This expression is the basis of the premiss of the second reasoning offered by Sextus Empiricus. It enables the development of a reasoning corresponding to the *modus tollens*, which validates the conclusion of the first reasoning.

It is impossible to say whether the Stoics manage to avoid, by use of elimination, the contradiction between the requirement of a necessary *a priori* relation between the two propositions of the conditional and the necessity that the sign produce new knowledge. Elimination renders the relation a necessary one, even in the case of factual truths, since it begins from the assumption that the fact that is obscure by nature is linked to the evident fact in such a way that what is evident could not exist if the non-perceived fact were not what it is revealed to be.

SEVEN

Inference and Language in Epicurus

7.0 INTRODUCTION

The contribution to the history of semiotics made by the Epicurean school belongs to the same period as the reflections on the sign of the Stoic school. One of the key points of Epicurean epistemology was the semiotic principle of making conjectures about facts which are by nature imperceptible to the senses from visible phenomena. The fundamental elements of Epicurean physics (that is, the existence of atoms and of the void, the forms and reasons for celestial phenomena) are established by means of semiotic inferences which start from perceptible phenomena:

> Some phenomena within our experience afford evidence (*sēmeîa*) by which we may interpret what goes on in the heavens. We see how the former really take place, but not how the celestial phenomena take place, for their occurrence may possibly be due to a variety of causes.
>
> (Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*, 87)

Epicurus rejected the deductive reasoning typical of Aristotle and the Stoics, judging it to be empty and devoid of use, but he accepted and believed in the importance of analogic inference, which takes signs as the starting point for its development. In the Hellenistic period, the Epicureans became the main exponents and promoters of a method of reasoning which could be termed "semiotic induction", and they entered into heated polemics with the Stoic philosophers on the subject of the method of inference. An entire first century B.C. treatise, *Perì sēmeíōn kaì sēmeiṓseōn* (*On Signs and Inferences*) by the Epicurean Philodemus of Gadara, was devoted to the debate which took place between the Stoics and the Epicureans on the subject of semiotic inference.[1]

Epicurus and the Epicurean school as a whole propounded the possibility of making objectively valid judgements about phenomena not directly knowable through experience on the basis of inferences made from signs.

The central problem then became how to establish the criterion to check if and within what limits these judgements could be considered reliable or unreliable (that is, true or false) and to establish the basis on which to pro-

nounce whether or not certain assertions indeed correspond to the facts which they describe. The notion of the "truth criterion" thus comes to the fore, and this provides the framework within which both the theory of semiotic inference and the theory of language were developed. There is not, in fact, a unique truth criterion, but many. According to what Diogenes Laertius records,[2] these include sensations (*aisthēseis*), affections (*páthē*) and preconceptions (*prolēpseis*), to which may be added, for reasons which will become clear below, immediate evidence (*enárgeia*). Truth criteria—and in particular *prolēpsis* ("anticipation", "preconception")—have a fundamental and creative role in both the theory of inference[3] and the theory of language.[4] In this way, they form a linking element between the two theories. Nonetheless, this is still not sufficient to allow a common analysis and explanation of the inferential sign and the linguistic sign, which are once again the objects of two separate investigations.

For the Stoics too, as will be recalled, the theory of the linguistic sign, termed *sēmaînon*, had its beginnings with the discussion of the truth criterion and the "true". In their conception, and that of the Epicureans, the inferential sign, termed *sēmeîon*, had no point of contact with the linguistic sign except through the part played by the notion of *lektón*, which had to be considered true or false. Epicurean semiotics, however, has one special feature which is worth noting: it also takes into consideration a theory of the perceptible image which is linked to the truth criterion but also anticipates several interesting problems from the point of view of a semiotic theory of iconism.

In the following sections we shall deal with the questions of the truth criterion, of prolepsis and of the perceptible image in Epicurus' philosophy, which we shall link both to the theory of semiotic inference and the theory of language. Because of their range and importance, the developments which Epicurean semiotic theory underwent in Philodemus' *De Signis* merit an individual investigation and will therefore be dealt with in a separate chapter (Chapter 8).

