

## **Lucretius Poet and Philosopher**

# **Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes**

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## **Volume 90**

# Lucretius Poet and Philosopher



Background and Fortunes of *De Rerum Natura*

Edited by  
Philip R. Hardie, Valentina Prosperi  
and Diego Zucca

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Valentina Prosperi, Diego Zucca, Philip Hardie

## Introduction

An introduction is, in reality, an afterword: it can only be drafted after the research has been completed and one can finally take stock of what has emerged in ways that at first could only be conjectured. This is all the more true when the research is a collective work and the introduction often risks becoming an exercise in which the editors strive to find unifying threads and thus may end up identifying rather tenuous common denominators.

The present volume sprung out of an anniversary conference: the six hundred years since the rediscovery of Lucretius in 1417. Seeing as anniversaries and any such celebrations are more often than not the mark not so much of tradition but of its invention, as Eric J. Hobsbawm remarked, as editors, we paused: was the sexcentenary really more than an academic pretext, or did it have its own inherent significance? Moreover, was not an anniversary for a poet whose biography is clouded in uncertainty, a doubly artificial imposition? We might risk ending up with a loosely coherent, albeit excellent, collection of papers. But the three days of the conference did more than reassure us in terms of inner consistency and dialogue across the different papers.

This volume is thus not only an extremely valuable collection of papers but a truly coherent collective reflection on the issues that brought about Lucretius' reappearance, which is, conversely, his disappearance and the aftermath of it.

Lucretius's long absence from Western culture delayed the process of absorbing his work into the revered but often deadening realm of the canonized classics. But would his philosophy and work have been defused and normalized by an unbroken presence in Western culture? In other words, is what we perceive as Lucretius' singularity merely an optical illusion of his more recent acquisition?

The relative newness of Lucretius, and his outsider status, compared to the rest of the Latin corpus, though, are as much a cause as a consequence of his disappearance, and its roots run much deeper than any random combination of circumstances. The sexcentenary thus reveals itself as bearing more significance for the author than any biographical occurrence of life or death, coming closer perhaps to the commemoration of an exile. And speaking of exile, it is hard not to notice that compared to the almost non-existent Lucretian celebrations, 2017 saw an overwhelming number of academic homages paid to Ovid's bimillenary: a potent if mundane reminder of the different levels of integration at play.

In these last twenty years or so, the ever-increasing flow of scholarship regarding Lucretius, and especially of studies in his reception, means that Lucretius will be a focus for a good long time, and perhaps some international scientific committee will bestow on Lucretius an array of coordinated celebrations.

Still, any foreseeable future anniversary will have to reckon with the fact that the only certain date in Lucretius' 'biography' is the one of his reappearance, which doubles as the signpost of his long oblivion. Any discussion of Lucretius' relevance, then, inevitably takes on the deeper significance of an assessment of the causes that brought about his disappearance. In this, we could say that the resurrection of Lucretius in 1417 shapes the history of his reception and of our readings of it, radiating chronologically in both directions. Towards our present age, 1417 fixes the starting point in a way that has few parallels, but 1417 also determines the direction and circumstances of our dialogue with Lucretius, a dialogue that is still evolving; towards the past, 1417 forces us to look for early clues that might have announced his future disappearance. Such clues obviously concern philosophical and theoretical contents rather than literary forms, but above all they concern the rational and argumentative force – underlying the poetical expression – through which such 'outrageous' contents were posited and justified.

So this is why a critical reconstruction of the philosophical methods and theories which inform the DRN is crucial for an overall understanding of the troubled history of Lucretius' disappearance-and-reappearance. This implies that Lucretius' controversial relation to his philosophical source (Epicurus' doctrine and the tradition of early Epicureanism) as well as certain distinctive features of the source itself must be inquired into and framed as a part of this history of transmission. Consequently, the papers in this volume which directly address Lucretius' Epicurean philosophy help to shed light on the vicissitudes of disappearance/reappearance/reception(s).

It is perhaps a truism to state that Lucretius' peculiar fate has exposed him to two different waves of receptions, so far apart in time and space that any attempt at tracing differences and similarities between the two might at first glance be seen as little more than academic. Except that the comprehensive reading of these chapters cannot but encourage an informed interest in Lucretius' reception and fortune, and thereby trace a pattern of constants and variants through the history of what Lucretius has meant over two millennia for readers of all backgrounds.

The risk of reading too much into what could after all be dismissed as a string of casual events has been largely offset by an impressive amount of recent scholarship. The 2007 Cambridge Companion included eight chapters on the reception

of Lucretius: an unprecedented amount of space, as both readers and reviewers remarked at the time.<sup>1</sup> And a number of publications<sup>2</sup> dedicated to different aspects of Lucretius's modern reception has also accumulated enough evidence for reclaiming not only Lucretius' influence on Western culture, but also the uniqueness of it.

