

THE EPICUREAN NOTION OF *EPIBOLĒ*

The surviving writings of Epicurus and his followers contain several references to *epibolē* - a puzzling notion that does not receive discussion in the extant Epicurean texts, even though it is known to have been debated within the Garden. While the grammatical components of '*epibolē*' (*epi* + *ballein*) have commonly been taken to indicate that the term refers to projection or attention, there is no consensus about what *epibolē* is, what it is *of*, and what it operates *on*. Even more importantly, the epistemological status and rôle of that notion is unclear. On the one hand, Diogenes Laertius attests that some Epicureans treated the *phantastikai epibolai tēs dianoias* (representational *epibolai* of the mind) as criteria of truth. On the other, Epicurus explicitly states that the criteria of truth are, precisely, sensations, preconceptions, and feelings. Since overt disagreement with the Founder is not permissible in the context of the Garden, it is important to examine whether Epicurus' surviving writings might permit or suggest that *epibolē* too has criterial status. This and other related questions are crucial for the ethical theory as well as the epistemology and scientific methodology of the Garden. For the criteria are supposed to ensure both access to truths and solid grounds for action.

My aim, then, is to piece together Epicurus' conception of *epibolē* partly in light of its reception and uses by later Epicurean authors. In Part One, I discuss in turn the occurrences of '*epibolē*' and its cognates in the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Principal Doctrines* and argue that some of the things that Epicurus says might plausibly be taken to imply that *epibolē* has criterial powers. Notably, I dwell on a distinction between two different types or senses of '*epibolē*' that has received little or no attention in the secondary literature and, nonetheless, according to my analysis, is absolutely central for both Epicurus and his late followers. In light of that distinction, in Part Two I consider the philosophical merits of the traditional interpretation of *epibolē* as projection and/or attention. The latter, I suggest, gains or loses plausibility depending on the context and on the sort of *epibolē* that one is talking about. In Part Three I pursue the aforementioned distinction in late Epicureanism, in particular Lucretius and Philodemus. I try to show how, during that period, *epibolē* enjoys the status of a criterion and also acquires paramount moral importance. I conclude with a few general remarks.

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T1

‘Those who have sufficiently advanced in the comprehensive survey (*epiblepsis*) of the entire system ought to fix in their memory the outline of the whole treatise, organised as it is under the headings of its principal elements. For we frequently are in need of a comprehensive grasp of the whole (*athroa epibolê*), whereas we seldom need to have a grasp of the details (*kata meros epibolê*)’ (Epicurus, *H* 35).

T2

‘Thus we must continually return to those (principal elements) and must memorise them, so that we shall both acquire a comprehensive *epibolê* of things and discover all the details with precision when the general outlines have been correctly understood and remembered. For this is the privilege of the advanced student, to be able to make ready use of his *epibolai* by referring each of them to the basic elements and the (corresponding) terms. For it is impossible to contemplate the results of continuous diligent study of the totality of things unless we can summarise in simple expressions and hold in the mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to the most minute detail’ (*H* 36).

T3

‘First, then, Herodotus, we must grasp the items 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 indiscriminated 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. Furthermore, we should attend in every way to our sensations and, generally, to the present *epibolai* (*tas parousas epibolas*) 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’ (*H* 37-38).

T4

‘And whatever representation (*phantasian*) we receive by way of *epibolê* (*epiblêtikôs*) through the mind or the sense-organs, whether it is a representation of shape or of some other property, this shape is the shape of the solid thing and has been constituted either in accordance with a close condensation of the film(s) of atoms as a whole or in accordance with what remains of it. On the other hand, falsehood and error always dwell in the additional element of opinion about

<that which awaits> to be confirmed or remain uncontested but then receives no confirmation <or is contested>. [(This opinion is formed) following a certain movement in ourselves, which is attached to the representational *epibolê* (*phantastikê epibolê*) but distinct from it, and according to which falsehood occurs]. For the imaginary figments (*phantasmôn*) received, for instance, in a picture or arising in dreams or from certain other *epibolai* of the mind or of the other criteria would never have resembled the things that we call real and true, were there not certain actual things of the same kind as those that we compare them to. On the other hand, error would not have occurred, if we had not experienced also some other movement in ourselves conjoined with the representational *epibolê* but distinct from it. In relation to this movement, if it is not attested or is contested, falsehood arises, whereas if it is attested or not contested truth is established. We must closely adhere to this doctrine, if we are not to reject the criteria established on the basis of clear evidence (*kata tas enargeias*) nor throw everything into confusion by asserting falsehoods as if they were truths' (H 50-52).

