following remarks. In the context of the debates mentioned above, Philodemus advances what looks like a new kind of preconception: complex concepts consisting of the evaluative adjective *agathos* (/-*ē* /-*on*), 'good', and a common noun pertaining to the relevant fields of enquiry: the preconception of good verse, of the good poem,[64] and of the good property manager. His idea may be that there is a *prolēpsis* of good verse distinct from the *prolēpsis* of verse, a *prolēpsis* of the good poem distinct from that of a poem, etc. Alternatively, Philodemus' thought could be that there is one *prolēpsis*, of verse or of a poem or of a property manager, which paradigmatically entails what it is to be a *good* verse, a *good* poem, or a *good* property manager. Anyway, the novelty has to do both with the nature of these preconceptions, i.e. the fact that they derive from new philosophical domains, and with their presentation as complex concepts entailing an explicit evaluative element. Furthermore, Philodemus occasionally draws distinctions in respect of the same concept or between one concept and another. For exam-

62 Specifically, the core of the debate concerns the question whether rhetoric is a *technē*, art: see Blank 1995.

63 Philodemus' treatise *On Property Management* is the most important document of this debate during the period under discussion. Discussions of the contents of that treatise, as well as of the broader issues concerning *oikonomia*, property management, are found in Tsouna 2007, 163-94, and Tsouna 2012, pp. xi-xlv. Natali 1995 gives a survey of ancient philosophical approaches to *oikonomia* during the fourth century BC and the Hellenistic era.

64 A detailed overview of this debate is found in the introduction of Janko 2000. Important issues of Epicurean poetic theory and practice are discussed in Obbink 1995.

ple, he points out that there are more or less common usages of the term 'rhetor' in accordance with the *prolēpsis* (Philodemus, *Rhet*. i. 244.15 Sudhaus) and, as we shall see below, the same holds for the terms 'property manager' and 'money-maker'. Also, he suggests that some *prolēpseis* are clearer and more determinate than others (*Rhet*. ii. 189.5-8 Sudhaus), and some require information and skill in order to be formed whereas others none at all. Compare the Stoic claim that rational impressions are *noēseis*, concepts, and of them some involve expertise but others not (DL 7.51). It is possible that Philodemus' suggestion that preconceptions differ in both their clarity and the expertise necessary for their formation reflects, quite precisely, his reaction to the Stoic view. And also, it indicates that he is less rigidly empiricist with regard to the physio-psychological mechanism of concept-formation: not all preconceptions result, passively and automatically, from repeated impressions of the same sort of thing; rather, some of them originate artfully, through the operations of the human mind.

The following examples from Philodemus illustrate the nature of proleptic arguments, the types of problems that they address, and their methodological role in late Epicureanism.

In the *Rhetoric*, Philodemus confronts the vexed question whether rhetoric qualifies as an art (*technē*), and he maintains that sophistic or epideictic rhetoric is a *technē* whereas political rhetoric and forensic rhetoric are not. At the outset, however, he clears the ground by rejecting a rival position (*Rhet*. i. 53.3-22 Sudhaus):

> Nor should we endorse the position of those who state the following: that rhetoric is not an art (*technē*), provided that one follows the preconception of art as that which has a methodical character and stability; and that it is (only) if one uses 'art' also as a term for general observance of rules which aims at that which is for the most part and according to likelihood, as do medicine and navigation, that rhetoric is an art. For to start with, they expound their case as if it were not the preconception to speak of it in both ways, and it were just some people's whim to use the term in the latter way.

Philodemus' opponents, then, who are probably some other Epicurean group, argue that the *prolēpsis* of art establishes that an art is a coherent and methodical body of knowledge; and since no branch of rhetoric fulfils these conditions, no branch of rhetoric qualifies as an art. Only if one adopts an extended and looser usage of 'art', can rhetoric be regarded a *technē*. According to one reading, Philodemus' retort is that both the narrow and the extended use fall within

the preconception of art. According to another, he responds that, in fact, there are two preconceptions of art, one corresponding to the so-called firm arts, the other corresponding to the so-called stochastic arts.[65] On either interpretation, each side of the debate assumes that the success or failure of the argument crucially depends on attending to the preconception(s).