To borrow here from the title of a recent volume, it was not the humanistic rediscovery of the DRN, or whatever name we choose to attach to the events of 1417, that ensured that Lucretius stayed modern; it was, rather, his intrinsic resistance to – and friction with – any surrounding cultural landscape, be it before or after his reappearance, that kept him unassimilable and in that sense modern. After all, what other ancient classic author enjoyed – and at the very late date of 1693 – the doubtful privilege of being attacked from the altar of a cathedral as a heresy monger and atheist?<sup>3</sup> And few other authors ever produced lines so acerbic for their readers as the second proem of the DRN. A piece of poetry that has provoked rebuttals and awkward silences not only from all of its readers from antiquity onwards but, remarkably, also from scholars and professional commentators up to the present day.

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1 Martindale, Charles. Review of *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius. Translation and Literature* 17, no. 2 (2008): 226–233.

2 The main ones in recent years include: Gambino Longo S., *Savoir de la nature et poésie des choses. Lucrèce et Épicure à la Renaissance italienne*, Paris, Champion, 2004. Prosperi V., «Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso». *La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma*, Turin, Nino Aragno, 2004. Gillespie S., Hardie P. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. Beretta M., Citti F., (eds.), *Lucrezio la natura e la scienza*, Firenze, Olschki, 2008; Brown A., *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2010; Greenblatt S., *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2011; Paladini M., *Lucrezio e l'epicureismo tra Riforma e Controriforma*, Naples, Liguori Editore, 2011; Passannante G., *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Lestringant F., Naya E. (eds.), *Renaissance de Lucrèce*, Cahiers du Centre V.L. Saulnier 27, Paris, 2010; Butterfield, D., *The Early Textual History of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Palmer A., *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2014; Vesperini P., *Lucrèce. Archéologie d'un Classique européen*, Paris, Fayard, 2017; David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, Philip Hardie (eds.), *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, Oxford, 2015; Jacques Leszra, Liza Blake (eds.), *Lucretius and Modernity: Epicurean Encounters Across Time and Disciplines*, New York, 2016.

3 The sermon, held by Bishop Cantelmo in Naples' cathedral, was recorded by Giovan Battista Clemente Nelli in a dispute with Alessandro Marchetti's son, Francesco: Saccenti M., *Lucrezio in Toscana*, p. 126 n.

As we have already suggested, a comprehensive understanding of Lucretius' uniqueness cannot just concern DNR's extraordinary though belated *Wirkungsgeschichte* in isolation from the 'direct' inquiry into Lucretius himself as a philosopher and, in particular, as a critical receiver of Epicurus' philosophical message. In fact, the very manner of Lucretius' reception cannot be totally told apart from the manner of Epicurus' reception by Lucretius himself. Clearly, these are significantly different if not incommensurable phenomena, yet in a sense they are parts of the same broad and non-linear history of transmission, rings of the same (heterogeneous and non-continuous) chain.

This is why the first group of papers in this volume explicitly investigate specific aspects of the DRN as a masterpiece of *philosophy*, not only as a potential source for understanding Epicurus but also as an 'intrinsic' treasure of theoretical depth and argumentative rigorousness, aspects too often overshadowed by the understandable focus on the extraordinary quality of Lucretius' poetry. The epistemology proposed in DRN is critically assessed and framed within the polemical debate with other alternative schools (Diego Zucca, Richard Stoneman); the 'philosophy of mind' and the materialistic account of the soul/body relation are interpreted as a consistent global theory (Francesca Masi); Lucretius' creative appropriation of Epicurus' 'multi-layered' explanatory model in meteorology is reconstructed through contextualizing it within contemporary debate (Francesco Verde); and an original reconsideration of Lucretius' treatment of Epicurean 'true pleasures' (such as studying physics, which Lucretius enjoys) is brilliantly articulated (David Sedley).

The DRN originally came into the realm of light, *in luminis oras*, so that Lucretius could rescue Memmius and all his readers from the darkness of misguided fears, namely those of death and of divine intervention and retribution before and after our death. Such was his messianic fervour that, despite the traditional Epicurean mistrust of poetry, he deferred to the poetical form, so as to clothe in sweetness the bitter medicine of his salvific doctrine for reluctant, child-like readers. It is this clash of form and content that engendered the initial imbalance in the reception of the DRN: readers were drawn to the charm of Lucretius' poetry more than they were to his philosophy. So much so that the reception of Lucretius was for long equivalent to his poetical reception: responses to the DRN from the foremost Latin poets such as Virgil and Ovid appear to point more to the category of poetical *aemulatio* and admiration than to any direct engagement with its philosophy. However, the sheer number of responses to the DRN from ancient readers is certainly higher than has normally been assumed. A case in point is Seneca's treatment of DRN. As Myrto Garani shows in her paper, contrary to what is

commonly held to be the case, Seneca read and made extensive, if polemical, use of Lucretius.

