**Chapter 11**

**Epicureans on Preconceptions and Other Concepts**

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In this chapter we aim to explore how Epicurus and his followers thought of different types of mental entities that serve to identify, re-identify, and categorise items in the world, form the basis of inferences, and fix the meaning of linguistic expressions, and thereby make us competent users of language – entities which can thus reasonably be characterised as concepts. We shall investigate how the Epicureans accounted for the formation of these entities, as well as for their use in both everyday and scientific reasoning, how they envisaged the connection between such entities, language and meaning, and how they related these questions to their epistemological, ontological, physical, and ultimately ethical tenets. More specifically, we aim to analyse how the Epicureans’ approach to these mental entities reveals their views and assumptions concerning the mind’s interaction with reality, and, in particular, how the Epicureans tried to balance between their very strong empiricist commitments and the role of the mind in the case of different kinds of concepts, and especially in the case of ‘preconceptions – a special class of mental items, which, according to the Epicureans, can function as criteria of truth and on which all other reasoning depends.

Our sources, written by Epicureans or discussing Epicurean doctrines, use a rich and varied vocabulary to designate mental items and to refer to mental operations bearing on concept formation and concept use. Some of these terms were probably introduced by Epicurus and his followers, whereas others might have originated in other schools, notably the Stoics. It is, however, not always easy to see clearly what the relationship between these terms is, or whether the Epicureans use them consistently. In the surviving Epicurean texts, *ennoia* appears to mean ‘conception’ or can be used as a synonym of *ennoēma,* a term that in other schools, typically, refers to concepts. In addition, the related terms encountered in the Greek sources include, notably, *noēsis* (sometimes translated as ‘notion’) and its cognates *nooumenon* and *epinooumenon* and also *epinoia* (‘thought’ or ‘conception’), which appears to designate the broadest category of mental items, as well as *huponoia*, *dianoia*, *perilēpsis*, *hupolēpsis*, and *prolēpsis*. This last term is rendered in Latin by ‘praenotio’ or ‘anticipatio’, while ‘notitia’ and ‘notities’ may refer specifically to preconceptions or, more generally, to concepts or conceptions. In relation to preconceptions, Epicurus and other authors occasionally refer also to *epibolē* ‘focusing’ or ‘projection’ or ‘application’ of the senses (*epibolē tōn aisthētēriōn*) or the mind (*epibolē tēs dianoias, iniectus animi*).[[1]](#footnote-2) It is however not clear what sort of mental act *epibolē* is and in what way it bears on the formation of preconceptions and other concepts. In the discussion that follows we shall try to assess how these terms are used by our sources to refer to particular kinds of concepts and particular sorts of mental acts. In fact, we believe that sorting out this terminology goes hand in hand with the exploration of the philosophical questions that we wish to address.

**1. Preconceptions and concepts: setting the agenda**

We should start by situating the Epicurean interest in a specific type of mental contents and operations within their overall philosophical project. Epicurus set out his tenets pertaining to epistemology and philosophy of language in a now lost treatise called *Canon* (‘ruler’, ‘yardstick’, or ‘standard'). As is clear from the brief summary he gives of the principal points of this work, as well as from independent reports, Epicurus considered these topics to be auxiliary to, or part of, the study of nature in a two-fold manner (Diog. Laert. 10.30; cf. Cic. *Fin*. 1.63). Canonic establishes the rules that guides scientific inquiry,[[2]](#footnote-3) whereas if we understand the physical account of the underlying processes, we also understand why the methodological rules of inquiry are in fact correct.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Importantly for us, already the first rule states that we must have a secure grasp of what ‘underlie’ expressions and words (*phthongoi*): clarifying the meanings of words and expressions, getting rid of ambiguity and false connotations, is the starting point and basis of all successful inquiry guiding us in making inferences, assessing beliefs, and adjudicating disputes. As Epicurus immediately adds, this can be done by ‘looking at’ and relying on the ‘primary conception’ (*prōton ennoēma*), or ‘preconception’, corresponding to each term (*Ep. Hdt*. 37-8).[[4]](#footnote-5) We will discuss the relationship between preconceptions and word meaning more in detail. But let us flag already at this point that in so far as ‘primary conceptions’ or ‘preconceptions’ are mental contents which fix the meaning of a linguistic expression, and render us competent users of the relevant linguistic expression, they function as concepts as specified above. It is also on this account that Epicurus and his followers hold that preconceptions, together with sensations and feelings, are criteria of truth.

We will also return to the relationship between preconceptions and definitions below. But let us note already now that unlike other philosophers, Epicurus and his followers considered ‘primary concepts’ or preconceptions, rather than definitions, the proper starting points for dialectical debate and fundamental to scientific inquiry (Epic., *Nat.* XXVIII, Fr. 12, col. 3.6–9.; fr. 13 col. 12 sup. (ll. 12–16); Diog. Laert. 10.31; cf. pp. 000 below).[[5]](#footnote-6) What we can see already at this stage is that preconceptions are reliable guides. Having the preconception of F means not merely that I can successfully use the word ‘F’ in communicating with others, but that on the basis of having the preconception of F, I am able to clarify possible ambiguities of the word ‘F’, to have a clear view of what it takes to be F, and to start drawing inferences and building scientific theories involving F. Someone can have an erroneous or blurry conception of F, but this can be rectified and sharpened by relying on the preconception of F. In other words, having the preconception of F means that I have access to *the* concept of F, which truly captures what it takes to be F, as opposed to having *a* concept of F.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Again as we will discuss more in detail, in line with Epicurus’ strong empiricism, preconceptions can serve this criterial function because of the way they are related to sensations (*aisthēseis*).[[7]](#footnote-8) According to the famous Epicurean dictum, all sensations and feelings (*pathē*) are ‘true’ (*alēthes*) – a statement that has occasioned much debate. On the line of interpretation we find the most plausible, sensations and feelings are ‘true’ in the sense that they reliably preserve and report the relevant properties of their objects.[[8]](#footnote-9) The physical account of the occurrence of sensations provides justification for this claim. According to this account, all vision and imagination is produced by the influx of a stream of fine atomic films, *eidōla* (Lat. *simulacra*), emitted by the external objects of sensation, and there is nothing in the sense-organs and in the occurrence of sensation which would modify the properties of the *eidōla*. The properties of the *eidōla* are thus preserved in sense-impressions. Then, going backwards in the causal chain, the *eidōla* themselves preserve, at least for the most part,[[9]](#footnote-10) the relevant properties of the external object which emits them. In this way, through the *eidōla*, the external objects imprint ‘their own nature’ on the perceiver (Diog. Laert. 10.49). Sensations can be consistently ‘true’ because there is no intervening mental process that would introduce any alteration of the relevant properties in this causal chain.[[10]](#footnote-11) A similar causal story can be told about ‘feelings’. It is because of this ‘property-preserving’ causal chain that sensations and feelings can also preserve the *enargeia* of external objects, their being ‘evident’, ‘manifest’ or ‘clear’.

All mental contents, including preconceptions, originate in sense-impressions and feelings (Diog. Laert. 10.32). The occurrence of these further mental contents, however, must involve some form of processing of sensations and feelings. On the basis of what we have seen, and as we will discuss more in detail below, we can expect that preconceptions can serve their criterial role because the mental operations by which they are produced from sensations are such that they also systematically and reliably preserve the relevant properties, including the *enargeia*, of external objects. It is only at the next levels, such as the formation of more complex, higher-level concepts, beliefs and conceptions, based on (possibly false) inferences, that the ‘property-preserving’ causal chain can be broken by mental operations, and thus error can occur.

This explanatory model raises a number of questions, which also set the agenda for our discussion. What are the mental operations that are property-preserving and what are those that are not? If preconceptions are supposed to be directly based on sensations, can we form preconceptions of non-perceptible entities, and if so how? How can we be sure that something is a preconception and not another type of concept which is not, or not necessarily, veridical?

**2. The formation of preconceptions**

Let us start with the formation of preconceptions. A preconception is a sort of memory (*mnēmē*) of something external, which one had immediate perceptual experience of many times in the past (Diog. Laert. 10.33). The physical description of this process is continuous with that of sensation. Preconceptions are formed from the accretion and superimposition of *eidōla* of the same type entering the sense-organ in sensation. It is probably on this account that preconceptions were also described as *tupoi*, ‘imprints’, ‘patterns’ or ‘delineations’ of the general outline of the object or type of object that ‘imprints its nature’ on our mind.[[11]](#footnote-12) The Epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda offers some further details of the process, stressing both the representational and the physical and psychological aspects of memory functions: ‘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' (NF 5.3.3-14).

