

All Sense-Perceptions are True: Epicurean Responses to Skepticism and Relativism

Epicurean epistemology is infamous for the claim that all sense-perceptions are true.¹

This is how Lucretius puts it: what is perceived by any of the senses at any given time is true (*De rerum natura* 4.499). The claim – which I shall call SPT – seems to be deeply misguided. First, it seems obvious that sense-perception can err. Second, Lucretius’ use of the predicate ‘true’ appears incomprehensible: it would seem that, for anything to be evaluable as true it would have to be the kind of thing that can also be evaluated as false. These are weighty objections – SPT might be incomprehensible. The plan for this paper is to make sense of it.

SPT is presented in the midst of a series of anti-skeptical arguments. Lucretius’ skeptic is someone who says, rather naively, that nothing can be known. In response, one might

¹ This paper is written as a talk; many more references could be added. Important secondary literature for my purposes includes: Gisela Striker, “Epicurus on the Truth of Sense-Impressions,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977), 125-42, reprinted in Striker, *Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77-91; David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Elisabeth Asmis, *Epicurus’ Scientific Method* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984) and “Epicurean Empiricism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David K. Glidden, “‘Sensus’ and Sense Perception in the ‘De rerum natura,’” *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 12 (1979): 155-181; James Warren, “Lucretius and Greek philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, eds. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stephen Everson, 1990. “Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses,” in Stephen Everson (ed.), *Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161–183; Fritz Jürss, *Die epikureische Erkenntnistheorie* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1991); C.C.W. Taylor, “‘All Perceptions are True,’” in M. Schofield, J. Barnes and M. Burnyeat (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 105–24; Paul vander Waerdt, 1989. “Colotes and the Epicurean Refutation of Skepticism,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 30: 225–267.

argue that this claim is self-refuting, or one might try to point to instances of knowledge. SPT, however, makes a remarkably different claim, namely that all sense-perceptions are true. Notably, this is not a thesis about knowledge. A cognizer could have true sense perceptions in the Epicurean sense without having any knowledge. Lucretius' skeptic is thus probably not the only opponent he has in mind. As I see it, much of the background for Lucretius' position lies in Epicurean engagement with relativism. According to its best-known formulation in antiquity – in Plato's *Theaetetus* – relativism embraces the view that all sense-perceptions are true. It is thus a rather obvious competitor for Epicurean epistemology, which, as I shall argue, aims to capture the truth in relativism. Before I defend this reading (sections 3 to 5), an outline of Lucretius' arguments is needed (sections 1 and 2).

1. Lucretius' Anti-Skeptical Arguments

SPT is part of an extended anti-skeptical argument in Book IV of *De rerum natura*.² The passage occurs within a section that can plausibly be said to begin at 4.469.

If then someone holds that nothing is known, he also doesn't know
whether this can be known, for he acknowledged to know nothing.
Against him then I give up to fight about this matter,
who has placed himself with his head in his own footprints.
Denique nil sciri si quis putat, id quoque nescit
an sciri possit, quoniam nil scire fatetur.
hunc igitur contra mittam contendere causam,
qui capite ipse sua in statuit vestigia sese. (4.469-72)

² I largely agree with David Sedley's outline of the sections of Book 4 (1998, 150). 26-238: existence and mobility of images; 239-468: vision, truth and falsity; 469-521: refutation of skepticism; 522-721: the other senses; 722-822: thought; 823-857: critique of teleology; 858-1287: nutrition, motion, sleep, dreams, sex.

Lucretius' portrayal of skepticism is rather strange. Hellenistic skeptics were too sophisticated to say "nothing is known."³ If Lucretius intends to address the skepticism of those who wrote during the 2nd and 1st century BC, he fails. But perhaps Lucretius' conception of skepticism is older, going back to the times when Epicurus developed his views.⁴ At that point, Hellenistic skepticism was in its early beginnings and perhaps at a low point: someone might have said something as simple-minded as "nothing can be known."⁵ Let's grant Lucretius his skeptic, though he might well be a straw man. Indeed, one might speculate whether Lucretius is old-fashioned in referring to a skeptic that has long gone extinct; or whether he is like the moderns, not caring whether any particular person exists who holds the view that is ascribed to the skeptic.