7.1 THE TRUTH CRITERION AND EPICUREAN EPISTEMOLOGY

From the point of view of epistemology, Epicurean philosophy is structured around the attempt to base knowledge on purely empirical foundations. Facts and objects are viewed as having the greatest importance, but words also constitute a mode of access to things. There are thus two possible methods of research for philosophy in this perspective: (i) one oriented towards the knowledge which comes from words; (ii) the other towards the knowledge which comes directly from things.[5] However, the second method is considered preliminary to the first, and knowledge which is obtained through language, such as that which is produced by means of propositions, is often empty and unreliable.[6]

The final basis for truth is represented by truth criteria, which can lead the inquiring human subject to nothing less that imperturbability.[7] Truth criteria therefore lie at the base of Epicurus' philosophy in general; they were dealt with in a lost work, entitled *Canon*, which contained all the preliminary matter to Epicurus' doctrinal system.[8] It is no use thinking of truth in modern terms, that is, as a function of propositions, if we wish to understand Epicurean thought correctly. It must be remembered that in Greek, in general, the adjective *alēthés* ("true") may be used both to qualify the truth of a proposition and to indicate what actually exists and is real. For Epicurus, in particular, the adjective "true" implies an effective awareness of something. This explains its application to sensations and affections, for saying that a certain sensation (or affection) is true is the same thing as saying that it gives an effective *indication* of a real fact, thereby making us aware of it.[9]

Before examining the different forms of truth criterion, perhaps we must first emphasize how the truth criterion is functional to a theory of semiotic inference. It tends to establish basic truths regarding perceptible objects, which in turn form a starting point from which to make inferences about the things which are not accessible through sense perception.[10]

7.2 THE FORMS OF TRUTH CRITERION

Epicurus therefore considered truth criteria to be: sensations, preconception (or prolepsis), affections (or sentiments).[11] Paragraph 82 of the *Letter to Herodotus* also mentions *enárgeia* ("immediate evidence" or "clear sight"). With reference to this passage, Long (1971b, p.116) makes an interesting proposal about the internal organization of the forms of truth criteria. He suggests that they are organized hierarchically. First of all, there are affections and sensations, then immediate evidence, then preconceptions. According to Long, affections and sensations have a purely subjective truth value when considered on their own. They must instead be coordinated with immediate evidence and prolepsis in order to constitute an objective criterion.

Affections and sensations carry the awareness of something, and their "truth" resides precisely in such awareness, even if it remains subjective. Figure 7.1 illustrates the relationships between the forms of truth criteria.

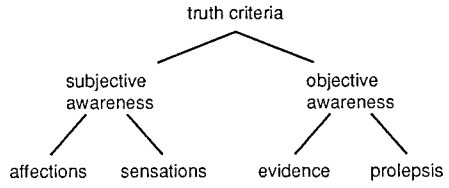

Figure 7.1

7.3 THE IDOLS THEORY

So far we have been considering the cognitive process from the point of

view of the subject who feels a sensation or experiences an affection in relation to external stimuli. However, if we now look at the same process from the opposite point of view, that is, from the point of view of the object, we can see that Epicurus developed a fully fledged theory of the image which offers many points of interest for a semiotics of iconism. Epicurus begins to talk about the mechanics of sense perception in paragraph 46 of the *Letter to Herodotus*. According to his view, objects continually emit a fine stream of atoms which form configurations which are completely identical to the outer shape of solid bodies.[12] These configurations are called idols (*eídōla*) and they travel at extremely high speed to penetrate human sense organs and enter into the mind where they produce a more or less exact image (*phantasía*) of the body or object from which they were emitted. The process can be represented as in Figure 7.2.

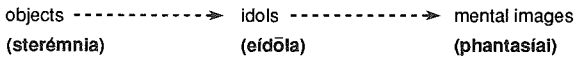

Figure 7.2

Epicurus' theory could thus be defined as a "causal" theory of perception (cf. Long, 1971b, p.117), since external objects are directly responsible for the existence of idols, and idols directly cause the formation of images in the mind. It must be said, however, that the images are a direct consequence of the idols and thus only secondarily a consequence of the external objects, from which they can also differ slightly.