This process needs some involvement of the mind. Minimally, it must include the sorting out and stacking of similar *eidōla*, or *eidōla* emitted by the same type of objects. This process will also create ‘passages’ for further *eidōla* of the same shape, which is probably the explanation of why on the basis of preconceptions we can identify and categorise the same (type of) entity when we encounter it again. In addition, the formation of preconceptions needs to include some simultaneous mechanism by which the differences of individual sensations are filtered out so that only the common elements get registered in preconceptions. It is by such an operation that what is retained in the preconception is only those properties which invariably belong to all entities that are covered by that preconception. This is how, for example, the preconception of body will not include the determinate sizes, specific colours, or indeed any colours, or other contingent properties of bodies, but will specify only that bodies, as bodies, are three-dimensionally extended and have resistance. Similarly, the preconception of human doesn’t include individual differences, but only that humans are living beings of a certain shape: such properties as are constant in all individual humans we experience.[[12]](#footnote-13) The preconception of a human being should also be distinct from the preconception of statue. A statue might have the shape of a human, without however showing life functions – this is why the preconception of human should include not only the characteristic shape of humans, but also that they show life functions. This sorting, stacking, filtering, and ordering operation can thus be fairly complex. However, the mechanism must be such that it preserves the shared properties of the relevantly similar *eidōla*, and of the objects that emitted these *eidōla*. Although no direct textual evidence to this effect has survived, we might surmise that the atomic constitution of humans is such that they are naturally predisposed so that these operations occur without an interference from reason.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Such a species-specific predisposition is probably closely related to the view held by Epicurus and his followers that preconceptions are ‘natural’. It is, however, not entirely clear what else the ‘naturalness’ of preconceptions entails. According to the 2nd century BCE Epicurean philosopher Demetrius Laco, something is natural or exists ‘by nature’ (*phusei*), if it is spontaneous and instinctive, or if it is compelling and unavoidable, or if it brings some sort of advantage, or if it yields truth and understanding (*PHerc*. 1012, LXVII.1 - LXVIII.10). Epicurus’ account appears to imply that preconceptions are natural in all these senses. Since they are formed by a spontaneous mechanism on the basis of a natural predisposition, we have no control over their acquisition: it is necessary and unavoidable in just that sense. One cannot avoid acquiring the preconception of elephant if one is repeatedly exposed to elephants in sense-perception. Moreover, preconceptions are crucial for our survival and well-being: for instance, our preconceptions of natural kinds enable us to identify instances of kinds in our surroundings and react accordingly, the preconception of justice promotes social as well as personal benefit, and the preconception of the gods secures our peace of mind.[[14]](#footnote-15)

The compulsory character of the formation of preconceptions is however not a matter of absolute but of conditional necessity. As we have seen, at the atomic level the formation of preconceptions is explained as a modification of the atomic structure of the mind occasioned by the repeated ingress of similar *eidōla*. The framework of Epicurean physics would in principle allow that we are born already with the results of these modifications in place, and that in this way the *tupoi* and the passages for similar *eidōla* were innate. It is noteworthy that Epicurus and his followers don’t countenance such a scenario: *tupoi* can apparently only be produced as an effect of the appropriate sensory stimuli. Presumably, the prehistoric inhabitants of Easter Island lacked the preconception – and the concept – of giraffe. We should probably conclude, therefore, that even though human beings are naturally disposed to form preconceptions, the acquisition of preconceptions depends on contingencies. A given preconception may be formed in the minds of the people in a community exposed to similar experiences, while people outside that community may lack it.

One remarkable exception might be the preconception of god. According to Epicurus, the cognition (*gnōsis*) of gods is evident (*enargēs*) to all mentally sane human beings across all communities (Epic., *Ep. Men*. 123-124; Cic., *Nat. D.* 1.43-44; Phld., *Piet*. 112.5-12, Sext. Emp., *M*. 9.33). The preconception of god however is atypical in so far as it is not based on sense experience, but on the nature of the gods being ‘viewed’ by the mind (Epic., *RS* 1; Lucr., *DRN* 5.148-149; Cic., *Nat. D*. 1.49). Moreover, according to Velleius, the Epicurean spokesman of Cicero’s work *On the Nature of Gods*, our preconception of god is both natural and *innata* and therefore present in all human beings (Cic., *Nat. D.* 1.43-45). Arguably, Velleius’ claim that this preconception is *innata* should not be taken to mean that humans are born with it, but rather that humans are naturally constituted in such a way that their minds are disposed to form the preconception of god in response to the relevant stimuli, even without the direct perception of gods. If so, the preconception of god is similar to other preconceptions in the sense that because of their psycho-physical make-up, all human beings have the capacity and disposition to acquire it.

Gods are however not objects of sensation, but are intelligible, ‘viewed by the mind’. Hence the formation of the preconception of god is not subject to empirical contingencies, but obtains invariably and universally because the psycho-physical mechanism by which the mind grasps that object without relying on external stimuli is the same for all human beings. The universality of this mechanism also guarantees that the preconception of god can serve the criterial role that all preconceptions are supposed to serve: assessing beliefs and adjudicating disagreements about the nature of gods. Most importantly, it can serve to dispel misconceptions about the gods that produce anxiety in us, and furnish a correct conception of god that can serve as the paradigm of a blessedly happy life. It is a further matter whether, and if so how, a preconception formed in this way can ground the mind-independent existence of gods – a question that has been extensively discussed in the literature.[[15]](#footnote-16)

**3. The scope of preconceptions**

Our discussion so far has skirted an important question: what kind of entities have corresponding preconceptions. The standard account of preconceptions strongly suggests that, once again with the possible exception of god, we have preconceptions of things of which we have had repeated direct sensory experiences. This, however, doesn’t in itself settle the question. Scholarship on Epicurean preconceptions mentions a wide range of different types of entities: natural kinds such as horse and man and rose; individuals such as Plato; perceptible properties such as green, round and square; states or events, for instance death; moral, epistemic, or prudential values, e.g. justice, utility, or truth, as well as just, good, and beautiful; psychological and moral attitudes, such as responsibility and agency; modalities, notably necessity; physical body; time; cause; art or craft or expertise, and individual professions such as rhetor; works of art such as poem; and complex evaluative notions, such as the good poem or the good property manager.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Such a wide range could be validated by the key passage in Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* we considered above, and which can be read as saying that there is a primary notion, or preconception, underlying each term and expression (*kath’ hekaston phthongon, Ep. Hdt.* 38). On the other hand, there are terms for which, on Epicurus’ own account, there is no corresponding preconception; as we shall shortly see, the concepts corresponding to some meaningful terms are supposed to be generated from preconceptions with the addition of further mental operations.[[17]](#footnote-18) Moreover, the evidence about some of the categories mentioned above is inconclusive. For instance, the passage in Sextus (*Math.* 7.208-215) sometime adduced for the point that we have preconceptions of individuals and such properties as round and square neither entails nor excludes the existence of such preconceptions. As we will argue in section 9 below, there are also strong reasons to be doubtful about the existence of such complex preconceptions as that of a good poem as opposed to a poem *simpliciter.* Moreover, it is questionable whether sensory properties such as green, sweet or loud correspond to preconceptions, rather than to some other type of concept formed differently than preconceptions.

On the whole, the most secure and well-documented items on the list are natural kinds, and there can be no doubt that there are preconceptions of value terms and of more abstract entities, such as physical body, and even of truth. Following the methodology of Epicurus, his followers debate the nature of the good, pleasure, body, motion, and much else by appealing to the preconceptions of the corresponding terms. Moreover, they regularly compare and contrast these latter with other, derivative notions whose content is crucially determined by the contributions of the mind, and can therefore involve unwarranted operations, such as incorrect inferences, and thus be susceptible of falsehood. Most likely, there was no codified list of the types of preconceptions, and different Epicureans might have worked with a narrower or a broader range. At any rate, we have good reason to think that the scope of preconceptions is narrower than that of concepts.