However that might be, the skepticism that is imagined is such that, in response to it, Lucretius defends sense-perception as a basic kind of access to the world. Lucretius' skeptic counts as refuted if the senses provide us with something on which the 'edifice' of knowledge can be built. That is, Lucretius' strategy is not to show that there is sense-

³ This formulation is so obviously problematic that it was already improved upon by the Pre-Socratic Metrodorus of Chios, a student of Democritus. Metrodorus says at the beginning of his book *On Nature* "None of us knows anything, not even this, whether we know or we do not know; nor do we know what 'to not know' or 'to know' are, nor on the whole, whether anything is or is not" (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.73; trans. Lee (2010) = DK 70B1; SE M 7.48, 87–8; Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.19.9).

⁴ Some minimal historical situating may help: Pyrrho (360-270); Epicurus (341-270); first Academic skeptic Arcesilaus (316-241); Pyrrhonian skeptic Aenesidemus (1st century BC); Lucretius (99-55). In general, I hold the view that skepticism develops far more in exchange with Epicurean epistemology than it is standardly assumed. Some recent research by Schofield and others points into this direction. However, Epicurus does not yet have sophisticated skeptics as interlocutors.

⁵ Skepticism was then significantly advanced by the need to reply to Epicurean and Stoic challenges. At the time when Lucretius writes there are complicated kinds of skepticism to respond to.

perceptual knowledge and therefore there is knowledge. Instead, it is to show that sense-perception plays a certain role in providing us with access to ‘what is,’ and therefore we can have knowledge. SPT, the claim I am here interested in, is put forward as part of this larger argument. Let me thus go through this argument, asking whether any of the points Lucretius makes help explain and defend SPT.

Notional Argument (4.473-9): Lucretius argues that if the senses are not to be trusted, we end up not even having the notions of truth and knowledge.⁶ He asks the skeptic how, if she has never yet seen anything true, she knows what knowing and not-knowing is. (474-5) As Lucretius sees it, the notion of truth was first created by the senses.

Impossibility Argument (4.479): In the same vein, Lucretius suggests that it is in principle impossible to conceive of the attempt to refute the senses. Our access to the world is primarily and fundamentally via the senses – the idea that we could attempt to step outside of this is absurd. Life is so deeply rooted in sense-perception that the very idea of calling sense-perception into question is ultimately incomprehensible.

⁶ “You will find that by the senses was first created/ the notion of truth; and that the senses cannot be refuted.” *Invenies primis ab sensibus esse creatam/ notitiam veri neque sensus posse refelli.* (478-9) “*notitiam veri*” is ambiguous: it could mean “notion of truth” or “acquaintance with truth.” The context suggests that Lucretius wants to cover both ideas. This argument is in line with what appears to be a standard Epicurean argument against skepticism, namely the charge that skeptics cannot have concepts and accordingly cannot think. Cf. Vogt, *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato* (forthcoming OUP), Chapter 6 “Skepticism and Concepts: Can the Skeptic Think?”; an earlier version of this paper appeared as “Skeptische Suche und das Verstehen von Begriffen” (2006).

Priority Argument (4.483-5): Sense-perception is the *beginning* of cognitive activity, and thus the root of thinking. Thinking derives from or stems from sense-perception. (483-4). Thus, if sense-perceptions are not true, how could thinking be true? (485)

Parity Argument (4.486-498): Each sense – vision, hearing, etc. – has its own *domain* and *power* (*potestas, vis*), and insofar as it does, the senses cannot interfere with each other. Similarly, Lucretius argues that no sense can correct *itself*; that is, for example, no particular vision can correct another vision. All sense-perceptions have the same standing. SPT is presented as following from this consideration (499).⁷ Here is the quote, together with the preceding lines:

... And therefore it is necessarily the case
that the senses are not such that they can compel each other.
Nor will they be able, each for itself, to correct itself,
for one must always have equal trust.
Therefore what is perceived by one of them at a given time is true.
*... ideoque necesse est
non possint alios alii convincere sensus.
nec porro poterunt ipsi reprehendere sese,
aequa fides quoniam debebit semper haberi.
proinde quod in quoquest his visum tempore, verumst.* (4.498-9)

Criterial Argument (513-21)⁸: Lucretius ends his series of anti-skeptical arguments by appealing to the criterial role of sense-perception. This is a core Epicurean commitment:

⁷ Sextus ascribes SPT to Epicurus (M 8.63), but there is no explicit version of it in the surviving letters.

⁸ I skip two famous lines, because they are, for current purposes, a distraction. **Apraxia Argument** (500-512): Lucretius asks his reader to suppose that an object is square from nearby and round from a distance. Even if one were to make a judgment, ascribing one's perception of the distant object to a false cause – a round object causing the perception – one would be better off, in Lucretius' view, than if one were to generally mistrust the senses. Life and safety depend on trust in the senses.

sense-perceptions are criteria of truth. If the senses were false, Lucretius argues, our cognitive situation would resemble a house that is built with crooked measuring sticks and ill-adjusted scales. If such tools are used while the foundations of the building are erected, the whole building will be a mess, in danger of collapsing.⁹

What do these arguments from the immediate context of SPT achieve? Lucretius describes the senses as our primary kind of access to the world, so much so that it is not even clear what it would mean to call them into question. However, one might hold this view without holding the claim that every *particular* sense-perception is true. One could agree with the Epicureans that sense-perception is basic to concept-formation and our ability to think. And one could argue that concept-acquisition is such as to secure access to the world, so that knowledge is possible. This line of argument is widespread in Hellenistic philosophy, shared by the Stoics and Epicureans. SPT goes beyond it in characterizing every single sense-perception as true. Lucretius' anti-skeptical arguments do not seem to offer much explanation of this far-reaching claim. Or, at least, they are so condensed that they need unpacking. As I see it, the Parity Argument and the Criterial Argument contain the seeds of a rationale for SPT; but they need to be explained a bit further for this to become clear.

2. The Criterial Argument and the Parity Argument

⁹ Asmis (2009) focuses on Epicurean criteria of truth. Cf. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 23: "If you argue against all your sensations, you will then have no criterion to declare any of them false."

Start with the Criterial Argument.¹⁰ Sense-perception, Lucretius says, must play the role of a *criterion*. According to Epicurean doctrine, sense-perceptions are criteria of truth (DL 10.31). Notably, they do not serve to assess each other. Instead, our judgments are to be assessed in their light. A theory that agrees with sense perception gains support; a theory that is in conflict with sense-perception must be ruled out. Sense-perception can play this criterial role because it is *arational* (DL 10.31). Perceptions are thought of as the deliverances of the senses. We are aware of them, and in that sense they are ‘in the mind.’ But they do not involve the cognitive activity of judging. This is of great importance to SPT: error or falsity are germane to judgment or belief-formation.¹¹ The claim that the senses are arational in the sense of not involving any judgment-activity translates into a further claim, namely that the senses are truthful: they do not lie. The senses are mere receptacles and reporters of content.¹² They are passively affected and do

¹⁰ Cf. Epicurus’ defense of the truth of sense-perceptions: “All sensation, he says, is arational and does not accommodate memory. [...] Nor does their exist that which can refute sensations: neither can like sense refute like, because of their equal validity nor unlike unlike, since they are not discriminatory of the same things; nor can reason, since all reason depends on the senses; nor can one individual sensation refute another, since they all command our attention. And also the fact of sensory recognitions confirms the truth of sensations. And our seeing and hearing are facts, just as having pain is. [...] The figments of madmen and dreaming are true. For they cause movement, whereas the non-existent does not move anything.” (DL 10.31-2; tr. LS 16B)

¹¹ Epicurus says “there is no error in sense-perception” (SE M 8.9).