In fact the continuity of the process can be interrupted at the level of the passage of the stream of atoms from the external objects to the idols. Sometimes the idols, although usually exact copies of the objects, can undergo modifications (caused by entering into collision with other atoms while travelling through the air), and they can also become reduced in size when they enter a person (this too because they collide with other atoms).[13]

This particular aspect of the theory reflects Epicurus' attempts to take into consideration the fact that objects seen close seem to have certain dimensions, whereas they have quite different (much smaller) dimensions when seen from a distance. Epicurus thus avoids the contradiction of the principle that sensation is always a guarantee of truth. The contradiction would be inevitable if the *phantasía* were an image of the object, but in fact it is an image of the idol (*eídōlon*).

Sextus Empiricus seems to have grasped Epicurus' thought correctly when he quotes the example of the tower in this context:

> . . . just so I should decline to say that eyesight is false because at a long distance it sees the tower as small and round but from close at hand as large and square, but I should say rather that it reports truly because, when the object of sense appears to it small and of a certain shape, it really is small and of a certain shape, as the limits belonging to the images (*eídōla*) are rubbed away by their passage through the air; (and again when it appears large and of a different shape it is correspondingly large and of a different shape, since it is no longer the same object that is both at once.)
>
> (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VII, 208-209)

The senses receive the stream of atoms which is given off by the object and which makes up its idol, not the object itself. The configuration of the stream of atoms can be altered in its passage through the air, and this is what produces the diversity of images of the same object. Thus every mental image (*phantasía*) is effectively true because it reflects not the object but one of its various idols, which differ according to the distance covered to reach the subject who perceives them. It is essential not to identify the idol which is produced close to the object with that which is seen when the observer is some distance from the object.

7.4 THE THEORY OF ERROR AND OF OPINION

The theme of semiotic inference becomes more central in the field of perception processes when we leave the safe ground of sensation to venture into the rough area of opinions, where error may occur. If human individuals paid attention only to their sensations and limited themselves to describing their mental images (*phantasíai*), there would be no possibility of error. But this, of course, does not happen, and error occurs when what Epicurus refers to in the *Letter to Herodotus* (51) as "second movement" (*állē kínēsis*) is added to sensation.

Long (1971b, p.118) identifies this "second movement" with the process of the formation of opinion. Epicurus says that it is "connected" to the first movement (that is, the simple apprehension of images), but that it differs from this in that it "admits a distinction", the distinction between true and false. The first movement, or apprehension of images, admits no such distinction, for it is produced by external causes, that is, by idols. The second movement, however, since it consists of adding a judgement we make about these images, can receive confirmation or proof of the opposite. The process can be schematized as shown in Figure 7.3.

If, on the basis of viewing from a distance or in bad light conditions, I say, translating my sensations into words: "That *has the appearance of* a round tower", I am speaking in a true manner. If, however, I say "That *is* a round tower", my judgement will be proved wrong when I come closer to the tower and receive an image of a square tower. Images are always true, whereas some opinions are true and some opinions are false.[14] The conclusion of this, of course, is the conjectural nature of opinion.

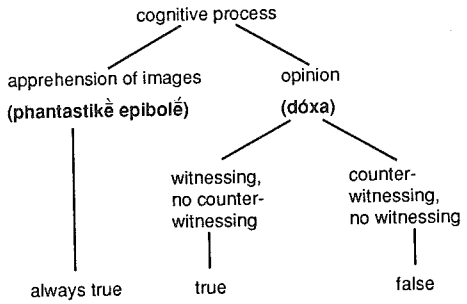

Figure 7.3

7.5 CONJECTURE

It is to be expected that a special place be dedicated to conjecture within the bounds of a theory of opinion. In general, conjecture consists precisely of a cognitive hypothesis on a dimension which goes beyond what can be perceived by the senses. Opinion, in Epicurus' use of the term, is associated precisely with this characteristic, for it is a judgement which requires the commitment of the subject to something which awaits confirmation.

There are several key terms which define the cognitive process affected through opinion. The first of these is *prosménon*, "that which awaits confirmation",[15] which is the object on which judgement is made.