The case of Seneca is exemplary of a certain manner of reading Lucretius that we are now familiar with thanks to the recent surge of studies in his early modern reception. The awkward balance between reading the text and correcting problematic parts of its message is a trait most prominent in early modern readers, but one adopted already by ancient. In his contribution, Philip Hardie shows how early Christian poets appropriated the text of DRN and its most famous passages as an efficacious vehicle for Christian contents. This pattern of reusing Lucretius for apologetic reasons resurfaced ten centuries later in Catholic Latin America: Andrew Laird gives a prime example of how Lucretius's powers of persuasion were appropriated for apologetic reasons in Catholic Latin America, thereby reviving a selective reading that went as far back as early Christian poets and had been reinforced throughout the Italian Renaissance.

Of course, our gauging of the exact measure of Lucretius's unassimilability, is, perhaps inevitably, distorted by our own specific cultural background: this is why books on Lucretius' reception in modernity which present diametrically opposed points of view have recently been published within a short space of time, as well as a number of more balanced and nuanced works. Stephen Greenblatt's ambitious and acclaimed *The Swerve* has famously ruffled academia's feathers by magnifying the impact of the *De Rerum Natura* and implying that it was essentially Lucretius' influence that brought about much of what made the Humanism and the Renaissance exceptional. Conversely, the recent book by Pierre Vesperini, *Lucrèce. Archéologie d'un Classique européen*, stresses the prompt integration of Lucretius among all the other classics, downplaying any alleged disruption that his philosophy might have provoked as well as any special reaction he might have raised among humanists, outliers, philosophers, clerics, from Humanism to the Enlightenment.

This volume brings together the views and thoughts of Lucretian scholars from an array of different cultural backgrounds, thereby gaining an overall balance and polyphony. Nevertheless, taken overall the resulting chapters unmistakably point towards the "special" status of Lucretian reception. A status that has much to do with the historical events that were to unfold in Europe, and Italy in particular, shortly after the time of his recovery. Hence the especial emphasis in our volume on the Italian reception of the DRN, a field of research so productive and multi-layered that no amount of investigation seems to be capable of exhausting it any time soon.

Even before the Counter Reformation brought about its enforcement of ecclesiastical control and censorship on culture and thought, Italy did not appear as

particularly suited to welcome the *redivivus* Lucretius, and the risk posed by his materialistic poetry so concerned his very first reader, Niccolò Niccoli, that he sequestered Poggio's copy, keeping it to himself for ten years.

Indeed, the famous simile of the honey-smeared cup that was to resound so widely in the sixteenth century debate on the role of poetry can be taken as a token of Lucretius' paradoxical fate in his second humanistic life. Just as the Church Fathers had already pointed out, poetry could more often than not be the pleasing veil for the poison of heresy, rather than the means to cure audiences of ill-formed opinions. So when Lucretius resurfaced in 1417, his poem, due to immensely changed circumstances, had in the meantime morphed from philosophical to atheistic, and his poetry, so enticing, was perceived as all the more dangerous and poisonous.

This led to a schizophrenic kind of reception, where immediate success and circulation had however to confront suspicion and the possible material consequences of a misguided handling of the DRN.

The results of this double bind in the poem's reception led to a guarded, wary circulation of the poem among all categories of audience involved in the reading of Lucretius. If one point needs to be stressed, it is that Lucretius enjoyed universal acclaim, just as any other ancient master, and even more so, considering the comparatively far shorter time since his resurfacing. This speaks as much to the enormous force of Lucretius' poetry as to the Italians' capacity for circumventing Catholic strictures through a modicum of dissimulation.

Niccolò Machiavelli was both a notorious early reader of the DRN and one of the most vocal critics of the crippling grip of the Catholic Church on the national character. Nevertheless, while on the one hand he famously wrote that the Church in Italy was to blame for making the Italians "sanza religione e cattivi", on the other he never once named the Latin poet in his works or quoted from him: it takes the trained eye of Mario De Caro to uncover the threads that connect Machiavelli's theory of free will with the Lucretian swerve.