¹² As others have observed, Lucretius uses the same word, *sensus*, for sense-perception in general, for sense-organs (physiologically conceived), and for their deliverances (the perceptions). Cf. Glidden. Accordingly, it is not always evident that “all sense-perceptions are true” and “the senses are truthful” are two theses – but they are. It is likely that Epicurus can be credited with the view that the senses never lie (*Lucullus* 26.82). Moreover, it is likely that Epicurus took that claim to be immediately related to another claim, one that is rather close to SPT, namely that if one perception were false, then none would be true. According to Cicero, Epicurus says for this reason that all of the senses give a “true report” (*De Natura Deorum* 1.25, 70).

not “add” or “subtract” anything to the perception: they don’t lie insofar as they do not alter the perception.¹³

And yet, the Epicureans locate sense-perception in the sense-organs. Put somewhat crudely, this means that the *eyes see* and the *ears hear*. It is not the cognizer who *sees with* her eyes and *hears with* her ears, etc.. This question – whether the sense-organs or the cognizer perceives – is a much-debated one in ancient philosophy. To help see the upshot of the Epicurean position, compare it to two views discussed in Platonic dialogues.

First, one might think that the sense-organs are deficient tools, because their physicality negatively affects the quality of the input. This is an idea from the *Phaedo*. The eyes, here, are described as little windows that the soul uses to glance at the outside. But, figuratively speaking, larger windows made from clearer glass would afford better vision. Human eyes have a particular physiology. This physiology not just shapes how we see, it affects it in such a way as to ‘blur’ things by its very physicality. Second, one might go to the other extreme and argue that it is misguided to place sense-perception in any important way in bodily organs. They are tools, but the real activity lies with the mind.

¹³ Everson argues that, for Epicurus, the Veracity Thesis (as we might call it) provides the rationale for SPT: “What allows Epicurus his confidence in the truth of all perceptions is the fact that the processes involved in perception are such that external objects ‘imprint their natures’ on the senses: what perception is produced is entirely determined by the nature of the external object which gives rise to it by affecting the sense-organ” (173-4). I don’t fully agree: circumstantial factors and the state of the person make a difference.

Sense-perception consists in sense-perceptual judgments, and it is thus a form of thinking – this view is discussed in the *Theaetetus*. The Epicurean account of the senses as non-falsifying deliverers is, as it were, in between. It ascribes the central role in sense-perception to the senses rather than to thought; but it does not see the senses as sources of alterations – it views them as neutral messengers.

Add to this that, according to the Parity Argument, there is no context that alters perception thus as to make it erroneous. Consider external circumstances, say, of one's position vis-a-vis an object: one can be far away from a tower or nearby. Being far away, the Epicureans argue, is not a falsifying circumstance. To think so, they say, is to make the very mistake that one would make if one thought one didn't hear the sound of a bell properly because one didn't climb inside the bell (SE M7.206-10, LS 16E). This comparison strikes me as particularly helpful in understanding the gist of the Epicurean proposal. The Bell Example suggests that, in ordinary life, we assume that things will look differently from different angles and sound differently from different distances, and we find this rather obvious and unproblematic – it is not a reason to consider one of these perceptions *false*.¹⁴ We still think that there are, say, better and worse 'viewing conditions' or 'hearing conditions.' But it is not as straightforward as one might suspect to explain what "better" and "worse" mean here. In one context – say, the acoustics of a concert hall – audio conditions are better if a certain ideal of musical sound can be achieved. In another context – say, wanting to judge whether a tower is round or square –

¹⁴ Cf. Lucretius 4.379-86 on shadows and light (LS 16H).

viewing conditions are best when we stand at a distance that allows us to see the object as a whole (not too close) and still sharply (not too far away).¹⁵ None of this, however, disputes the Epicurean proposal. The music *does* sound off in a room with bad acoustics; the sound is real and perceived as what it is. It is true that the tower looks round from a distance, and that is a relevant fact about it. Things look, sound, etc., differently from different angles, distances, etc. These different perceptions are not such that one would ideally identify the one that is best. Instead, all of them provide us with facts about the object – how, for example, it looks when you look at it from a distance, or how it looks when you come so close that you no longer see the object as a whole.