The second and third key terms are linked by a relation of antonymia and are *epimartýrēsis* ("witnessing") and *antimartýrēsis* ("counterwitnessing"). However, Epicurus' system for verification or falsification of an opinion works on not just two terms, but on four. Verification is achieved when there is "witnessing" or "no counterwitnessing" and falsification is given when there is "counterwitnessing" or "no witnessing". Thus a proper semiotic square is created (cf. Figure 7.4).[16]

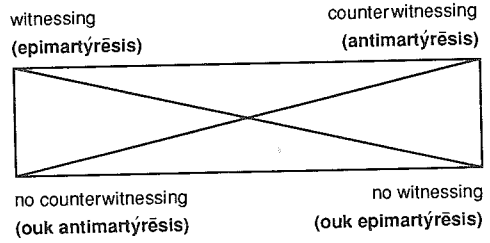

Figure 7.4

However, in reality each of the four terms is sufficient to establish the validity of an opinion. Later, in the semiotic theory expressed by Philodemus' *De Signis*, the criterion for deciding the validity of an inductive inference is simply no counterwitnessing, or the absence of conflict between the signic expression and perceptible phenomena.

In Epicurus' square, there is the problem of establishing a criterion to define in what the base term, that is, witnessing, consists. We can identify this criterion with *enárgeia* ("evidence", "clear sight") as Sextus Empiricus indicates:

> And witnessing (*epimartýrēsis*) is apprehension by means of evidence (*di' enargeías*) that the thing opined is of such a sort as it was opined to be—as when, for example, on the approach of Plato from afar I guess and opine, because of the distance, that it is Plato, and when he has drawn near the fact that he is Plato is further testified—the distance being reduced—and is confirmed by actual evidence of sense.
>
> (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VII, 212)

In fact, Epicurus was very well aware that error in identification or recognition of objects of perception could occur and, in all likelihood, he considered that every act of perception was marked not only by pure and simple sensation, but also by *dóxa*. In this way, conjecture becomes ubiquitous, for it is involved in all acts of perception. As a consequence, sensations and mental images take on the role of providing data on which to base conjecture.[17]

The *Letter to Herodotus* (38) seems to take into consideration two kinds of object on which semiotic inference operates:

(1) that which awaits confirmation (*prosménon*)

(2) that which is not available to the senses (*ádēlon*).

These give rise to two different kinds of inferential process.

The first type of inferential process involves the kind of conjecture which is formulated within the processes of perception themselves. It is illustrated by the example, which Sextus Empiricus repeats above, of seeing Plato approaching in the distance and being able only to conjecture that it is truly he. In this case the object on which conjecture is made is something which is perceived by the senses, but indistinctly. Nonetheless, the process concludes with a verification, in this case the confirmation of the conjectured fact, by means of clear sight.

The second type of conjecture is that which formulates an inference with respect to things which do not fall within the range of sense perception. This is conjecture in the classic sense. Sextus Empiricus gives us an example of this type of conjecture as well.[18] His example is that of tracing the existence of the void from the existence of motion, that is, moving from a perceptible element, a *phainómenon*, to an imperceptible element, an *ádēlon*. This is the typical logical relationship of implication (which Sextus Empiricus terms *akolouthía*) between an antecedent and a consequent. We can call this second type of inferential process *inference to the imperceptible*.

7.6 INFERENCE FROM SIGNS

Inference to the imperceptible is a typical kind of inference from signs. In many cases, as in the example given above, "If there is motion → there is the void", it is not possible to know directly the object about which the inference is made ("the void"), but it must be reached through a sign ("motion"). Thus, for Epicurus too, inference from signs is connected with the possibility of broadening the scope of knowledge beyond the sphere of sensible objects. It is indeed thanks to the theory of signic inference that the Epicurean school is able to go beyond the limits of its characteristic basic empiricism and to open the way to knowledge of phenomena not directly perceptible to the senses. In Philodemus' *De Signis* (fr. 2), there is an explicit invitation to consider knowledge achieved through inference to be as reliable as direct knowledge.