Another important passage is this (*Rhet*. i.254.25-255.20 Sudhaus):

> The philosophers of our school say that [sc. our concepts of] what is just, good, <and beautiful> are the same as the concepts of the many, but that the former differ from the latter in this respect only: they apprehend these concepts not only in a passive manner but using conjectural reasoning, and they do not often forget them <but always measure> against indifferents the things which occupy the place of the most important goods. As for the things which bring about the moral end, they [sc. Epicurean philosophers] do not hold them to be the same as the many do, for instance offices and statesmanship and the destruction of nations and everything similar to these things. Likewise, we also accept as being just and good the thoughts in accordance with the preconceptions that they [sc. the many] look at, but we <actually> deviate from the beliefs of the <populace> regarding the things which fit in the <preconceptions>.

Philodemus' position is that epideictic orators as well as philosophers are better off than political orators. For the latter have no expert or useful advice to give about practical and moral matters. On the other hand, epideictic orators do not make it their task to give such advice. Only Epicurean philosophers are in a position to do so for three reasons, all of which have to do with their grasp of the relevant preconceptions. First, although they have the same moral and aesthetic preconceptions as the many, they cognise them in a different way, i.e. not passively but through a certain sort of empirically based reasoning. Secondly, the followers of Epicurus make appropriate use of their preconceptions by bringing them regularly to bear on moral choice, whereas the many do not. Thirdly, Epicurus' doctrine enables its adherents to judge correctly the things that match each preconception, while the many entertain false beliefs about that matter. The facts that Philodemus distinguishes between different ways of acquiring and using the *prolēpseis*, and also emphasises the role of reasoning in a philosopher's apprehension of preconceptions, may lend addi-

65 I thank Malcolm Schofield and David Sedley for their observations on this passage. See also Blank 1993, 593-6.

tional plausibility to the hypothesis that he relaxes his commitment to a rigid empiricism in respect of concept-formation.

In the first book of the *Poetics*, Philodemus appeals to the preconceptions of a good poem and of good verse to counter Heracleodorus. This critic held that the content of a poem lies outside the poetic art, that genre and diction and style can be mixed in any way whatsoever and, worse, that artfully composed prose with a great content counts as poetry (cf. *De poem*. i. 199.1 *ff*. Janko). Philodemus retorts that Heracleodorus fails to take into account the preconception. He says more about this in the second book of *On Poems*, where he remarks that 'we all conceive of the poem not as a humming and a beat, but as words which signify a thought from being composed in a certain way' (*De poem*. ii. N 1074b fr. 21 + 1081b fr. 8 sup., 6-11).[66] Heracleodorus, however, does not describe good poetry in accordance with that preconception,[67] and he also overlooks the difference between plain verse and good verse. 'Indeed, as I said, they [sc. Heracleodorus, Crates and perhaps Andromenides][68] neither regard a verse as something different from a good verse, nor say that a verse and a good verse are examined by a different criterion' (*De poem*. i. 194.18-24).[69]

Lastly, we should look at an excerpt from Philodemus' treatise *On Property Management*. The dialectical context is this: Philodemus' general aim is to examine whether the philosopher may engage in activities concerning the management of his estate (*oikonomia*), and also to what extent and in what manner he may do so. He draws a sharp contrast between a traditional conception of *oikonomia* marked by the aggressive and single-minded pursuit of wealth, and an Epicurean *oikonomia* determined throughout by the hedonistic calculus. He also contrasts the traditional *oikonomos*, property manager, who acts solely in accordance with quantitative criteria ('the more and the less'), with the Epicurean sage, who regulates his financial activities by referring to ethical values. Of course, these contrasts aim to establish the superiority of the Epicurean property manager with regard to the traditional *oikonomos*. Nevertheless, the objection might be raised that the Epicurean sage may be a better *person* than his pedestrian counterpart but, surely, he must be a worse *manager* and a worse money-maker (*chrēmatistēs*). To settle this matter,

66 See Janko 2000, 419 with n. 6. I use Janko's text and translation of *On Poems* 1, and I am also indebted to his commentary and notes.

67 The term *prolēpsis* occurs in *De poem*. i. 193.20.

68 Cf. Janko 2000, 421 with n. 1.

69 Also, in *On Poems* 5, Philodemus appeals to the preconception of the goodness of a poem in order to refute the view that what we mean by the goodness of a poem is moral goodness (*De poem.* v. col. 30.32-6 Jensen).