**4. Preconceptions and permanent properties**

We have seen above that preconceptions register properties that belong to every entity corresponding to the preconception, and which can thus be used to identify and categorise the relevant entities, and to fix the meaning of linguistic expressions. This is precisely why having the preconception of F can count as grasping the concept of F. At this point we might ask what the relationship is between the properties that constitute the content of a preconception. For instance, it could be the case that if the preconception of human is made up of the properties ‘living being’ and ‘having such and such a shape’, these properties stand in a genus-differentia relation. There is, however, strong evidence that militates against such a picture: Epicurus appears to think of the content of ‘conceptions’ (*ennoiai*) in general and of preconceptions in particular as mere aggregates or lists of properties.[[18]](#footnote-19) A crucial passage from Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* points firmly in this direction:

Moreover, as regards shapes, colours, magnitudes, weights, and all the other properties that are predicated of body, in so far as they are permanent properties either of all bodies or of bodies that are visible and which we cognise in accordance with the sensation of these properties, we must not suppose these properties either to be natures that exist on their own (for this is inconceivable), nor to be entirely non-existent, nor to be distinct incorporeal entities attached to body, nor to be parts of body. Instead, we must suppose that the whole body altogether derives its own permanent nature from all these properties, but not as if it were composed by the total sum of these properties in the way in which a larger aggregate is composed out of extended parts, whether these be primary parts or magnitudes smaller than this particular whole. Rather, as I say, only in the way that it gets its own permanent nature from all these aforementioned properties. All of them have their own proper ways of being attended to and distinguished, but always along with the whole aggregate and never separately from it, and it is in accordance with this aggregate conception (sc. of body) that the body has received its predication. (*Ep. Hdt*. 68-69)

In this passage, Epicurus offers grounds for analysing body in two parallel or even complementary ways, one physical, the other metaphysical and conceptual. Physically, a body can be analysed into its material parts and constituent atoms. Metaphysically and conceptually, a body *qua* body can be analysed into the ineliminable properties of all bodies: there is no (visible) body that would not have these properties, and it is in this sense that they are called ‘permanent accompaniments’ of bodies. A body *qua* body is an ‘aggregate’ (*athroon*) of these properties, or in current-day terminology a ‘bundle’ of them. These properties can’t exist on their own, independently of bodies, but we can distinguish them by the mental act of focusing (*epibolē*). Epicurus leaves open the list of the properties in question, but says that they include size, shape, weight and colour, this last being exclusive to visible bodies. The preconception of body tracks these ineliminable properties, and we call an entity a body in so far as it has the conjunction of these properties. In the sentences following the passage quoted, Epicurus adds that without its permanent properties, body cannot be conceived (*Ep. Hdt*. 70). These properties are thus included in the preconception of body.

In the sequel of the passage quoted above (*Ep. Hdt*. 70-71), Epicurus contrasts a body’s permanent properties with the accidental properties that it may acquire or lose over time (*Ep. Hdt*. 71; cf. Lucr., *DRN* 1.445-482, and Sext. Emp., *Math.* 10.219-227). Just like permanent properties, accidents are real, but can’t exist independently. And, just like permanent properties, they can be identified by an act of focusing (*epibolē*). Accidental properties may or may not accompany a body, and the corresponding attributes are hence not part of the preconception.

Epicurus speaks about an ‘aggregate conception’ (*athroa ennoia*) and there is no suggestion in this or other related texts that the permanent properties that make up this ‘aggregate’ are related to each other in any more complex way, as for instance genus and differentia. In addition, Epicurus’ claim that preconceptions are *tupoi* or outlines based on sensation of the corresponding types of objects is compatible with the bundle view, but is in tension with views presupposing that the conceptual parts of a preconception have a hierarchical structure. Similarly, there is no indication that preconceptions would establish relationships between different (types of) entities.

The Epicureans frequently articulate the preconception of a type of entity in different ways. For instance, Epicurus is attested to have advanced multiple different formulae to capture body. According to the first, body is a conjunction of magnitude, shape, and *antitupia*, resistance. According to the second, body is that which is extended in three dimensions and has *antitupia* (Sext. Emp., *Math.* 1.21; *Math.* 10.240). Ostensibly, each of the properties listed in each of these accounts is a permanent property of body, but some of them are interchangeable: in the first account, having magnitude and shape is replaceable with the property of being three-dimensionally extended that figures in the second account. At any rate, all of these accounts are formulated as inventories of properties without indicating any structure among the properties listed.[[19]](#footnote-20) Accordingly, Sextus says that in conceptions body is ‘conceived in terms of a coming together of many specific properties’ (*Math.* 1.22: *kata sunodon pollōn idiōmatōn noeitai*,trans. Bett).

Epicurus and his followers treat these formulae listing permanent properties as their preferred alternatives to definitions.[[20]](#footnote-21) Epicurus rejected the method advanced by Plato and followed by other philosophers which defined a term by finding the place of the corresponding entity in a hierarchical taxonomy. Epicureans claimed that definitions thus produced are unhelpful and lack the clarity that terms themselves possess on the basis of the corresponding preconception (Cic. *Fin* 1.22, 2.4; Anon., *in Theaet*. 22.39–47; Erotianus, *Glossarii Hippocr. praef*. p. 34, 10 Klein in Usener 258). Thus, in the case mentioned in the previous paragraph, having resistance distinguishes body from void, which is also three-dimensionally extended; nonetheless ‘three-dimensionally extended’ does not function as a genus with resistance as a differentia. Likewise, the Epicurean preconception of human is ‘having such and such a shape with being ensouled’ (Sext. Emp., *Pyr.* 2.25), and the property of being ensouled (i.e. manifesting life-functions) distinguishes humans from similarly shaped statues and corpses; however, having this particular shape does not constitute a genus that would include humans, corpses, and human-shaped statues.

Moreover, since the Epicureans believe that the formulae of preconceptions do not capture essence or fix the place of a type in a hierarchical taxonomy, but merely convey the outline of the concept corresponding to the thing under investigation, it is not surprising that they frequently offer more than one formula corresponding to a given preconception.

**5. Preconceptions and true beliefs**

As we have seen, Epicurus takes preconceptions to be the starting-points of scientific inquiry and the reference points in deciding contentious questions. In these contexts, the permanent properties form the basis of inferences about non-evident aspects of an entity. For instance, a hypothesis has to be rejected if it is in conflict with one or more of the permanent properties included in the preconception. In the example we have considered above, having a definite size and shape are included in the preconception of body, and they imply limitedness. In so far as limitedness is incompatible with having an infinite number of extended parts, we must conclude, says Epicurus, that a body can only have a finite number of extended parts (Epic., *Ep. Hdt*. 57).

All Epicureans subscribe to the Founder’s methodological principle (Sext. Emp., *Math.* 8.135-7, *Math*. 9.21). For instance, one of Epicurus’ immediate disciples, Hermarchus apparently follows a similar line of argument regarding the gods. Our preconception represents god as a living being, from which, in so for as all living beings breathe, Hermarchus infers that gods too must breathe (fr. 32 Longo Auricchio). In a fragmentary papyrus text, the late Epicurean Philodemus appears to adopt a comparable strategy in response to the Academics, who contend that corporeality is incompatible with divinity. Philodemus argues that every conception (*ennoēmata panta*) of the divine assigns to the gods sensation and pleasure[[21]](#footnote-22) which in turn presuppose corporeality. Corporeality is thus far from being incompatible with the conception of god as his opponents maintain, it can in fact be safely inferred from the list of permanent properties (Phld., *Piet*. 5.14-20 / 130-144).

As these examples also suggest, although the preconceptions *qua* non-structured lists of properties or representational outlines (*tupoi*) are not propositional in form, they must have propositional content in order to be able to fulfil their epistemological function.[[22]](#footnote-23) If preconceptions serve as indemonstrable bases for inferences about what is non-evident – either about non-evident aspects of the entities corresponding to preconceptions or about further non-evident entities – then, in epistemological contexts, preconceptions must be treated as beliefs or propositions expressing those beliefs. These beliefs and propositions are always and evidently true, and can test the truth or falsehood of other propositions without being tested themselves in the same way. It is in this sense that a preconception might be called ‘correct belief’ (Diog. Laert. 10.33). As for the other conceptions (*ennoiai*), since they too are used in reasoning, they too must be assumed to entail beliefs and corresponding propositions, which however can be true or false. Thus, Epicurus points to a contrast between preconceptions and other conceptions involving such further beliefs (*doxastikai ennoiai,* *RS* 24): the preconceptions, as well as the other criteria of truth, feelings and sensation, are present in the mind and self-evidently true, whereas the other ‘concepts involving belief’ must await confirmation regarding their truth value.