This kind of cognitive programme rests on an epistemology which divides objects into four categories, very much as in Stoic semiotics:

(1) *Evident objects or facts* (*enargê*). These are "those things which are perceived involuntarily through representation or affection" (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 316). The examples given for this category include the fact that it is day or the recognition that a certain person is a man.
(2) *Absolutely obscure* (*phýsei ádēla*) *objects*. These are "those things which neither have been previously apprehended, nor are they now being apprehended, nor will hereafter be apprehended, but are eternally unknowable" (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 317-18). The example given is that of the impossibility of knowing whether the total number of stars is odd or even. Facts of this type are unknowable, Sextus Empiricus explains, not by their nature, but by our nature, given the limits of human understanding.
(3) *Obscure by their own nature* (*génei ádēla*) *objects*. These are "those things which in their own proper nature are hidden but are made known, it is claimed, by means of signs and proofs" (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 319). The examples given are atoms and the void. The existence of atoms and the void had been postulated by Leucippus and Democritus on a purely rational basis, but, in conformity with his general empiricism, Epicurus insists that they can be known through analogical inference.
(4) *Objects awaiting confirmation* (*prosménonta*). These are objects immediately beyond our experience (cf. *Letter to Herodotus*, 38). The possibility of knowing these objects is limited by certain factors, such as distance in space or being situated in the future.

As may be seen from this classification, the only objects which can be known through inference are those belonging to the third and fourth category. These can be placed in correspondence with the two types of inference mentioned above.

Perceptive inference operates in the sphere of objects belonging to the fourth category, those "awaiting confirmation".

Inference to the imperceptible operates rather with respect to objects belonging to the third category, in the interest of gaining knowledge about objects which are "by their own nature obscure" and which can never be reached through the senses. In this case, the method of verification takes an indirect form of no counterwitnessing (*ouk antimartýrēsis*). As we have seen, the void is not verifiable through direct experience, but for the Epicureans, its existence is not in contradiction with any known fact,[19] while its negation would enter into conflict with the empirical experience of motion, which requires the void for its existence. The heart of reasoning based on no counterwitnessing consists in the fact that when there are two contradictory propositions about something which is imperceptible, and one of these is false according to empirical proof (in the example given above, the non-existence of the void, since this would conflict with the existence of motion), then the other can be considered to be true (cf. De Lacy and De Lacy, 1978, p.188).

7.7 PROLEPSIS

Prolepsis (or "anticipation", "pre-conception") is the second of the two truth criteria which we have defined as "objective". It has a decisive role in perceptive inference, as Diogenes shows:

> For example: the object standing yonder is a horse or a cow. Before making this judgement, we must at some time or other have known by preconception the shape of a horse or a cow.
>
> (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae*, X, 33)

Indeed, prolepsis is necessary to the experience of perception *per se* in order that the subject move from the simple awareness of the fact that s/he is seeing an image to the objective judgement that this is an image of a specific thing. In other words, according to Epicurus, in order to perceive a horse or a cow, one must: (1) have already seen an image of these animals; (2) have stored this image in the mind; (3) compare the data provided by the present sensation with this stored image.

Prolepses are really mental images or concepts which have been formed as a result of numerous experiences of external objects. They have two basic characteristics: (i) they are firmly linked to memory of previous experiences; (ii) they are evident (*enargeîs*).

As concepts, prolepses do not necessarily correspond to individual external objects; instead, prolepses consist in individual perceptive experiences. This is strictly connected to the fact that prolepses are a test for truth. It is only

through the possession of the general concept of "human being" that one can decide whether what one sees is a particular occurrence of this concept.

7.8 THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Prolepses also constitute a necessary condition of language and operate both on the level of decodification and on the level of codification. First of all, the act of uttering a name (for example |human|) brings to the mind of a listener an image or a concept, an underlying entity (*hypotetagménon*) of that name which is derived from prolepsis;[20] we could say, translating into Saussurean terms, that the presence of a signifier causes a listener to match this to a signified. In addition, a speaker must have a preconception of what s/he intends to express, otherwise it would be impossible to say anything; here the speaker codifies a signified which is present in his/her mind by means of an expressive device (a "name").

In Epicurean theory, prolepsis seems always to be involved in the formation of concepts. Diogenes Laertius says that "all concepts (*epínoiai*) stem from sensations, either by *direct experience*, or by *analogy*, or by *resemblance*, or by *combination*, with a certain contribution also on the part of reason" (*Vitae*, X, 32). Long (1971b, p.119) suggests that the first class of concepts—that is, those which stem from direct experience of sensations—should be identified with prolepses.