Philodemus appeals to the preconception of the good property manager (*agathos oikonomos*) or the good money-maker (*agathos chrēmatistēs*) (*De oec.* 20.1-32):[70]

> We must not <absurdly> violate this [sc. the meaning of the expression 'the good money-maker'] through the ordinary use of language, just as sophists do, especially as we would be showing nothing about the acquisition and use of wealth pertaining to the sage. Rather we must refer to the preconception that we possess about the good money-maker, ask in whom the content of that preconception is substantiated and in what manner that person makes money, and ascribe the predicate 'good money-maker' to whoever it may be in whom those features are attested. Just for this reason, if we want to claim that, in preconception, the good money-maker is the one who acquires and takes care of wealth in accordance with the useful, then we must proclaim above all the sage as such a man. But if, on the other hand, in preconception we apply the quality of the good money-maker rather to the man who obtains for himself many possessions with ability and expertise, and also not in a dishonourable way but lawfully, however much it may be true that [in this mode of acquisition] he encounters <more sufferings> than pleasures, then we must affirm that it is people other than the sage who belong to that category.

Here, Philodemus sets out two different ways of analysing the concept of the good money-maker. According to the former, the good chrematist is the person who performs his economic activities with a view to what is useful for, or conducive to, pleasure; hence, he is the philosopher. According to the latter, the good chrematist is the financial expert, i.e. someone who painstakingly and lawfully amasses great wealth. Philodemus invites us to consider which one of these two options captures in fact the original *prolēpsis*, assuming, of course, that the description which encapsulates the original *prolēpsis* is the correct one. However, the issue is left open only in form. Philodemus has argued beforehand that the sage cannot at any rate be considered a *bad* manager. Now he implicitly relies on the self-evidence of the *prolēpsis* in order to advance a stronger claim. Not merely is the sage a competent money-maker, but he alone instantiates the corresponding preconception. Hence, 'the sage' is the only subject to whom the predicate 'the good money-maker' can be truly ascribed. And he is the only kind of person to whom that property truly belongs.

70 See Tsouna 2007, 394-5.

Moreover, preconceptions acquire increasingly greater importance in connection to newly emerging methodological, epistemological and logical needs. In the first place, Philodemus attests that Zeno of Sidon and his later followers often appeal to *prolēpseis* in order to bolster Epicurean methods of reasoning and inference vis-à-vis the corresponding methods of the Stoics (*De sign.*, *passim*). In brief, one of Zeno's principal rivals, Dionysius of Cyrene (pupil of Dionysius of Babylon and Antipater of Tarsus), argued in favour of a deductive method of argumentation and refutation (*kat' anaskeuēn tropos*), as opposed to the Epicurean methods of similarity (*kath' homoiotēta tropos*) and conjectural reasoning of a certain sort (*epilogismos*). The latter consists in surveying and assessing a given range of phenomena, observing significant similarities between them, and, on the basis of these similarities, drawing inferences about non-evident things.[71] One feature of *epilogismos* is that it does not involve formal proof. Rather, later Epicureans who engage in that method of reasoning often rely on the relevant preconceptions to assess the premises, guarantee the soundness of analogies and comparisons, and formulate the conclusions of their conjectural arguments. In the second place, although Zeno and his later followers retain the orthodox use of preconceptions in scientific method for purposes of verification and falsification, nonetheless they also occasionally replace the use of *prolēpseis* with inductive reasoning intended to infer truths about unobservable states of affairs from observable signs. In the third place, certain passages lend support to an intuition that is, I think, increasingly true of later Epicurean uses of *prolēpseis*. Namely, the propositions entailed by the preconceptions come to acquire the richness of definitions, as the Epicureans understand them: informative outlines of the kind of thing that each preconception is of.[72] For instance, according to Demetrius, one of the four different senses of *katho kai paro* is 'the very account of the phrase and this is the preconception, as when we claim that body *qua* body has volume and resistance or man *qua* man is a rational being' (Philodemus, *De sign*. 34.5-11).[73] In this case, the preconception captures precisely the qualities that

71 On the Epicurean methods of inference and on *epilogismos*, see De Lacy and De Lacy 1958 and 1978, Sedley 1982, Barnes 1988, and Schofield 1996.

72 On the nature of Epicurean definitions and the ways in which they differ from e.g. Platonic or Aristotelian definitions, see for instance Asmis 1984, 82: Epicurean definitions do not convey the essence of anything, but rather function as summary outlines of the corresponding preconceptions. Technically, the terms referring to such outlines are *hupographai* or *hupotupōseis*.