Philodemus uses a revealing metaphor in order to differentiate the correct conception of the gods as blessed and immortal beings from false conceptions entailing the belief that the gods are envious and hostile towards humans: the preconception of god belongs to ‘pure conceptions’ (*katharai ennoiai*: Phld., *Piet*. fr. 9.11-12 / 242-243), whereas false beliefs about the gods are ‘lying conceptions’ (*pseudomenai ennoiai*, Phld., *Piet*. fr. 65.14-15 / 1865-1866). The purity metaphor conveys the idea that our preconception of god is uncontaminated by falsehood and, more generally, any belief based on false inference.

As we have seen above, preconceptions, on account of their formation, are shared by people who are exposed to the same sensory inputs, whereas Epicureans maintained that the preconception of god is common to all mankind. Relatedly, Epicurus draws also another contrast between the conception of divinity commonly shared by mankind (*koinē noēsis*, Epic., *Ep. Men*. 123) and the false beliefs held by many. He warns that these latter are not part of the preconception but are false notions (*hupolēpseis pseudeis*), causing the greatest harm (Epic., *Ep. Men*. 124). The term *hupolēpsis* need not refer only to falsehoods. For instance, Sextus relays that, in Epicurus’ view, dream images led men to form a *hupolēpsis* of the gods as having human shape (cf. *Math.* 9.25, 43, and 65). While anthropomorphism is not part of the preconception of god, several Epicurean authors treat it as an aspect of the correct conception of the divine. Notably, Philodemus’ analysis of the nature of the gods presupposes anthropomorphism, and the same appears to hold for other Epicureans too. On the other hand, most occurrences of *hupolēpsis* in the surviving texts of Epicurus and his adherents indicate that even when hypoleptic notions are true, they are not epistemically reliable in the way in which preconceptions are.

Epicurus stresses that we cannot escape error if we do not carefully discriminate the concepts that have criterial power from those that do not and submit non-proleptic notions to scrutiny according to the principles of Epicurean methodology. Obviously, this puts into sharp relief the problem of how we can distinguish between preconceptions and other types of concepts. This problem is not addressed explicitly in the surviving Epicurean texts. Nonetheless, there is some evidence pointing to partial answers. Epicurus’ contention that preconceptions are self-evident (*enargeis*), suggests that he makes a psychological and epistemic assumption similar to the assumption underlying the Stoic cognitive impression (*phantasia katalēptikē*): differently from all other notions, the preconceptions present themselves to the mind in a distinct and unmistakable manner. Of course this assumption incurs for Epicurus the sort of criticism that the Academics levelled against the Stoics in respect of the claim that cognitive impressions have a special sort of *enargeia,* represent the object exactly as it is, cannot be confused with non-cognitive impressions, and invariably result in a cognitive grasp of the object. Notably, one could retort that there is no independent way of confirming that a notion is a preconception and hence Epicurus’ contention that preconceptions are evident begs the question.

Later Epicurean authors suggest other possible answers. Demetrius Laco appears to maintain that a way of identifying preconceptions and of distinguishing them from other concepts may be to pay close attention to the relevant linguistic context. Demetrius held that taking into consideration the specific framework in which a term occurs is crucial in order to spot the preconception and use it correctly in argument (*PHerc*. 1012 LXIII.1-9; see also Phld., *Sign.* XXXIV.5-11).

The assumption that conceptions entail propositions underlies a further distinction between articulated (*diērthrōmenai*) and non-articulated (*adiarthrōtoi*) notions and, in particular, preconceptions. Plutarch (fr. 215f) compares Epicurean preconceptions to the common conceptions (*koinai ennoiai*) of the Stoics[[23]](#footnote-24) and confronts the Epicureans with the following dilemma: either a preconception is articulated or it is unarticulated; if the former, the corresponding investigation is redundant; if the latter, the search is impossible. Even if Plutarch uses this distinction between articulated and non-articulated conceptions in an unsympathetic way, it is consistent with the double duty of preconceptions. On the one hand, preconceptions are fundamental for the everyday use of language in so far as they fix word meaning. For this use, preconceptions don’t need to be ‘unpacked’ or ‘articulated’. On the other hand, we have seen that the content of preconceptions can be ‘articulated’ in the formulae listing permanent properties. It seems then that queries raised in ordinary discourse can usually proceed on the basis of non-articulated preconceptions that members of a linguistic community share, whereas philosophical and scientific enquiries require a different level of structured elaboration that can be provided only by unpacking the content of our basic notions into articulated accounts.

**6. Preconceptions and word meaning**

As we have seen above, there is a very close connection between preconceptions and successful linguistic communication. The passage from Diogenes Laertius quoted below, although very condensed, complements what we have already discussed on the basis of Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* (section 3 above). And even though it concerns exclusively preconceptions, some of the claims it contains might concern other categories of concepts as well.

They (sc. the Epicureans) say that preconception is as it were a cognition (*katalēpsis*) or correct belief (*orthē doxa*) or conception (*ennoia*) or universal notion (*katholikē noēsis*) stored inside, 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 to the mind by way of preconception, senses (*aisthēseis*) leading the way. Thus, what primarily underlies every name is something evident. And we would not inquire about the object of inquiry, if we did not know it first. For instance, ‘What stands over there, is it a horse or a cow’? For one must at some time come to know, by way of preconception, the form of a horse or of a cow. Nor would we have named anything, if we had not first learnt its pattern by way of preconception. Thus, preconceptions are evident. And what is believed is derived from something prior and evident, by reference to which we say, for instance, 'How do we know if this is a man?' (Diog. Laert. 10.33)

Not only does this passage underscore the different aspects of preconceptions, it also highlights the process by which possessing the preconception ensures understanding and communication. When I hear you uttering the word ‘man’, I don’t need concurrently to see a man in order to understand what you are saying. This is so because the preconception, or ‘pattern’ (*tupos*)[[24]](#footnote-25), of man, based on previous perceptions of human beings, is stored in my mind, and gets activated upon hearing the word ‘man’. Because of the causal history of the ‘pattern’, which is formed from previous sensations, the preconception that gets activated upon hearing the word, is also ‘evident’, just as an occurrent perception is, and thereby guarantees that I don’t think of something completely different than you when I hear you uttering the word ‘man’. If so, the account does not involve reference to the meaning of the word ‘man’, but instead focuses on the relation between the vocal utterance, the preconception, and the achievement of interpersonal communication. On this construal, we have a two-tier account, with words on the one hand and with the corresponding entities (external objects and preconceptions formed by repeated sensations of the relevant external objects) on the other hand.

As opposed to the reading just sketched, scholars have maintained that preconceptions play the role of meanings or significations, functionally analogous to Fregean senses or Stoic sayables (*lekta*).[[25]](#footnote-26) According to this line of interpretation, Epicurus has a three-tier semantic theory in which the preconception mediates between the use of the word and the corresponding item in the world.

The evidence provided by Sextus (*Math.* 8.13, 258) and Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1119F) is sometimes evoked in support of the two-tier reconstruction. We have, however, to be careful how to assess this evidence. What Sextus and Plutarch say is that the Epicureans rejected the existence of Stoic-type *lekta*, and apparently base their claim that the Epicureans had a two-tier theory on this rejection*.* The rejection of Stoic *lekta* makes perfect sense from an Epicurean perspective in so far as *lekta*, according to the Stoics, are incorporeal entities, whereas Epicurean ontology does not allow for the existence of incorporeals other than void. In particular, as we have seen, Epicureans give a physical account of preconceptions. The rejection of the Stoic incorporeal *lekta* in itself is however not decisive about the semantic role of preconceptions within the Epicurean theory.[[26]](#footnote-27) One might have a three-tier theory without Stoic incorporeals.