If prolepses then form the basis for all concepts, a theory of the linguistic sign begins to take shape which is very different from that usually attributed to the Epicurean school by Sextus Empiricus and Plutarch.[21] For these two writers claimed that Epicurus' theory of language involved only two factors: the signifying thing (*sēmaînon*, or "voice", *phōnḗ*) and the designated thing (*tynchánon*). The reason Plutarch and Sextus Empiricus ignored prolepsis in the theory of linguistic meaning is that they could see nothing in Epicurean theory to match the Stoic *lektón*, which was simultaneously incorporeal and completely distinct from a mental image.

Nonetheless, this does not prevent prolepses from having precisely the same function as the Stoic *lektá*, that is, they form an element of mediation between words and things. As a result of this, the Epicurean theory of the linguistic sign could be represented as shown in Figure 7.5.

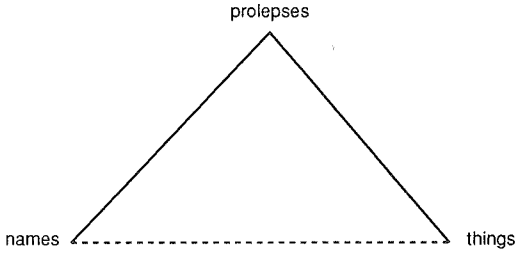

Figure 7.5

To attribute to Epicurus a theory of language in which words refer directly to things, without the mediation of prolepsis, causes a contradiction with his doctrine of false beliefs. For example, if humans mistakenly believe that the gods are ill-disposed towards them, and express this belief in words, unless the conceptual level of prolepsis exists, there is nothing to correspond to the proposition "The gods are ill-disposed towards humans". The existence of prolepsis as a mediating element between words and things allows for false assertions and assertions about things which do not exist. When someone thinks that the gods are ill-disposed towards humans, this is a false supposition, or a concept which is not derived from the object, that is, from the gods themselves.

The centrality of prolepsis in the Epicurean theory of language is also shown by the fact that it can be identified also with the "basic" or "primary" meaning (*prôton ennóēma*) mentioned in the *Letter to Herodotus* (37-38), a meaning which stands apart from all other meanings which can be considered to be derived from it.[22]

7.9 THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

In Epicurus' system of thought, the theory of language is linked to the theory of the origins of language itself, which are dealt with in the *Letter to Herodotus* (75-76).[23] Epicurus thought of language as an activity which humanity had developed during the course of its evolution, passing through two distinct phases. In the first phase, language expressed what could be defined as a natural relationship with reality, while in the second phase the relationship came close to what is usually termed conventional. Epicurus may in fact be seen to occupy a middle position, and a very particular one, in the *phýsis/nómos* debate, for he rejects both the idea that there was a single name-giver and the notion that words reflect things in a natural way (as the Stoics held). Let us now look more closely at how the birth and development of language are described in the *Letter to Herodotus*.

In its first phase, human linguistic activity was no different from other natural processes such as sneezing, coughing, groaning, etc. Humans emit sounds, which are similar to words, as a result of natural involuntary stimuli from the affections (*páthē*) they feel and the images (*phantásmata*) which are formed within their minds. Primitive language is thus an instinctive reaction to the environment, and Epicurus' hypothesis in this respect conforms perfectly to the naturalistic model. However, a closer analysis of the hypothesis reveals further considerations. Disciples of the naturalist theory of language have always had difficulty in accounting for the diversity of languages. Epicurus does not ignore this aspect of the problem[24] but manages to integrate it into his theory.

According to Epicurus, the diversity of languages is a direct result of the diversity of environments in which different peoples live and to which they react by emitting different sounds. In a nutshell, languages vary because things vary from one place to another. Furthermore, humans realize that

they produce different sounds in relation to the affections and images which are produced by objects and therefore find it useful to use these sounds as name-labels for objects.