73 Contrast with the first sense of the phrase under analysis, which corresponds to essential but not defining properties: men *qua* men have flesh and are susceptible to disease and to old age (*De sign.* 33.35-34.5). See De Lacy and De Lacy 1978, 162.

an Epicurean definition would capture. Elsewhere, Demetrius emphasises that paying attention to the specific theoretical framework in which a term occurs is crucial to the correct use of the corresponding preconception. For only if we carefully consider the context shall we be able to correctly identify the relevant *prolēpsis* and construe effective counterarguments by reference to this latter (*P.Herc.* 1012, col. 63.1-9). In sum, methodologically, Epicurus' empiricism holds tight several centuries after his death. One difference is, however, that the Epicureans of the late Republic detach the epistemological and scientific uses of preconceptions from their empiricist origin more than Epicurus does.

Turning to the vexed topic of our preconception of the gods, even if one accepts my earlier suggestions that innatism and the *consensus omnium* argument were not explicitly formulated by Epicurus but constitute part of Velleius own elaboration of Epicurus' theological stance, nonetheless one may ask how these elements did find their way into Velleius' account. The following speculations may serve as a basis for further exploration of that issue.

As indicated, although dispositional innatism and the *consensus omnium* argument concerning the god's existence could be detected in Epicurus' writings in an underdetermined form, nonetheless they are explicitly stated in the evidence only once, in *ND* 1.43-5. So, it is possible that they do not belong to Epicureanism at all, but rather have been inserted by Cicero into Velleius' exposition, either because of some misunderstanding of Epicurus' doctrine or for dialectical reasons. I do not find plausible the hypothesis that Cicero misunderstood Epicurus; for despite his naked hostility to Epicurus' system, in fact he appears to have a good grasp of his ethical and theological views. On the contrary, the presence of the two aforementioned features in Velleius' speech can be explained by reference to the dialectical needs of *ND*. As well as Velleius, Balbus too, in his exposition of Stoic theology, mentions these elements: 'therefore the main point (that gods exist) is agreed among all men of all races. For all have it inborn (*innatum*) and virtually engraved (*insculptum*) in their minds that there are gods. Opinions vary as to what they are like, but they exist nobody denies' (2.12). Balbus, then, appeals to innatism to establish the belief of all men in the existence of gods, and he points to the universal agreement of all men with regard to that belief.[74] Balbus' 'engraved' belief in gods closely parallels Velleius' 'implanted' knowledge of them, and both these cognitive states are said to be 'innate' in the minds of all men. Cicero's dialectical move is, I suggest, to delineate the ground that Velleius and Balbus share

74 Just how the Stoics appeal to universal agreement is open to different interpretations. Obbink 1992 gives an eminently plausible account of the issues at stake.

in common, so as to better highlight the differences between their respective conceptions of the divine.[75]

Another possibility worth considering, however, is that Cicero did not import the ideas of dispositional innatism and *consensus omnium* into Epicureanism for dialectical reasons, but that he draws these views from late Epicurean texts. First of all, the close parallel between the expositions of Velleius and Balbus mentioned above may well indicate, I think, that the ideas of dispositional innatism and of *consensus omnium* mark the theological debate between Epicureans and Stoics around Cicero's time: i.e., the two schools agree that we have a preconception of the gods as existing and that this fact is corroborated by the universal consensus of mankind, but they disagree about the essential attributes of the gods and, especially, about their providential nature. Another point is this: recall that Epicurus' notion of *prolēpsis* typically assumes the object's existence and is supposed to establish its essential attributes (i.e. assuming that *x*, the *prolēpsis* establishes that *x* is F), whereas Velleius' notion of the preconception of the gods is taken to establish their existence as well as their indestructibility and blessedness. As I suggested, Epicurus' position regarding this matter is ambiguous. For instance, consider a passage from his *Letter to Menoeceus* (123): 'first of all, believing that god is an indestructible and blessed living being, in accordance with the outline of the common notion of the gods, do not ascribe to him anything alien to his indestructibility or incompatible with his blessedness.' This could mean *either* that, assuming god's existence, the 'common notion of the gods' entails the belief that god is an indestructible and blessed animal, *or* that the 'common notion' entails belief in the god *as existing*, and also as indestructible and blessed. As for Epicurus' *koinē noēsis*, common notion, it could be taken as a synonym of *prolēpsis* or as involving also reference to the universal agreement of mankind. Regarding these issues, Velleius' understanding of Epicurus appears to differ from Philodemus' own. For Velleius takes existence to be an *attribute*, just as imperishability and blessedness are; and he also takes the god's existence to be confirmed by the universal agreement of mankind. Philodemus, however, appears to assume the existence of the gods and to consider it logically prior to the entailments of indestructibility and blessedness. This is indicated by his statement that Epicurus preaches 'everything that <may> logically follow

