

From Pindar and Aeschylus, the figuration of the *phrenes* as wax tablets (*deltai*) has been a vivid way of describing the tactility of the spoken word and the human capacity for memory (e.g. A. *Pr.* 789; Pi. *O.* 10.2). With Plato's *Theaetetus*, the wax-tablet model is formalized as one (not entirely satisfactory) means of conceptualizing our retention of all sense impressions, not just words, and the formation of beliefs about the world (191c-196c). The dual properties of wax—receptivity and fidelity—recommend it as a medium through which to imagine not only memory, but any process through which a malleable surface receives form (e.g. Ar. *de An.* 412b4-8). Thus, this figure is no simple commonplace, but rather a powerful conceptual habit that generates the framework in which the intertwining of subject and world continues to be thought in Greco-Roman philosophy. In this paper, I would like to reconsider the difficult concept of *prolêpsis* in Epicurean theories of language by locating it within this tradition of treating knowledge as imprinting. I will ask what the implications of this tradition might be for understanding *prolêpsis* as an instrument for knowing and manipulating the world through language, and specifically how the stress laid by the wax-tablet model on openness and receptivity complicates the role of attention and desire in Epicurean epistemology.

The ontological status of *prolêpsis* remains obscure. Studies on Epicurean semantics have generally focused more on elucidating the function of *prolêpsis*, especially in language processing. The fullest definition of *prolêpsis*, that given by Diogenes Laertius, actively fosters this obscurity, giving as synonyms *katalêpsis* (a direct apprehension), correct opinion (*doxa orthê*), conception (*ennoia*), or a universal stored notion (*katholikê noêsis*), i.e. a memory (*mnêmê*) of what has appeared frequently externally (10.33). Some of the words on this list suggests that one has, that is, one holds in one's possession, a *prolêpsis* of something—Long (1971) hypothesized an aggregate of fine, mobile atoms that present themselves to consciousness as an image—and Epicurus himself speaks of the *proton ennoêma*, first thought, that “lies under” a word (*Ep. Hdt.* 37-8). Yet as Cyril Bailey (1928.562) and Elizabeth Asmis (1984.63-5) have observed, nouns ending in *-sis* lay more stress on a faculty, rather than the result of a process, for which Greek prefers *-ma* nouns, e.g. *noêma*. Diogenes' use of *prolêpsis* in his account of how language works suggests that the notion of a faculty is also important: he says, for example, that we learn the *morphê* of a cow through (*kata*) *prolêpsis* and that we could name nothing if we had not learned the *tupos kata prolêpsin*.

With the noun *tupos*, we are firmly in the tradition of imprinting, and there is evidence that suggests that this may have been Epicurus' own language to speak of *prolêpsis* (e.g. *tu|poi proeil[ê]photos*, 34.28 Arrighetti=20C Long & Sedley, whose text I follow). I will ask whether the language of *tupoi* is consonant with the idea that a *prolêpsis* is something held in our possession and, if so, what form of access we have to it. Does it appear as an image, as Long suggests? But then, what is the relationship of this image to a word (since *prolêpsis* is used to explain language)? Finally, if we emphasize the nature of *prolêpsis qua* faculty, I will argue that this implies that the images are not in our possession, but something to which we have access—in the *Letter to Herodotus*, *tupos* is a synonym for *eidôlon* (*Ep. Hdt.* 46; cf. 36; 49). To the extent that *eidôla* are pieces of molded air, this raises questions about where imprinting and memory happens and how our own acts of recognition are to be figured. I suggest that *prolêpsis*, like *aisthêsis*, be understood as a structure of attention to the world capable of attracting certain representations in response to either external stimuli (e.g. a word) or internal stimuli.