At this point, the second phase in the evolutionary process of language comes into play, whereby conventional elements are introduced. The introduction of conventional elements occurs under a two-fold impetus. First of all, it is the result of a rationalizing movement which takes ambiguous expressions that were created naturally and makes them "clearer" and "more concise". Then there is also the work of "the learned", who tend to introduce concepts related to things beyond the scope of perceptions, signifieds which therefore cannot have been named naturally. As Sedley (1973, p.19) points out, the deliberate attempt to introduce processes of simplification into the evolution of language corresponds to the desire to take into account the abstract processes in which a one-to-one relationship between words and things is no longer tenable. This occurs in two cases, both of which are linked to the entire problematic of language in Epicurus' thought: (i) in the formation of general terms and (ii) in the use of metaphors.

7.10 EPICURUS AND THE "PHÝSIS"/"NÓMOS" TRADITION

Having looked at the Epicurean theory of the origin of language, it is now possible to go back to the semiotic triangle and analyze what relationships it implies between the various terms it uses, in relation to earlier theories of language.

An immediate connection can be seen with Aristotle's position in this tradition. Scholars have often suggested that Epicurus' theory of language depended heavily on that of Aristotle (cf. Arrighett, 1960, p.476, and others), or at least that it is very similar to that of Aristotle (cf. Long, 1971b, p.121). In fact, in *De Interpretatione* (16 a), Aristotle considers affections of the soul to be images produced by sensorial expressions derived from external objects in a way very similar to that in which Epicurus' prolepses derive from objects.

However, even though this represents a point of contact between the two theories, as Sedley (1973, p.20) points out, the mutual differences are greater. Perhaps the most significant difference in the linguistic theories of Aristotle and Epicurus lies in the fact that for Aristotle, different peoples have exactly the same mental affections, but they represent them by means of different linguistic expressions. For Epicurus, in contrast (as we have seen with respect to his thoughts on the origin of language), linguistic forms are different because mental affections (*páthē* and *phantásmata*, both of which are covered by the Aristotelian term *pathḗmata*) are different from one people to another as a consequence of differences in the natural environment. However, the differences between the two theories do not stop here. For Aristotle, no name can alone have an apophantic function, that is, no name can be said to be true or false *per se*, and an expression can become a symbol only as a result of convention. For

Epicurus, however, the names of individual objects can be true or false, as also is the case, for example, in the Platonic *Cratylus*. In addition, an expression, which could be simply a sound, can be used as a symbol when there are no conventional elements (as occurs, for example, in the primitive phase of communication).

A second useful comparison can be made with Plato's position on the theory of language. Certainly Epicurus does not propose anything remotely similar to Plato's first semantic theory[25]—which was subsequently adopted also by the Stoics—according to which a name is an abbreviated list of the properties of the object to which it refers. Plato considered primitive words to be the faithful representation of the properties of an object, almost as though vocabulary deliberately consisted entirely of onomatopoeia.

The naturalist position adopted by Epicurus does not go beyond stating that, within each language, a name is used correctly when it is used to denote the object, or the class of objects, with which it was associated at the moment of its natural origin. However, notwithstanding this distinction, there remain some strong points of convergence between the positions of Plato and Epicurus with respect to the theory of language. These may be seen in the way that for both thinkers names originally have a cognitive value which is partially obliterated by the changes in language over time.[26] For Plato, it was possible to recuperate the original meaning of words by means of etymology, and the Stoic school agreed with him in this. For Epicurus, in contrast, the original relationship between language and objects has been clouded principally through the processes of metaphor; to recuperate the original epistemological value of names, he suggests looking for "the first image" (*prôton ennóēma*, cf. *Letter to Herodotus*, 38). The first image can be identified with the prolepsis, that is, with the concept which was formed at the first perception of the object and which was then associated with that name.

It could therefore be said that Epicurus represents an intermediary position between Aristotle's theory of language and Plato's first semantic theory. For Aristotle, names are *symbols* and they are *conventional*. For Plato, names are *icons* of objects and they are *natural*. For Epicurus, names are *symbols* (as for Aristotle) in that they do not reproduce the properties of objects, but they are also *natural* (as for Plato) in their origin, which coincides with the first of the two phases in the evolution of language.

The conventional elements in language are developed only later, in the second evolutionary phase. The intermediary position adopted by Epicurus with respect to Aristotle and Plato explains why his theory has no need to refer to etymology, as Plato and the Stoics do, yet involves keeping "the first image" in mind. The biconditional correspondence between the name and "the first image" is based not on the *form*, but on the natural *origin* of the name.