Consider next ‘internal circumstances,’ states of the cognizer and their potential effect on her perceptions. Lucretius and Epicurus accept an idea that is already formulated in Plato’s *Theaetetus*: dreams and the visions of sick or mad people do not count as examples for false perceptions.¹⁶ In the *Theaetetus*, this view is developed as a component of relativism. The relativist finds it arbitrary to prefer one state (say, being awake or healthy) over another (say, being asleep or sick). Similarly, dream-images and hallucinations simply are perceptions in Epicurean epistemology, on par with other perceptions. As Epicurus puts it, Orestes’ perception when he seemed to see the Furies

¹⁵ The claim that all sense perceptions are true is compatible with the claim that, for a given purpose, there are good viewing (hearing, etc.) conditions. The sound of a bell does not, *simpliciter*, sound right from a given distance, though it can sound right for calling people to lunch, or for patients in hospitals calling a nurse when they need assistance, etc.

¹⁶ Epicurus was firmly committed to this view. Cf. DL 10.32 and Plutarch *adv. Col.* 1109B; 1121 D, E; 1124 B.

was true, for he was moved by images that really existed. His mind jumped to a false belief, namely that the Furies were solid bodies, but his perception was true (SE M 8.63).

To sum up. Lucretius' anti-skeptical arguments, if unpacked with the help of other evidence on Epicurean epistemology, defend the claims that all sense-perceptions are on a par and that, thereby, they serve as criteria of truth. However, it is one thing to say that sense-perceptions are *criteria of truth*, and another thing to say that they (themselves) are *true*. We need to hear more about the sense in which Lucretius calls sense-perceptions "true."

3. Truth

How should one understand the predicate "true" in the claim that all sense-perceptions are true?¹⁷ Striker, Everson, and Asmis see the puzzle as follows: truth-predicates cannot attach to sense-perceptions, understood as atomic images. Truth-predicates, it is assumed, *must* be applied to something like propositions. Accordingly, the puzzle would be resolved if the Epicureans talked about the truth of propositions. Absent any texts that explicitly support this, scholars are content with a related idea: the truth-predicates could be applied to representational states (in Hellenistic terms, impressions or *phantasiai*), on

¹⁷ Asmis argues that there is a correspondence between the appearance (as a mental representation) and the influx of atoms (2009, 94, n.19). Asmis writes: "[a]ll perceptions are true in that they correspond to something from the outside; in addition, we are able to perceive enduring external objects" (2009, 85), and "whatever appears in perception corresponds to something that enters us from outside; in every case, therefore, we perceive something from the outside as it really is." (95)

the assumption that representational states have propositional counterparts.¹⁸ Suppose we envisage such a corresponding proposition, say “this looks like a round tower to me now.” And suppose that, according to the Epicurean proposal, this is the bearer of the truth-value. Then, it is argued, the problem is resolved, for we found a respectable bearer of the value “true.”

Interpreters readily admit that the sources are ambiguous. Epicurus’ core argument is that perceptions are true insofar as each impression is the product of something *existent* (M 8.63).¹⁹ An existent atomic image causes the movement of perception. Moreover, and interpreters also grant this point, there is a Greek usage that takes “true” in an existential sense, so that “true” means “real” or “existent.”²⁰ Atomic images might thus be true insofar as they are existent. But this does not satisfy interpreters, and rightly so. The Epicureans do seem to say more than that atomic images exist, a point that others could readily grant (insofar as they grant something like an atomist account of perception). Moreover, as Everson points out, the Epicureans advance two claims in tandem: “all perceptions are true” and “beliefs are true or false” (M. 7.210).²¹ It seems plausible that

¹⁸ Say, if the tower looks round to me, Striker thinks that a proposition corresponds to it, namely “this looks like a round tower” (90). This kind of proposition – and that is, one that refrains from judging how things are, merely capturing what Epicurus calls *to paron*, what is ‘present’ – might plausibly always be true.