Be that as it may, evidence from surviving Epicurean texts about the origin of language also seems to corroborate the two-tier reading. According to Lucretius as well as Epicurus, 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* 5.1030-1032). In this picture, the basic semantic items are two, not three: the vocal utterance and what it refers to. The signalling of the child also involves two items, the pointing finger and what it points to. For his part, Epicurus explains how names originally came into being as exhalations of breath peculiarly emitted in natural response to external stimuli, and how, in a later phase, terms were clarified and disambiguated by consensus (*Ep. Hdt*. 75-76). He says nothing about preconceptions or meanings in that context. We encounter the same pattern in the second stage of linguistic development: experts introduce newly coined terms to refer to newly discovered entities (Epic., *Ep. Hdt*. 76). Again, in this account we hear about words referring to things, and there is no separate mention of preconceptions or other entities having the role of meanings. Similar observations may apply to Diogenes of Oinoanda too (10.2.11-5.15).[[27]](#footnote-28)

Consider also the example in the passage from Diogenes Laertius, namely that the relevant preconception is necessary to answer correctly the question 'What stands over there, is it a horse or a cow?’. The point is that the possession of the relevant preconceptions is psychologically and epistemologically prior to being able to reply to that question; here too the preconceptions do not seem to be identical to the senses or the meanings of the words ‘horse’ and ‘cow’, although they serve to fix these meanings.

On balance, although the evidence from Sextus and Plutarch is inconclusive, there is thus good philosophical motivation and textual grounds for favouring a two-tier interpretation of the Epicurean position.

Besides, according to Diogenes Laertius (Diog. Laert. 10.34), the Epicureans held that, of enquiries, some are about things, others merely about words or utterances, and that they favoured the former sort of enquiry rather than the latter. They rejected dialectic as redundant, contending that ‘it is sufficient that natural philosophers should proceed under the guidance of words designating things’. Once again, the focus is on words and things, and their role in successful communication and inquiry: language is worth studying not so much for its own sake as for the sake of understanding the nature of things and of communicating, clearly and unambiguously, our thoughts to others.

This stance might also explain why the Epicureans’ extant remains contain neither a semantic vocabulary, nor any detailed explicit reflection on the signifying relation obtaining between words and things or on the exact way in which preconceptions enable linguistic communication, apart from the slim evidence from Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* and the passage Diogenes Laertius quoted and discussed above. In sum, we are inclined to believe that Epicurus and his followers were not so interested in the signifying relation between language and the world as in the epistemological function of the ‘first concepts’ and their contribution to the effective use of language.

**7. Preconceptions and other concepts**

Compared to preconceptions, the available evidence is scarce about other concepts. We would like to suggest that the reason for this is not historical accident, but that it might well reflect a corresponding relative lack of interest on the part of the Epicureans. In brief, our position is this. Epicurus provided an account of the methods by which we can validly infer true claims about non-evident things on the basis of sensations and preconceptions. These truths about non-evident things involve positing entities which are not available to sensation, and of which we consequently don’t have a preconception formed from repeated sensations. The list of these non-evident items includes such fundamental entities as the atoms and the void. However, Epicurus’ focus is not on how we form the concept of such entities, but how we come to know that they exist and have certain properties. We also wish to suggest that the original Epicurean material might have been construed by later non-Epicurean authors with a different focus, presumably under Stoic influence, as pertaining to concept formation.

In summarising the functions of sensations and preconceptions in *Letter to Herodotus* 38, Epicurus does not say that we form non-proleptic concepts on their basis; rather, he maintains that we can use them as starting points for forming and testing further claims. In the rest of the *Letter*, we in fact find multiple applications of this methodology. For instance, the senses provide immediate evidence for the existence of bodies, and we have seen above how the preconception of body is formed on that basis. Epicurus continues by arguing that the sensory evidence showing that bodies exist and move is sufficient to establish the existence of something distinct from bodies, which provides place for bodies and in which bodies can move. In accordance with these fundamental characteristics of this entity, inferred by this reasoning, this entity can be called ‘empty’ (*kenon*), in so far as it leaves room for moving bodies, ‘place’ (*topos*), in so far as it is where bodies are, and ‘intangible thing’ (*anaphēs phusis*), in so far as, in contrast to bodies, it is not resistant to touch (*Ep. Hdt.* 40). By this reasoning, we must affirm the existence of void.

Epicurus continues by arguing, somewhat elliptically, that if bodies were not constituted of ultimate constituents that are indivisible, unalterable and ‘full’, then, when composite bodies dissolve, bodies would dissolve into nothing. Yet, as he argued a little earlier, if bodies could dissolve into not-being, in the infinity of past time all bodies would have already turned into nothing, which is obviously not the case (*Ep. Hdt.* 41).[[28]](#footnote-29) On the basis of this reasoning, we can thus see that these ultimate indivisible and unalterable constituents of bodies – that is, atoms – must exist. Epicurus adds that we cannot conceive of (*epinoēthēnai*) any fundamental *per se* existent entities beyond bodies and the void, either by direct grasp (*perilēptikōs*), as we do with bodies, or on the basis of ‘analogy’ with what is grasped directly (*analogōs tois perilēptois*), as we do with the void. It is not the place to assess these arguments; it seems however clear that Epicurus’ interest lies in how to infer to the existence of entities that are not available to the senses, such as the void and the atoms, and not in giving an account of the mental process of forming a concept of them.

In a later part of the *Letter*, Epicurus argues that we cannot distinguish infinitely many parts in atoms even in thought (*Ep. Hdt*. 57-9). Again, this argument for sub-atomic minima, distinguishable only in thought, is compressed and and its interpretation vexed. What however seems clear is that Epicurus’ inference is based on an analogy with the way in which we visually distinguish tiny, but still visible parts in visible bodies: we have a grasp of these minimal perceptible parts by visually focusing on the tiniest still perceptible part at the edge of the visible body. Epicurus claims that this perceptual experience is not ‘in every way completely dissimilar’ (*oute pantē pantōs anomoion*), but has a certain ‘commonality’ (*koinotēs*) with the way in which we can focus in thought on the edge of the invisibly small atoms, and this is the smallest part we can even think of. Then, taking that smallest thinkable part of the atom as it were the unit, we can in thought move on to, or make a transition (*metabasis*) to the next similarly sized part. Epicurus claims that we can reach this conclusion about the smallest parts of atoms on the basis of the analogy (*analogia*) between the smallest visible part in a visible body and the smallest conceivable part in an invisibly small atomic body. Again, there is no reason to think that Epicurus’ focus is on concept-formation as such, but rather on how to make an inference to the existence of atomic minima on the basis of analogy with what is perceptible.

There is some evidence that Epicurus also used the term *metabasis* for inference ([24]. 30.1, 6-7 Arrighetti / *Nat.* IA Pap. 154 8 IV.1-7.).[[29]](#footnote-30) The theory was then further discussed and developed by later Epicureans, who used the term *metabasis* for scientific inference in a quasi-technical way, and who ascribed special importance to inference by similarity (*kath’ homoiotēta*). We see for instance how Philodemus argues that we can establish the existence of void on the basis of inference by similarity (Phld., *Sign*. VIII–IX, De Lacy and De Lacy).

It is striking that we find many of the terms used in these passages in later sources that, according to many interpreters, speak about concept formation. This is for instance how Diogenes Laertius’ report on the Epicurean view has sometimes been understood:

Hence it is from appearances that we must draw inferences (*sēmeiousthai*) about non-evident things. For all our conceptions (*epinoiai*), derive from sensation either as a result of encounters [with the object] (*periptōsis*) or by analogy (*analogia*) or similarity (*homoiotēs*) or composition (*sunthesis*) and with some contribution from reasoning (*logismos*) as well. (Diog. Laert. 10.32)

Although some translators and interpreters take *epinoiai* in Diogenes’ text to refer to concepts,[[30]](#footnote-31) the close parallel with the passages from the *Letter to Herodotus* we have just considered strongly suggests that the term is to be understood more broadly: it must refer to a wide range of mental contents, which include (*a*) the results of direct ‘encounters’ (*periptōsis*), i.e., either occurrent sensations or repeated sensations as in the case of preconceptions, and also those that are (*b*) arrived at by some additional mental operation based on analogy, similarity, and composition, as well as reasoning. It seems that this distinction among the sources of *epinoiai* corresponds to the distinction made by Epicurus in *Hdt.* 40 we considered above between forming conceptions (*epinoēthēnai*) of things either by directly grasping them (*perilēptikōs*), as we do with bodies, or on the basis of ‘analogy’ of what is grasped directly (*analogōs tois perilēptois*).[[31]](#footnote-32) But, as we have argued, Epicurus’ interest was not in concept formation as such.