T5

'All these properties, I claim, merely give the body its own permanent nature. They all have their own *epibolai* and distinguishing features, but always along with body as a whole (*tou athroou*) and never in separation from it; and it is in accordance of this complete conception of body as a whole (*kata tèn athroan ennoian*) that it is designated as such' (H 69).

T6

'The exposition is of such a sort that those who have already tolerably or even perfectly mastered the details can, by analysing them into the corresponding sort of *epibolai*, pursue most of their investigations of nature in its totality. On the other hand, those who do not really belong to the category of mature students can rapidly and silently run over in their minds the cardinal doctrines of this exposition in order to gain peace of mind' (H 83).

T7

'At a time when human life lay for all to see squalidly sprawled on the ground, crushed beneath the weight of institutional religion (*religio*) that reared its head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals and terrible to behold, it was a man from Greece who first dared to raise those mortal eyes against her and was the first to make a stand against her. Neither the fables of the gods nor thunderbolts nor the heaven with its threatening roar held him back, but these all the more stirred up the eager courage of his mind (*acrem animi virtutem*), making him desire, first of all men, to break open the tight-shut bars of nature's gates. And so the energetic power of his mind (*vivida vis animi*) prevailed and issued forth (*previcit et processit*) far beyond the flaming walls of the world, as he roamed through the immeasurable universe with his mind and imagination (*atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque*). Whence he returns victorious to relay to us what can occur and what cannot, and moreover how each thing has its power delimited and its deep-set boundary stone. As a result, religion is now in her turn trampled underfoot, while we by his victory are raised to the heights of heaven' (Lucretius, *DRN* I.62-79).

T8

‘You (sc. the Stoics) on the contrary cannot see how nature can achieve all this without the aid of some (cosmic) intelligence, and so, like the tragic poets, being unable to bring the plot of your drama to a solution, you have recourse to a god. You certainly wouldn’t have needed his intervention if you contemplated the measureless magnitude of space stretching in every direction, by projecting and focusing itself (*se iniciens ... et intendens*) into which the mind travels far and wide without ever seeing a boundary of its extremities at which it could stop’ (Cicero, *ND* I.53-54).

T9

‘The construction of inferences from signs (did not happen) by contraposition of ‘if this is [this’ but was apprehended] through the [appearances providing uses] for it. Indeed the person who is puzzled about how [representations] of the mind [will be judged thinks] that inferences from signs [should be constructed] if they are verified by observation and do not [conflict] with all the things that are called criteria of non-evident things - with sensations, preconceptions, representational [*epibolai* of the mind], and feelings’ (Philodemus, *De sign.* fr. 1 De Lacy and De Lacy).

T10

‘And because of an attachment to life, not due to the fact that they (sc. foolish old men) live pleasantly but resulting from their terror of death, they appear to push away even the *epibolai* focusing on it (*tas epibolas tas ep’auton*). Then, when the sight of it becomes clearly evident (*enargês theôria*), it strikes them as something paradoxical. For this reason, unable to bring themselves even to the point of writing a will, they are overtaken and surrounded and, as Democritus says, are forced to bear a double misfortune. Sensible men, on the other hand, [even if for] some compelling reason they did not suspect that the paragraph and limit of their life was already approaching, when it comes into actual view, after they have surveyed in their thought systematically and with the greatest clarity, in a way that cannot be explained to the ignorant, their perfect enjoyment of every thing and the utter unconsciousness that will come over them, they breathe their last as calmly as if they never had lost their *epibolê* even for an instant’ (*De mort.* XXXIX.6-25).