¹⁹ At M 8.9, Sextus says that, according to Epicurus, it makes no difference whether you call something “true” (*alêthes*) or “existent” (*huparchon*).

²⁰ Rist argues that “a real event takes place in the act of sensing” (1972, 19-20). In 1977 (1996), Striker says that the interpretation that “true” means “real” has, then, become the standard view in the literature.

²¹ Everson (1990), 167.

“true” is used in the same way in both claims. Thus, the Epicureans apparently don’t want to employ the existential use of “true” in SPT. As Everson, Asmis, and Striker argue, they want the sense in which “true” is one of two truth-values, true and false.

However, this argument turns the debate on its head: for surely, Epicureans do *not* want a sense of “true” according to which something that is evaluated as true could also be false. The whole point of SPT is that sense-perceptions cannot be false. In the thesis that beliefs can be true or false, “true” is a success-term. In forming a belief, one aims to form a true belief. If one’s belief is in fact true, then one succeeded in doing so. It is crucial to this enterprise that one could also fail, thus forming a false belief. That means, if “true” were used in the same sense in SPT, it would have to be a success-term. But that would mean that there would have to be a sense in which perceptions could be false; and that, according to SPT, they cannot.²² Moreover, to understand “true” in the regular sense in which it attaches to propositions moves rather far away from the pervasive references to existence of atomic images, and the movements they cause, in the relevant texts. Though the idea that atomic images exist is too weak to account for SPT, SPT should relate to it.

In sum, interpreters see only two options:

A. “True” is used as “real” and characterizes atomic images.

²² This line of thought speaks against the view that perceptions are true insofar as they are mental representations (with linguistic counterparts) that correspond to atomic images. If a correspondence relation backs up talk about truth, it would have to be the case that the relation can also fail to obtain.

B. “True” is used as the truth-predicate “true,” in the same way in which it is used in the claim “beliefs are true or false.”

Both options fail. Accordingly, a third option (C) is needed.

4. Perception Is Factive

To find such an option, consider the question of whether there are other things that are characterized as true even though each instance is true and could not be false. There’s an obvious candidate: knowledge. Knowledge is unerring, as Plato puts this premise in the *Theaetetus* (186c-e). The claim arguably goes back as far as Parmenides, who associates being, knowledge and truth: knowledge is of what is, and “truth accompanies knowledge.”²³ This is a deep insight about knowledge, one that has not been disputed since. If one knows that p, it follows that p is true. One cannot know something that is not the case: what is known is a fact. This idea is today sometimes expressed as the thesis that the verb “to know” is *factive*.

To say that knowledge is factive is to use a formulation that avoids the perplexity of assigning the truth-predicate to something that could not be false. The thesis “all pieces of knowledge are true” is one that, as far as I can see, no one holds – not because people

²³ “But come, I will tell you – preserve the account when you hear it –/ the only roads of enquiry there are to be thought of: /one, that it is and cannot not be, /is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it)” [B 2.1-4, tr. Barnes] εἰ δ’ ἄγ’ ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας, / αἴπερ ὁδοὶ μόναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοήσαι· / ἢ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, / Πειθοῦς ἐστι κέλευθος (Ἀληθείη γὰρ ὀπηδεῖ) Assuming that “persuasion” is the domain of knowledge, the opening lines in Parmenides’ poem associate *truth*, *knowledge*, and *what is*. Knowledge is true and ‘of’ what is. I’m glossing the relevant idea about knowledge and truth as “truth accompanies knowledge.”