What could, and apparently have, caused confusion are passages by Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus that use a very similar terminology. This is what Diogenes writes about the Stoic account of concept formation:

Of concepts (*nooumena*) some are conceived (*enoēthē*) by encounters (*periptōsis*), some by similarity (*homoiotēs*), some by analogy (*analogia*), some by transposition (*metathesis*), some by composition (*sunthesis*) (7.52-3).

There is a clear overlap between the two passages, including the recurrence of key terms. There are however also crucial differences. First and foremost, this is an account of the formation of *nooumena*, concepts,and not of Epicurean *epinoiai*. And as the examples listed by Diogenes in the continuation of the text show, the list of *nooumena* thus formed include not only those of non-perceptible but real entities, such as the centre of the earth, but very prominently also of fictional entities, such as the giant Cyclops whom we conceive on the basis of augmenting humans in thought, or beings with their eyes on their chest conceived on the basis of transposition, or centaurs conceived on the basis of combining in thought a human and a horse. These seem to be acts of imagination with no ontological implications: the fact that on the basis of things we encounter we can form in our imagination all kinds of weird creatures, does not in any way imply that such creatures exist. By contrast, the Epicurean account is part of a scientific methodology about how to make inferences to the existence and properties of non-evident entities.

Note also that the Epicureans had a markedly different account of how we get the notion of centaurs and other monsters: *eidola* of a horse and of a human accidentally meet and get combined, and then such accidentally combined, or otherwise distorted, *eidola* reach our mind (cf. Lucr., *DRN* 4.732-8). In contrast to the Stoic account, such notions for the Epicureans are not the results of mental operations, and are not explained by reference to reasoning on the basis of analogy, similarity or composition.

Passages in Sextus Empiricus have further complicated the picture. For Sextus repeatedly states, without ascribing the view to a specific school, that we conceive things either by direct encounter (*periptōsis*) or by inference (*metabasis*) from encounters or from what is evident (*enargēs*), sometimes adding that *metabasis* can be based on similarity, combination, or analogy (*Math.* 1.23-25; *Math.* 3.40; *Math.* 8.56; *Math.* 9.390-402; *Math.* 11.250-6). As we have seen, the terminology has good Epicurean pedigree (or at the very least was shared by the Epicureans), and on this basis scholars have sometimes considered Sextus’ scheme to be Epicurean. However, when Sextus elaborates on the different forms of these mechanisms and provides examples, his explanation and specific examples (including the Cyclops and centaurs) correspond exactly to the ones in Diogenes’ account of the Stoic doctrine, which, as we have seen, we have good reason not to ascribe to the Epicureans. If so, whether or not Sextus in these passages is speaking about the formation of concepts or of conceptions, we don’t need to ascribe his scheme to the Epicureans.[[32]](#footnote-33)

**8. Objections and replies**

It was only to be expected that the Epicurean doctrine of preconceptions would attract vigorous criticism. In particular, critics appear to target the assumptions that having a preconception of X implies the existence of X as well as a firm grasp of what X is. However, such criticisms frequently blur the Epicurean distinction between preconceptions and other concepts either because the objectors are genuinely confused about it or for polemical reasons.

For example, in addressing the question whether the possession of an *epinoia* (here ‘conception’) or a preconception (*prolēpsis*) of X implies the existence (*huparxis*) of X, Sextus relays that, according to the Epicureans, if one has an *epinoia* or *prolēpsis* of proof, one has a mental grasp of what proof is and this establishes that proof exists (cf. *Math.* 8.337). Sextus considers this argument ‘rather rustic’ (*agroikoteron*), because he objects to the idea that one’s mental grasp (*noein*) of X constitutes sufficient grounds for inferring that X exists. In this argument Sextus appears to use the Epicurean notion of *epinoia* that, as we discussed in the previous section, has existential implications because it is formed either on the basis of direct encounter with external objects or on the basis of a valid inference going back to sense perception. Sextus seems to object that in neither case can the possession of an *epinoia* ground existence claims. Moreover, according to an argument rehearsed by Sextus, the ‘rustic’ reasoning of the Epicureans regarding preconceptions makes them vulnerable to a version of Meno’s paradox. If *prolēpseis* are *katalēpseis*, pieces of knowledge, Epicurus would find it difficult to account for an enquiry into e.g. the four elements. For either he would have a *prolēpsis* or an *epinoia* of the four elements and hence would apprehend them, in which case the enquiry would be redundant, or he would not have an *epinoia* of them, in which case the enquiry would be impossible (Sext. Emp., *Math*. 8.335a-336a).

Do the Epicureans have the resources to deal with that puzzle? Sextus suggests that their answer could run along the following lines. Although Epicurus had a conception (*epinoei*) of the four elements, he did not apprehend them in every way, i.e. he did not have a thorough articulation of them. And therefore he had both the capacity and the motivation to conduct a theoretical enquiry about what each of the four elements really is. As Sextus points out, here *epinoia*, conception, would indicate a mere movement of the mind stripped of ontological and epistemic implications. For, in that case, one could have an *epinoia* of the four elements, even if they do not exist or even if one has not yet fully grasped their nature

Evidently, this type of argument is better suited to preconceptions than to other conceptions, and it is especially well suited to the preconceptions that are intended to serve as the starting points of philosophical or scientific enquiries. In the context of Epicurean methodology and science, it is important to take for granted that, if we have a preconception of X, there is such a thing as X and we can investigate it. Unfortunately, we can only speculate about the ontological implications of cases where the mind goes wrong and, notably, cases where the mind forms concepts entailing falsehoods. The Epicureans could take either of the following alternative routes: they could argue that the possession of the conception of X entails that X exists, even though we may be ascribing to X attributes that it does not have; or, alternatively, they could contend that our conception of X is incoherent and does not establish in any way the existence of a corresponding object.

**9. Preconceptions and human flourishing**

Just as the entire philosophy of the Garden is geared towards the attainment of happiness, so also is the part that concerns preconceptions and concepts more generally. In the first place, preconceptions and other concepts are crucial to the defense of the central thesis of Epicurean hedonism and of other cardinal tenets including, notably, the articles of the so-called *Tetrapharmakos* or Fourfold Medicine: god is not to be feared, death is nothing to us, the good is easy to get, the bad is easy to endure (Phld., *Ad* [...] IV.9-14). In the second place, Epicureans of all periods stress the importance of concepts and especially of preconceptions for human survival, the development of civilisation, and the identification and proper practice of the arts and sciences. Let us take these matters in turn.

To begin with the first item of the *Tetrapharmakos*, following Epicurus (*Ep. Men*. 123-124), all known relevant Epicurean texts contrast the preconception of god, which represents divinities as imperishable and blessed beings, with false *hupolēpseis* about the gods, i.e. false beliefs ascribing to the gods attributes incompatible with the content of the preconception. While our conception of god can be developed and enriched in a reliable manner through experience-based mental processes so as to remain compatible with the preconception, it can also be distorted by prejudice and falsehood and move away from the preconception altogether.

Epicurus’ extant texts offer a brief analysis of death, but it is conspicuous that they make no mention of a preconception of death, neither do we find any mention of it in the surviving extensive discussions of death and the arguments against the fear of death in later Epicurean texts. Plutarch however, in a dialectical context, construes the Epicurean argument for the claim that ‘death is nothing to us’ on the analogy of the argument to the effect that we should not fear the gods. According to Plutarch just as the latter is based on the preconception of god so the former is based on the preconception of death (*thanatou prolēpsis*, *Non posse* 1092C). Philosophically, it might seem reasonable that the Epicureans would posit a preconception of death rather than some other type of concept, because, arguably, we acquire this concept through repeated impressions of dead people, animals, and plants. Even so, it might be that they did not base their arguments against the fear of death, or the fundamental tenet that ‘death is nothing to us’, on the preconception.

As for pleasure and pain, while they are ‘evident’ (*enarges*) and have criterial power in virtue of being feelings (e.g. Epic., *Ep. Men*. 129), they are also standardly treated as corresponding to conceptions (*ennoiai*). For instance, Epicurus’ summary presentation of pleasure as the first congenital good entertains pleasure as a mental item as well as a psychological and ethical state. Moreover, the debate between the characters of Torquatus and of Cicero about the nature of pleasure in *De finibus* 2 concerns the coherence of Epicurus’ conception of pleasure at least as much as the psychological and ethical plausibility of his twofold moral end (cf. *Fin.* 1.31).