75 Schofield 1996 offers a compelling reconstruction of the terms in which the Epicureans and the Stoics conducted that debate. Some of the evidence that he discusses pertains, specifically, to the Epicureans and Stoics of the late Hellenistic and early Roman period.

<with regard to> the existence of god' (*De piet*. 22.20-2 Obbink').[76] In any case, Philodemus' many references to challenges concerning the existence of the divine (*De piet*. cols. 1-25 Obbink; *De diis* 1, col. 15.31.3, col. 10.35 Diels) suggest that later Epicureans faced renewed pressure on that subject and may well have made the move to argue that the very *prolēpsis* that all men naturally have of the gods establishes them *as existing*, which also entails that they are indestructible and blessed.[77]

A last remark pertains to the origins of our concept of the gods and, indirectly, to the controversy between realism and idealism concerning the divine. While the majority of commentators treat the accounts of Velleius and Lucretius as complementary, an alternative hypothesis worth considering is that these two accounts point to different directions in which Epicurus' theological views might be interpreted. On the one hand, while Philodemus primarily emphasises the importance of the gods as moral ideals, as every other Epicurean does, nonetheless he clearly attributes to Epicurus the belief that the gods are immortal real beings: 'In book 12 of *On Nature* he claims that the first men arrived at conceptions of indestructible external entities' (*De piet*. 8.22-9 Obbink). If he appeals to men's innate predisposition to form a preconception of the divine, he does so, as I suggested, to establish that divine beings exist, not to question that assumption.[78] For present purposes, suffice it to mention Philodemus' thorough argumentation for the existence of the gods (*De piet*. cols. 1-25 Obbink), as well as his lengthy and systematic speculations concerning their nature, sustenance, and way of life (*De diis*, *passim*). To the extent that Cicero uses Philodemus or some common source for the composition of Velleius' speech,[79] the latter is likely to reflect Philodemus' realistic leanings, or at least remain neutral on that issue. On the other hand, Lucretius' account of how primitive men came to have a concept of the gods on the basis of mental images deriving from dreams, as well as his emphasis on the contingent factors determining their content (*DRN* 4.757-67, 962-83, 1011-36; 5.1161-8), cast doubt on the idea that our images and concept of the divine derive from,

76 Also, the gods' existence is such as to logically preclude divine providence and benevolence: see Obbink 1996, 370 *ad loc*.

77 The representation of Epicurus as an atheist may have originated with Posidonius: see the remarks of Obbink 1996, 15-17.

78 This claim is compatible with the assumption that genuine preconceptions about the gods are essential parts of the self, i.e. inborn elements of human nature. Philodemus' remark that silly thoughts ([*epib*]*olais anoētois*: *De piet*. 46.12) bring us into conflict with ourselves may indicate that he held some such view.

79 I have argued for a common source in respect of Torquatus' exposition of Epicurean ethics in Tsouna 2001.

and represent, real beings living in outer space. If this is correct, then it seems natural to read Lucretius along idealist lines, as David Sedley and others suggest. Concerning the issue of empiricism, Philodemus' realism about the gods matches his thorough empiricism with regard to how we came to acquire a *prolēpsis* of them: assuming that our minds are pure, the mental images constituting our preconception accurately represent the real properties of divine entities. Lucretius' corresponding explanation, however, must imply a softer sort of empiricism regarding the formation of the concept of the divine. On the one hand, the latter is formed in the mind of primitive men prompted by external stimuli. On the other, the content of the concept is largely determined by the psycho-physiological propensities of the first men, as well as by their feelings, concerns and values. It does not seem to make much difference, then, where the films of atoms prompting the formation of the concept really come from.