thought that knowledge can be false, but because people think that the relevant intuition is better expressed by saying “knowledge is unerring” (Plato) or “truth accompanies knowledge” (Parmenides) or “knowledge is factive” (contemporary epistemology). Perhaps Lucretius puts forward the claim that perception is factive. SPT might be reconstructed as saying that every sense-perception is *of what is* and therefore is *true*. This reading combines advantages of (A) and (B) – serious attention to Epicurean talk about the existent in the case of (A), and claiming more than that atomic images exist in the case of (B) – without the disadvantages of these readings. My proposal then says: C. “True” in “all sense-perceptions are true” indicates that perception is factive.²⁴

(C) meets relevant constraints of interpretation. It reads “true” in such a way that, what is characterized as true is not thereby something that could also be false. And it makes sense of the comparison with beliefs: “all perceptions are true” translates into the claim that perception is factive; “beliefs are true or false” translates into the claim that belief is not factive.

5. The Theaetetus

To assess further whether this is a plausible reading, turn to Hellenistic engagement with Plato’s *Theaetetus*.²⁵ The *Theaetetus* has long been recognized as a text that influenced

²⁴ Today, many philosophers assume that, while perceptual experience is non-factive, perception is factive.

²⁵ The Cold Wind Example (152b): The same wind is blowing. One of us feels cold, the other doesn’t. The wind is cold for the person who feels cold, and not cold for the other person.

Hellenistic epistemology greatly.²⁶ It offers a host of arguments that became crucial to Hellenistic discussions about perception. Accordingly, it seems rather plausible to me that Epicureans engage with the relevant arguments, if not as readers of the *Theaetetus* then as participants in debates about the respective ideas.

In Part I of the *Theaetetus*, the interlocutors discuss the hypothesis that perception is knowledge, and that is, an idea that is of obvious relevance to my proposed line of thought: if Epicurean epistemology construes perception as factive, it construes perception as others construe knowledge. If every instance of perception is an instance of knowing, so the argument goes in the *Theaetetus*, then an account of perception must be formulated on which every perception is true. If perception is knowledge, Socrates says, “then, [it] is always of what is, and unerring” (152c).

In Plato, “perception is knowledge” is taken to be a thesis that interprets Protagoras’ claim that “man is the measure.”²⁷ That is, “each perception is true” is seen as a component of the larger proposal that every *appearance* – every case of “it appears to A

²⁶ Stephen Everson (1990) also draws on the *Theaetetus*, though not to the extent that I do. Often, scholars focus on the ways in which Stoics are likely to read the *Theaetetus*, and they have good reasons: Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, spent many years in the Academy. Epicurus appears to have developed his philosophy more independently. However, recently scholars have started to recognize that there is more of a connection between Epicurean and skeptic philosophy than it was previously assumed. Ancient skepticism is a cousin of ancient relativism, and both approaches tend to be discussed in tandem.

²⁷ “Man is the measure of all things, of things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not [...]” (152a2-5; this is a quote from Protagoras’ book *Truth (Alêtheia)*; cf. SE M 7.60) “[T]hat as each thing appears to me (*emoi phainetai*), so it is for me (*estin emoi*), and as it appears to you, so it is for you.” (152a2-5/152a7-9) Later in the dialogue the Measure Doctrine gets rephrased in terms of what we might call Truth Relativism (cf. 157e): what seems to A is true-for-A and what seems to B is true-for-B.

that p” – is true; and this larger proposal counts as relativism. Now, one possible reaction to Plato’s *Theaetetus* is the following: one could argue that Plato, by extending “each perception is true” to “each appearance is true” arrives at an unpalatable position, global relativism, a position that he goes on to reject. But suppose one were to stop at the initial intuition captured by the well-known Cold Wind Example: when I am cold, then there is a fact of the matter and my perception is true by virtue of this fact. Isn’t this an insight about perception worth holding on to, even though the larger relativist perspective is flawed? As I see it, this is the motivation behind SPT. Let me continue this line of thought by sketching how Epicurean epistemology aims to capture the truth in relativism.