According to Epicurean orthodoxy, preconceptions are also extremely important for the passage from primitivism to civilization and for the technological achievements of civilized societies. If they are attended to they lead to prosperity and happiness, whereas if they are ignored many pains and evils follow.

In so far as the development of branches of expert knowledge (*technē*) is supposed to contribute to the comfort and prosperity of humans, and also to the attainment of pleasure, it is not surprising that some of his followers explore the role of preconceptions in the context of debates concerning *technē* or the *technai*. In such dialectical contexts we encounter a new form of expression referring to preconceptions that some scholars have taken to indicate a distinct category of preconceptions, namely complex preconceptions with evaluative content, such as that of the good poem, the good rhetor, or the good property manager. If we look more closely at the contexts in which these evaluative expressions occur, however, we are likely to come to the conclusion that they do not refer to a new class of preconceptions but rather reflect the particular dialectical context in which they occur.

A notable example is the art of *oikonomia*, property management *–* a *technē* the practice of which is problematic for an Epicurean, mainly because its overarching goal is material rather than moral, and consists in the maximally effective increase, preservation, and administration of property and wealth. Consistently with the views of Epicurus (e.g. Diog. Laert. 10.120), and Metrodorus (Phld., D*e oec. PHerc*. 1424 XII.17-25, XIV.19), Philodemus contends that, for the Epicurean property manager, ‘more’ is never identical with the open-ended goal of the traditional property manager, namely the goal of amassing as many riches as possible by lawful means. On Philodemus’ account, there are two approaches to the art of *oikonomia*, one suitable for the philosopher, the other unsuitable.[[33]](#footnote-34) To clarify the relation between them and delimit the boundaries of the sage’s engagement in the art of property management, he opposes the proleptic use of *agathos oikonomos*, the ‘good property manager’, with the non-proleptic use of that expression and, correspondingly, he systematically compares and contrasts the Epicurean conception of property management with the traditional conception of that art:

We must not [violate] this (sc. the meaning of the expression ‘the good moneymaker’ *agathos chrēmatistēs*) through linguistic expressions, as sophists do, for we would be showing nothing about the acquisition and use (of wealth) pertaining to the wise man. 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 moneymaker’ [to whoever it may be in whom] those features are attested’ (*De oec*. *PHerc*. 1424).

While for the traditional mindset the goodness of a property manager consists in his capacity to amass and administer wealth, according to the Epicurean way of thinking the goodness of the property manager must have to do with his capacity to bring pleasure through the exercise of his art.

Compare the options concerning the goodness of a poem and the debate between Stoics and Epicureans in that regard. On the Stoic view, the goodness of a poem depends on its content and is judged by the aptitude of the latter to promote virtue, whereas, on the Epicurean view as defended by Philodemus, the goodness of a poem depends significantly on its form *(De poem*. II N 1074b fr. 21 + 1081b fr. 8 sup., 6-11 Janko) and is judged by the pleasure that it causes by virtue of its form. In both these cases the evaluative component of the expression that refers to the preconception does not belong, strictly speaking, to the preconception itself, but is introduced because the debate concerns the value of the activity or the product at issue.[[34]](#footnote-35) In the former case the issue is not who counts as a property manager but who counts as a *good* property manager and the preconception gets qualified accordingly. In the latter case the question is not what counts as a poem but what counts as a *good* poem and, again, the preconception receives that qualification. But this is all. As in every other case, so in these cases the preconceptions are representational outlines and have no direct evaluative component.

Sometimes the Epicureans appeal to preconceptions related to the arts not in order to assess the value of a practice or a product, but in order to settle the formal question whether or not a certain practice truly possesses the credentials of a genuine *technē*. On other occasions, the Epicureans rely on the preconception of a *technē* so as to decide whether or to what degree people who adhere to the philosophy of Epicurus would profit from engaging in some particular *technē*. Once again, non-proleptic concepts play no prominent role in these discussions, in all likelihood because they have no criterial power and hence cannot be relied upon in order to judge such controversial issues. Philodemus’ discussion of the art of rhetoric pursues both these goals.

Recall that, according to Epicurus’ key methodological statement, only if we grasp ‘what underlies our utterances’ and only if we test our opinions, disputes, and investigations by reference to the ‘primary concept’ shall we be able to avoid circular reasoning and empty talk (*Ep. Hdt*. 37-38) as well as error arising from the manifold applications of the words, that is their ambiguity (*Nat*. XXVIII, *PHerc*. 1479 fr. 12 col. III.2-12 Sedley). Error is related to one’s misuse of ‘preconceptions and appearances’ and therefore, we must take care not to be misled by the ambiguities of common speech or other factors. However, as Epicurus and his followers point out, technical language frequently deviates from the preconceptual meaning of the terms (cf. *Nat*. XXVIII, *PHerc*. 1479 fr. 13 col. IV inf.1 - V sup. 12 Sedley).

Accordingly, Philodemus follows the strategy of looking, first of all, at the conception of *technē* or the conception of a given *technē* inherent in ordinary language in order to determine, for instance, whether rhetoric is an art. Here we cannot analyse his argument, but we wish to register that he eventually achieves his goal in part because he engages in the necessary conceptual work of removing certain ambiguities surrounding the concept of *technē* and of retrieving the preconception that underlies it. As he contends, his conclusion conforms to that preconception: technicity has everything to do with method and only sophistic rhetoric is methodical, whereas political rhetoric and forensic rhetoric are not; hence only sophistic rhetoric deserves to be called an art (cf. *Nat*. XLIII.20-21 / Longo 133).

The issue of the technicity of rhetoric is a theoretical dispute, but it has practical and ethical aspects as well. In so far as forensic and political rhetoric are demoted from the elevated status of a *technē*, they lose in prestige and attraction, while sophistic rhetoric retains both. Thus, the choiceworthiness of the former becomes questionable, whereas the value of the latter is not diminished. From an Epicurean perspective this is a good result, since the rhetoric practised in courthouses and political assemblies aims at money and power, whereas sophistic rhetoric mainly aims at pleasure. This example shows how the Epicurean methodology of relying on preconceptions in assessing disputed questions can be applied also outside the realm of the study of nature, and how the application of the method, even in specialised domains, is ultimately put at the service of the attainment of happiness.

**10. Conclusion**

Does the surviving Epicurean material about concepts amount to something like a substantive theory of concepts and concept formation? The evidence we have reviewed doesn’t encourage a positive answer to this question. As we have suggested, if we don’t find such a theory, it is probably not because of the fragmentary state of the evidence, but because, ultimately, the Epicureans are interested in preconceptions and other concepts only in so far as they are relevant to their epistemology, scientific methodology and ethics. However, we hope to have shown that, on the basis of Epicurus’ tenets, successive generations of Epicureans, developed a distinct and original approach to concepts in the light of their own version of atomism and of empiricism, coined a quasi-technical vocabulary to draw pertinent and defensible distinctions, and offered valuable insights regarding the mind’s contribution to the formation of concepts and their use. Also, they highlighted aspects of the ontology of concepts, traced their relation to reality and language, and underscored their crucial role in science, the acquisition of knowledge, and the attainment of the good life.