However, one must not be led into thinking, conversely, that Lucretius became the province of all-out heretics or outcasts. In fact, as Ada Palmer shows, there is a risk in today's debate of over-simplifying Lucretius' extensive and multifarious readership in terms of rebellion or subservience to a given set of values. This is far from being so. As Elena Nicoli illustrates, men of letters with no streak of rebellion in themselves, like the humanist Giovan Battista Pio and the physician Giovanni Nardi, worked extensively on Lucretius.

So, for centuries, provided that authors proclaimed their rejection of Epicureanism, the circulation of Lucretius was allowed at almost all levels of Italian culture. But in the long run, as abiding by the dissimulatory code became more

and more burdensome for Italian authors, other countries engaged more freely with Lucretian thought and poetry. By the end of the seventeenth century printed editions were no longer published in Italy and commentaries to the DRN had lost every pretension to philosophical engagement. Authors reserved their continuing love for Lucretius mostly for the form of the private commentary, not intended for print (Andrea Ceccarelli, Mauro Sarnelli). And while throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries most ancient authors had reached wider audiences through vernacular translations, those of Lucretius were effectively suppressed (Valentina Prosperi).

Also, while by the time of his second resurgence Lucretius had been all but erased from collective memory, his fame hung by the thread of his legend (“Lucretio... che per amor se uccise” as a fourteenth century poet wrote without having read Lucretius and without even knowing whether he wrote in Latin or Greek),<sup>4</sup> as retold by St. Jerome. The dark tale of erotic madness and suicide not only made up for the absence of the text from late antiquity to 1417: it welded *with* the text, once it was unearthed again. Reading the DRN through Lucretius’ supposed biography, or conversely his biography through his poem became a fairly common exercise (Giuseppe Solaro, Stephen Harrison), justified by Jerome’s testimony that the poem had been written *per intervalla insaniae* – and one that lasted for the centuries to come. Fascination for the man reflected on the interest for the poet and the other way around: a specific iconography of the man Lucretius even took shape (Gavina Cherchi).

On the other hand, coming back to modern philosophical thought in the European context, Lucretius’ influence is to be found in pivotal, groundbreaking thinkers like Leibniz, who – as Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero carefully shows – strongly refuses his denial of finalism, but is fascinated by the combinatorial strand of ancient atomism and somehow exploits it theoretically: of course, even through being critically discussed as a polemical target, an author or a text indirectly exerts their influence and remains an object of reception and transmission.

This volume offers fresh perspectives in the study of Lucretian reception. Most importantly, it encourages readers to look for their own patterns and threads across the chapters. And while it has no claim to exhaustiveness, we are confident that it will offer an essential contribution to Lucretian studies for years to come.

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Girolamo Nadal, *Leandreride*, ed. E. Lippi, Padova 1996.

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V.P., D.Z., P.R.H.

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## **Part I: Lucretius and the Traditions of Ancient Philosophy**



David Sedley

## Lucretian Pleasures

**Abstract:** This chapter's main aim is to bring into focus Lucretius' celebration of his own Epicurean pleasures. The DRN refers in its very first line to divine as well as human pleasures. It closes with the most frightful scene of bodily and mental pain, one that owing to the poem's evident incompleteness still lacks its Epicurean moral lesson about why even the most intense bodily pain need not be feared. In between those two extremities Lucretius offers a uniquely sensitive, and rarely appreciated, commentary on the meaning, boundaries and divine nature of true Epicurean pleasures, and on their intimate relationship to the study of physics, by one who can claim direct experience of their transformative effects.

**Keywords:** Pleasure, Epicureanism, Lucretius, hedonism, gods

With its opening words the *De Rerum Natura* celebrates Venus as *hominum divomque voluptas*, “pleasure of humans and gods” (1.1). And a recurrent theme of the poem that follows will be the divine nature of true pleasures, presented as a paradigm to which humans too may nevertheless aspire if they follow Lucretius' Epicurean path. Alongside this upward-looking aspiration, just a few lines further into book 1 pleasure, now in her very different guise as nature's procreative force, will be seen pervading the entire animal kingdom. In his opening then Lucretius provides, virtually in the same breath, two utterly different introductions to the Epicurean *summum bonum*. At one extreme, pleasure is the great leveller, an innate motivator common to all animate beings;<sup>1</sup> at the other, it is a godlike reward attainable, even among the human race, only by converts to Epicurean philosophy.