There is precious little evidence concerning the ways in which late Epicureans conceive of *epibolē* and its relation to *prolēpsis*. Initially, we should note that the notion eventually receives attention in connection to semantics and the philosophy of mind. According to Sextus, *epibolē* was used to refer to different meanings of a given term (*M* 3.4; 10.2; 11.25) or to describe one's mental application to a concept (cf. *M* 3.54). Moreover, these two types of uses of *epibolē* appear interrelated: the different senses of terms such as 'good' (*M* 11.25), 'void' (*M* 10.2), or 'minimal breadth' (*M* 3.54) correspond to different focusings of the mind onto different concepts related to each of those terms. Next, Epicurean texts of the first century BC suggest that, like *prolēpsis, epibolē* and its Latin equivalents (usually, *animi iactus* or *animi iniectus*) are employed with different degrees of semantic rigour. For instance, when Lucretius contends that the mind can project itself (*animi iniectus*) on the atoms regardless of their having no colour (*DRN* 2.739-45), he employs the term in the fairly broad sense of the mind conceiving of the atoms in that manner. However, when he claims that an *animi iniectus* (*DRN* 2.740) or *animi iactus* (*DRN* 2.1047) enables us to fully appreciate temporal and spatial infinity and its implications, these expressions acquire a narrower and more robust sense, i.e. they refer to a mental projection equal to a major intellectual breakthrough.[80] Something similar holds for Velleius' use of such terms to claim that, if our mind projected and focused itself (*se iniciens . . . et intendens*) onto the endless magnitude of space and appreciated just what the infinity of the universe implies, then we would liberate ourselves from the oppressive idea of a divine craftsmen (*ND* 1.53-4).

80 This point is also made in Sedley *unpublished*.

In these and many other cases, it is clear that late Epicureans assume that the mental focusings under discussion can deliver important truths in their own right and, therefore, can contribute significantly to the attainment of tranquillity. In short, *epibolai* come to acquire independent epistemological as well as ethical value. No author makes this as explicit as Philodemus does, especially in his ethical writings. There is no space to go into details, but it is important to register that, in the first place, he preserves the semantic core of *epibolē* as a sort of mental focusing, and he stresses that the latter is a voluntary and deliberate mental act involving attention and concentration. In the second place, however, Philodemus advances the original and significant suggestion that *epibolē* can be much more than that: it can be a mental act of the greatest intensity and comprehensiveness (cf. Bailey 1926, 159-60), by which the good Epicurean instantaneously summarises and vindicates his life, and also affirms his complete acceptance of his own mortality. In the final lines of the peroration of *On Death* (39.15-25) Philodemus offers the following reflections:

> People of sound mind, even if because of some compelling cause they become unmindful of the fact that the end and paragraph of their life may immediately meet with them, nonetheless, when it comes into sight, after they have systematically surveyed (*periodeusantes*) with great speed, which cannot be described to ignorant men, both the fact that they have enjoyed every [sc. pleasure] and the fact that complete unconsciousness is coming upon them, they expire as serenely as they would if their mental concentration [cf. *tēn epibolēn*] had not elapsed even for the briefest time.

Not only do enlightened persons, i.e. Epicureans, differ from fools in that they train themselves to accept death by contemplating it continuously in their thoughts and by attending to their every *epibolē* about it (cf. 39.8-9). They also differ in respect of their last *epibolē*, i.e. a sort of mental act which sensible persons can perform but fools cannot, and which entails the instantaneous as well as systematic overview of both the pleasures that one has experienced in one's lifetime and one's total annihilation by death.[81]

Never does Philodemus or any other of his contemporaries suggest that *epibolē* is identical with *prolēpsis* or a necessary aspect of the latter. On the contrary, assuming that the relevant fragment of passage of *On Signs* has been correctly restored, Philodemus distinguishes preconceptions from focusings

81 Compare one's *epibolē* of past, present and future pleasures, which fortifies one's piety towards the gods (Philodemus, *De diis* iii. 2.23-7; see Armstrong 2004, 50-1).

and ascribes to *epibolai* the status of an independent criterion of truth (*De sign*. fr. 1.13-14). Hence he brings independent confirmation to the testimony of Diogenes Laertius mentioned earlier, i.e. that, while Epicurus determines as criteria our sensations, *prolēpseis* and feelings, his followers also add 'the focusing of the mind into an impression' (DL 10.31). The context of the excerpt from *On Signs* indicates that *epibolai* were used in philosophical and scientific investigations, just as the other three criteria were: being evident themselves, they served for purposes of enquiring into non-evident matters.[82] Once again, Lucretius and especially Philodemus seem to me to adopt a less rigidly empiricist stance than Epicurus with regard to *epibolē*. For what they identify as *epibolē* or *iniectus animi* does not directly depend on sensation nor it is passively caused by sensation, as both preconceptions and feelings are. Rather, it is an active and voluntary mental movement, which can improve through intellectual and psychological training and which came to acquire independent value as a criterion of truth.