1. Epicurus, *Ep. Hdt*. 35, 36, 38, 50, 51, 69, 70, 83, *RS* 24; Lucretius, *DRN* 2.740: *animi iniectus*; Cicero, *Nat. D.* 1.20, 54: *iniciens animus et intendens*; *Nat. D.* 1.19, 49: *mentem intentam infixamque*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Epicureans applied the method not only for physical inquiry, but also in ethics. Cf. e.g. Cic., *Fin*. 2.1.3–2.6,15.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cf. Asmis 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For an alternative interpretation of the passage, disputing the identity of ‘primary conceptions’ and preconceptions, and arguing that it is justified to refer to meaning in this context, see Glidden 1983 and 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Cf. Taylor 2016; Sedley 2019: 108-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For the distinction between *the* concept of F and *a* concept of F, see McKirahan in chapter 6 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The term *aisthēsis* is variously translated as ‘sensation’, ‘perception’, or ‘sense-impression’. As we shall shortly see, *aisthēsis* for Epicurus does not involve any interpretation by the mind, and on this account we find ‘sensation’ more fitting. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. This will of course still not settle the question what the relevant properties are. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Eidōla* can get modified when they travel a long distance before they reach the sense-organ or when they have to traverse some distorting medium. This is why the far-away square tower might appear round or the oar partially submerged in water appear bent. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Matters are complicated by the fact that Epicurus apparently ascribed the property of ‘being true’ to external objects themselves: objects are true if they correspond to how they are spoken of (Sext. Emp., *Math.* 8.9). Objects of clear perception can in this sense be ‘true’ in so far as they reliably correspond to our perceptions and perceptual judgments of them. One advantage of this idiosyncratic position is that it allows the Epicureans to maintain that we learn the concepts of true and false also on the basis of our experience of external objects (Lucr., *DRN* 4.473-9; cf. Bown 2016; Sedley 2019: 94-5.). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. On previous uses of the term *tupos* in epistemological contexts, and in particular as part of concept formation on the basis of sense-perception, see Laks in this volume, p. 00. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Cf. Phld., *Sign*. XX.31-XXI.15 singling out mortality and vulnerability to disease as common characteristics. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. A text of Cicero (*Nat. D.* 1.105) suggests that these operations could be described by the Epicureans as the ‘focusing’ or ‘application of the mind’ (*epibolē tēs dianoias*) on the relevant stimuli. Cicero however is speaking about the formation of the preconception of the gods, which, at least in some respects, is unique (on this see below). It is thus not clear whether the ‘application of the mind’ is specific to the formation of this specific preconception, or indeed whether Cicero’s report is fully reliable at this point. Some interpreters take Epicurus to suggest that ‘application of the mind’ refers not to the formation but to the use of preconceptions in mental operations such as the identification or categorisation of sense objects. Goldschmidt 1978, Glidden 1985, and Morel 2008 defend versions of the view that *epibolē* is constitutive of a preconception, whereas Konstan 2008, Tsouna 2016: 186-193, and Verde 2016 argue that these are two distinct from each other, although closely related. Verde 2016 points out that Diogenes of Oinoanda fr. 79 (NF 33) lends support to the latter view. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. On the ways in which preconceptions are beneficial and even necessary for human well-being, see also section 9 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. For an excellent recent survey of the different interpretative options see Veres 2017. On the relationship between preconceptions and existence claims, see more below pp. 000. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Horse and man: Diog. Laert. 10.33; man: Lucr., *DRN* 5.181-3; god: e.g. Epic., *RS* 1, *Men*. 123-4; Phld., *Piet*. fr. 5.14-28 / ll. 130-144; justice: Epic., *KD* 37; utility: Lucr., *DRN* 4.853-4, 5.1046-9; pleasure: Cic., *Fin*. 1.31; responsibility and agency: Epic, *Nat.* 34.26-30; truth: Lucr., *DRN* 4.478-80; time: not a preconception in Epicurus (cf. *Ep. Hdt*. 72-3, Sext. Emp., *M.* 10.219), but mentioned as having a preconception in Phld., *Piet*. fr. 66A. 4-6 / ll. 1885-1887; cause: Epic., *Nat*. 28; cosmos: Lucr., *DRN* 5.156-237; ‘All' (*pan*): Phld., *Piet*. fr. 66A.3-6 / 1884-1887; *technē*: Phld., *Rhet*. I 53.3-22 Sudhaus; orator/rhetor: Phld., *Rhet*. I 244.15. Sudhaus; just, good, beautiful: Phld., *Rhet*. I.254.25-255.20; poem: Phld., *De poem.* I 193.20 (explicit mention of ‘preconception’) Janko II N 1074b fr.21 + 1081b fr.8 sup, 6-11.; good poem: Phld., *De poem.* I.194.18-24  Janko V col.30.32-36 Jensen; good property manager: Phld., *De oec*. XX.1-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See below on derivative concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See, notably, Betegh 2006: 280; 2013; Sedley 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. In some of these formulae the properties are linked simply with ‘and’, whereas in others we get the most conspicuous properties first (e.g. the species specific shape of human beings, or the three-dimensional extension of bodies) to which a less perspicuous property (e.g. being ensouled in the case of human and having resistance in the case of body) is added with the preposition *meta* (‘together with’). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Cf. Taylor 2016; Sedley 2019: 108-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. According to Philipson’s supplement, accepted by Obbink, Philodemus adds ‘and perfect disposition’. The supplement ἕξινis however uncertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Atherton 2009: 203, suggests that the application of a word to a thing is tantamount to expressing a belief about that thing (see Diog. Laert. 10.33), and also that, generally, the Epicureans appear quite indifferent with regard to the distinction between claiming that X has the property F and subscribing to a concept according to which X has the property F. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. See Ierodakonou 000 in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. On the early history of this term in epistemological contexts, see Laks section 1 in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. For the distinction, see esp. Atherton 2009: 198-99. Defenders of the three-tier reading specify in different ways the semantic role of preconceptions. See e.g. Long 1971, Long and Sedley 1987 vol. I *ad loc*., Goldschmidt 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Moreover, as Atherton 2009: 199 noted, the Epicurean theory was unlikely to have been developed as a response to the Stoic theory for chronological reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. On the occasions when Epicurus mentions preconceptions in connection to language, it is to remark, first, that all error arises over preconceptions and appearances because of the many habitual uses of words (*Nat*. XXVIII.31.10.2-12), and, second, that linguistic aberrations are due to the fact that people attend to concepts other than the primary concept corresponding to the relevant words (*to nooumenon kata tas lexeis*: *Nat*. XXVIII.31.13.23-14.12). The former of these passages points to the criterial function of preconceptions, whereas the latter highlights their importance for correct naming and speaking. But neither of these excerpts from Epicurus dwells on the semantic implications of his views. Likewise, Lucretius refers to concepts in connection to language to make points that are not directly related to semantic issues. For instance, he suggests that 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* 5.1046-1049). This remark has to do with the Epicurean genealogy of language and serves a dialectical purpose. It is not about semantics. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. For an attempt to reconstruct this argument, see Betegh 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. We can even speculate how this more general use of the term is related to what we have seen in the passage on atomic minima: we focus on the first smallest part at the edge of the body, and then by a mental operation we move on to the next one which we have reasons to believe is similar to the first one in the row. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Cf. e.g. Mueller 1982: 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. For the use of ‘encounter’ (*periptōsis*) in an Epicurean text, cf. Phld., *Sign*. XX.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. This conclusion might have further ramifications for a much-disputed passage. Sextus at *Math.* 9.45-7 reports an account according to which ‘god’s being eternal and imperishable and perfect in happiness came in by way of a transition (*metabasis*) from human beings. For just as by increasing the size of a normal human being in the appearance we get a concept (*noēsis*) of a Cyclops […] so, having conceived a human being who is happy and blessed and replete with all good things, by then augmenting these things we conceived god, the pinnacle in those very respects. Again, having formed an appearance of a long-lived human, the ancients increased the time to infinity by connecting the past and the future with the present; and then, having thus come to a conception of the eternal, they said that god is actually eternal’ (trans. Bett). The text appears to attribute this account to the Epicureans, and has been treated by scholars as such. The trouble is of course that this is in contrast with the standard Epicurean description of how the preconception of god is formed. The text poses the further problem that while the notion of the Cyclops thus formed is not veridical, so the process is not truth-preserving, the Epicureans want to state that we can know that god has these properties. However, the account in Sextus is clearly parallel – repeating also the example of the Cyclops – with the process of the formation of *nooumena* that Diogenes attributes to the Stoics in (Diog. Laert. 7.52-3), and which, as we have argued, we have good reasons to distinguish from the Epicurean theory of forming *epinoiai* on the basis of inference. If so, we have good reasons not to ascribe Sextus’ account to the Epicureans either. (We thank Charles Brittain and Máté Veres for discussion of this and related passages.) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Similar distinctions about other arts are attributed to Epicurus by Sextus in *Math*. 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See Philodemus’ refutation of the critic Heracleodorus, who contended that good poetry depends on good content.  Philodemus appeals to the preconception of goodness of a poem to refute the view that the latter consists in moral goodness.  Cf.  *De poem*. I 194. 18-24, I 199.1 ff, V col. 30.32-36 Jensen) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)