Epicurean epistemology says that all perceptions are true, not that all perceptions are knowledge. By claiming that perception is arational, Epicurean epistemology denies one move that is crucial to relativism, namely that access to the truth implies *knowing* the truth. It is one thing to have a perception that, qua perception, is true; it is another thing to *formulate a judgment and know the content of the perception*. That is, Epicurean epistemology aims to capture the insight expressed in the Cold Wind Example without thereby accepting that, in such cases, anything is *known*.

At some point in the discussion of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine, Plato toys with an interesting concession to relativism. As a theory about all appearances or all judgments, relativism fails in multiple ways. But Socrates temporarily grants that there might be some truth to it. The claim that “what seems to A is true-for-A,” he suggests, might be

plausible for *sense-perceptions in the present tense* (171d-172c and 177c-179c).²⁸ It seems to be true for “things like hot, dry, sweet,” etc., but not insofar as the future is concerned. It seems true only insofar as we consider what seems hot, dry, sweet, etc., to a given cognizer now. In this context, Socrates introduces a notion that gains much importance in Hellenistic philosophy, and it is Epicurus who is credited with making it central: the notion of a *kriterion* (“criterion,” 178b). Socrates says that Protagoras’ doctrine seems to hold for white and heavy, etc., as perceived in the present. In these cases, he says, people have the *kriterion* in themselves. Indeed, it seems as if Epicurus could have lifted this claim directly from the Platonic text.

A restricted relativism might hold for present tense sense-perception. Or perhaps, given the restriction, the relevant position might not be properly described as relativism; it might instead be best described as a forerunner of Epicurean epistemology. Lucretius’ claim, that “every sense-perception at any given time is true” (SPT) contains the temporal qualifier from Socrates’ proposal in the *Theaetetus*. Sense-perceptual judgments about the future – say, “the sound of the trumpet will be loud” – are already a different matter. Such judgments are, indeed, *judgments*, not perceptions, and they can be false. But “this sound is loud [to me, now]” cannot be false. If limited to the domain of present tense sense perception, the claim that each perception is true is a candidate for being taken seriously.

²⁸ Socrates suggests that the Measure Doctrine might hold for *two* domains: present-tense sense-perceptions and the law as it applies to the present. The latter, however, is irrelevant for present purposes (though obviously there are interesting questions about the inter-relations between both domains).

For Plato, the point that relativism might hold for present-tense perceptions is only a preliminary concession. In the *Theaetetus*, it does not hold up to scrutiny. It fails because it misconstrues perception as if perception was a non-rational activity, something taking place between objects and sense-organs, rather than objects and cognitive faculties. And that is, its rejection hangs on Plato's rejection of a general picture of sense-perception as arational. But as we have seen, Epicurean epistemology embraces precisely this picture: for Epicurus and Lucretius, sense-perceptions do not involve any judgment-activity, and it is crucially for this reason that every present perception is true.

Conclusion

From the point of view of Epicurean philosophy, the insight that each perception is factive – what is perceived is the case and thereby true – is too important to be glossed over. In the *Theaetetus*, this insight motivates relativism. But relativism goes much too far, both according to Plato and according to the Epicureans. Still, from the point of view of Epicurean epistemology it justly takes an interest in the kind of phenomenon that the Cold Wind Example captures: that, when I'm cold I'm cold; I'm affected in a certain way. When I say "the wind is cold," I say something that is true; and implicitly, I mean it to refer to me qua cognizer and to the present tense – "the wind is cold for me now." Present tense perceptions are interesting because they de facto occur, in such a way as to make talk about them being true plausible, *and* in such a way as to make talk about them being false implausible. This, I think, is the Epicureans' truth in relativism.

This reading has the great advantage of recognizing Lucretius' argument as a rather good argument. Recall, leading up to SPT Lucretius explains how all sense-perceptions are on a par – the point I called the Parity Argument. This point turns out to be crucial to the more complicated story in the background of the Epicureans' commitment to the truth of all sense-perceptions. All sense-perceptions are deliverances of the senses, and all of them are of something that is; this is why they are factive, and in that sense true.