Lastly, a few remarks concerning late Epicurean semantics. Earlier I argued that, in his extant remains, Epicurus' views regarding the semantic role of *prolēpsis* remain underdeveloped, and that the probable reason for that fact is that he is primarily interested in the methodological and epistemological aspects of *prolēpsis* rather than in semantics. I also suggested that, although the two-tier view is explicitly stated by Sextus and Plutarch, nonetheless it is probably implicit in Epicurus as well. Now I should like to remark, in addition, that both Sextus and Plutarch attribute the two-tier position to 'the followers of Epicurus' (*M* 8.13), or 'the Epicureans' (*M* 8.258), or the second person plural 'you' (sc. Epicureans: *Adv. Col*. 1119F), not to Epicurus himself. I believe that this feature is significant: it indicates a deliberate departure from the usual practice of referring to the Founder as the figurehead representing the school, probably in order to indicate that the view under discussion belongs to other Epicureans active during a later period. If this is correct, and assuming that the two-tier view is not a schematisation effected by non-Epicurean sources,[83] it probably reflects the growing interest of Epicureans of the second and first centuries BC in issues of meaning and linguistic function.

One factor motivating the clear formulation of the two-tier view is likely to have been the success of Stoic semantics and the increasing pressure to differentiate sufficiently the latter from what Epicurus had to say about language,

82 The same could perhaps be surmised by the hopelessly fragmentary contexts of *De sign*. fr. 5a9: τῆς δια[ν]οίας φανταστικῆι [ἐπιβολῆι]; and fr. 7a3: [ἐπ]ιβολάς.

83 This is highly unlikely: on the contrary, there is strong evidence that both Sextus and Plutarch draw from reliable Epicurean sources and perhaps even from a common source.

meaning, and concepts. Recall that Stoic semantics relies on three items: signifiers, name-bearers and significations or *lekta*, sayables. Likewise, Epicurus' theory also might appear to involve three items exactly corresponding to their Stoic counterparts: words, things and preconceptions. Hence, critics hostile to Epicureanism could point out that there is really nothing distinctive about the latter view and that, in fact, the Stoic view is clearly preferable because it is better defended and more sophisticated than its rival. By explicitly rejecting *lekta* and by asserting that they have a two-tier semantics, later Epicureans could disarm just that sort of criticism. In particular, the removal of preconceptions from the picture makes it impossible to draw the confusing parallel between the semantic views of the two schools, and also throws light on the fundamental intuition of Epicurus and all his followers: words refer to things.

Is there evidence that, as we move towards the end of the Hellenistic era, the Epicureans do get more interested in issues bearing on language and semantics? There is, and that it has to do, originally, with the preoccupation of Zeno of Sidon and of his associates to purify and consolidate the corpus of Epicurus' teachings and to transmit them to posterity. For that endeavour aims, in great part, to canonise the orthodox interpretation of the school's foundational writings by settling, among other things, controversies that concern the exact meaning of certain terms. For example, Demetrius Laco engages in a kind of philosophical exegesis which consists in explaining away semantic ambiguities and thus in solving the philosophical *aporiai* deriving from them. Moreover, although he acknowledges that the *prolēpsis* associated with the use of a term is important for purposes of refutation, nonetheless he recommends that we should also pay close attention to the secondary uses of words and to the varying contexts in which they occur (*P.Herc*. 1012, col. 63.1-9). In the late Republican period, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman, Torquatus, manifests a similar sort of concern in his exposition of Epicurean ethics: he appears aware of ambiguities and refers to *prolēpseis* in order to solve them. For example, he tries to dispel doubts stemming from the alleged ambiguity of 'pleasure' by arguing that kinetic as well as katastematic pleasures, formally, fit the preconception of pleasure and, factually, are pursued as intrinsic goods (Cicero, *De fin*. 2.6 *ff*.). Likewise, Philodemus often structures his discussion of a theoretical issue by pointing to a linguistic ambiguity that he subsequently undertakes to remove with the aid of *prolēpsis*. Is rhetoric a *technē*? It depends on what counts as *technē*. Does prose composed in grand style qualify as poetry? On one conception of poetry it does, on another it doesn't. And so on. In fact, Philodemus frequently gives the impression that he equates the preconception with the meaning of a given term. For instance, to the question whether the sage will experience anger he answers that 'the sage will become angry not

in accordance with this preconception, but in accordance with the more common one' (*De ir*. 45.1-6). A natural reading is that the sage will become angry in one sense of the word but not in another.[84] A final word concerning the issue of empiricism: so far as semantics bears on ontology, the late followers of Epicurus are as strictly empiricists as the founder of their school. Especially, their explicit rejection of *lekta* signals their determination to preserve pure Epicurus' materialism as well as the lean ontology entailed by his empiricist system.

7 Conclusions

To conclude, I should like to return to the leading concerns that have motivated this study. Historically, I hope that I have established that Epicurean orthodoxy did not preclude significant developments concerning both the notion of *prolēpsis* and its principal functions. On the contrary, close examination suggests that the loyalty of later Epicureans to Epicurus is compatible with and conducive to efforts to better understand his doctrine and elaborate it in appropriate ways. Exegetically, we gain a fuller understanding of Epicurus' views concerning preconceptions if we take into account also the treatment of the latter by his later followers. And also, the uses of *prolēpsis* by Philodemus, Lucretius, and Cicero's Epicurean spokesmen acquire proper perspective if they are considered in the light of the doctrine of the Founder, as well as in the dialectical context of interactions between the Epicureans and their principal rivals.

Philosophically, no incompatibility or contradiction emerges between the empiricism marking Epicurus' doctrine of *prolēpsis* and the views of his later adherents, although the latter appear to have relaxed their empiricism in some cases. Specifically concerning the controversial issues addressed by this paper, first, Epicurean philosophers of every period unquestionably subscribe to a thoroughly empiricist account of the formation of preconceptions, but later Epicureans expand both the scope and the functions of preconceptions further than Epicurus and his contemporaries do. Secondly, although the doctrine that every preconception originates in experience is never compromised, nonetheless the Epicureans of the late Republican period diverge in their ways of elaborating Epicurus' suggestion that we believe in the gods as indestructible and blessed beings and that that belief is entailed by a notion common to mankind. Some authors focus on the origins of that notion, highlighting the

84 See Barnes 1993, 201.

facts that we are naturally predisposed to acquire it and that we all agree about the god's existence and, arguably, severing any necessary connection that might hold between real gods and our mental images of them. Others, however, appear to assume that there can be such a connection and concentrate their efforts in exploring the attributes of real divine entities and their mode of life. Thirdly, throughout the history of Epicureanism, preconceptions are never identified with *epibolai*, mental focusings, although they are related to them. While the veridicality of the former derives from their passive character and their unmediated dependence on *aisthēseis*, the latter are active mental projections onto the representational objects present in the mind. However, the epistemological importance of *epibolai* gradually gets to be acknowledged by Zeno and Philodemus: despite the fact that *epibolai* are not entirely determined by experience, Zeno and his pupils, including Philodemus, upgrade them to the status of a criterion of truth. Fourthly, no Epicurean equates the semantic function of preconceptions with that of Stoic sayables. On the contrary, late Epicureans explicitly reject that suggestion, and all members of the school take care to preserve the sparse materialist ontology concordant with the rigid empiricism of Epicurus.[85]

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85 I presented earlier versions of this paper at the University of Cambridge, the University of Utrecht, the University of Crete, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Centre Léon Robin (Paris). I am very grateful to the audiences for their reactions, and especially to Myles Burnyeat, Nick Denyer, Jean-Baptiste Gourinat, Tony Long, Jaap Mansfeld, Marwan Rashed, and Malcolm Schofield. Also, I am pleased to acknowledge the observations of Myrto Dragona-Monachou, Katerina Ierodiakonou, Paul Kalligas, and Stelios Virvidakis on parts of the material presented many months ago in Modern Greek. I am very grateful to Pierre-Marie Morel and David Sedley, whose views I address in the present article, for detailed written comments and discussion of earlier as well as later drafts. I express my sincere thanks to Brad Inwood for making me rethink the structure and presentation of the argument, to anonymous referees for their criticisms, and to Michael Augustin and Robert McIntyre for their valuable input. Finally, I owe a great debt to James Warren and to George Boys-Stones for extensive sets of comments on the final manuscript and for their readiness to follow up certain issues in correspondence and conversation.

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