My primary focus in this paper will be on the latter kind, the godlike pleasures specific to Epicurean living, to which Lucretius is himself our most eloquent witness. The lower, animal pleasures may in the book 1 proem appear also to be divinized, in so far as they are the work of Venus, but in the proem to book 2 Lucretius carefully corrects any such impression. There he does again refer to the reproductive drive as “divine pleasure” (2.172 *diva voluptas*), referring to Venus'

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cic., *Fin.* 1.30, *omne animal, simul atque natum sit, voluptatem appetere eaque gaudere ut summo bono, dolorem aspernari ut summum malum et, quantum possit, a se repellere*.

divinely bestowed perpetuation of the human race. But, importantly, this time he rejects it out of hand as theologically mistaken.<sup>2</sup>

In Epicurean doctrine pleasures are divided into two kinds, the bodily and the mental; and within each of those two domains there are short-term “kinetic” pleasures, which lie primarily in hedonic *processes* such as eating or learning, and static (or “katastematic”) pleasures, which consist in the longer-term state of painlessness. Counter-intuitively, and notoriously, Epicureans insist that when all pain has gone and static pleasure has replaced it, the height of pleasure has already been reached. The added kinetic pleasures typically associated with luxurious living can, as they put it, ‘vary’ the static pleasure, but cannot increase it. As Lucretius says in his second proem (2.16–19), “there is nothing else that nature barks out for than that pain should be absent from the body, and that the mind should enjoy pleasurable sensation while insulated from anxiety and fear.”<sup>3</sup> And as we learn from him in the same proem and elsewhere, those who make the mistake of thinking that the pleasures of simple long-term painlessness can be further increased by heaping luxury upon luxury find that the reverse is true: not only do the luxuries fail to increase the sum total of pleasure, they actually detract from it by generating or intensifying desires that threaten to enslave us.

Take the body first. How do you keep it free of pain? Lucretius dwells on the ease with which this goal can be achieved: not, that is, by luxurious living, but by the satisfaction of basic needs. In the proem to book 2 this ideal is encapsulated for us with the model of a simple pastoral existence consisting in relaxation on shady grass beside a stream.<sup>4</sup> Later, book 5’s reconstruction of human history (5.1390–1411) will teach us that the idyllic life portrayed in this tableau was once

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2 2.167–76, *at quidam contra haec, ignari materiai, naturam non posse deum sine numine reddunt/ tanto opere humanis rationibus atmoderate/ tempora mutare annorum frugesque creare/ et iam cetera, mortalis quae suadet adire/ ipsaque deducit dux vitae dia voluptas/ et res per Veneris blanditur saecula propagent, ne genus occidat humanum. quorum omnia causa constituisse deos cum fingunt, omnibus rebus/ magno opere a vera lapsi ratione videntur.*

3 *nonne videre/ nihil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi ut qui/ corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur/ iucundo sensu cura semota metuque?*

4 2.20–36, *ergo corpoream ad naturam pauca videmus/ esse opus omnino: quae demant cumque dolorem, delicias quoque uti multas substernere possint/ gratius interdum, neque natura ipsa requirit, si non aurea sunt iuvenum simulacra per aedes/ lampadas igniferas manibus retinentia dextris, lumina nocturnis epulis ut suppeditentur, nec domus argento fulget auroque renidet/ nec citharae reboant laqueata aurataque templa, cum tamen inter se prostrati in gramine molli/ propter aquae rivum sub ramis arboris altae/ non magnis opibus iucunde corpora curant, praesertim cum tempestas adridet et anni/ tempora conspergunt viridantis floribus herbas, nec calidae citius decedunt corpore febres, textilebus si in picturis ostroque rubenti/ iacteris, quam si in plebeia veste cubandum est.*

upon a time the reality of the human condition – before, that is, we threw it away by developing extravagant desires, deprived as we were at that time of the insight that the limit of bodily pleasure had already been reached. In the sixth and final proem we learn that only the intervention of Epicurus, when it finally came, was able to halt and reverse this downward spiral of the human condition.

But the recommendation of pastoral simplicity is only half of the story. Epicureanism does not pretend that anyone, however frugally they live, can be sure that illness or injury will not sooner or later make intense bodily pain inescapable – other, that is, than by death. That pain can be tolerated on certain conditions is an important Epicurean lesson, and one that Lucretius in the book 6 proem encourages us to expect,<sup>5</sup> but nowhere delivers, even in that same book's concluding account of frightful sufferings in the great Athenian plague. Yet without confident security from the threat of intolerable bodily pain we would also lack the required *mental* pleasure, that of freedom from anxiety. It is this gap in Lucretius' otherwise immaculate presentation of Epicurean ethics that convinces me that at the time of his death the end of book 6 still awaited revision.<sup>6</sup> For although the DRN is a poem devoted to the physical universe, Lucretius' mastery of Epicurean ethics is if anything even more remarkable than his expertise in physics. His ethical commentary has not featured as much as it deserves in modern reconstructions of Epicurean ethics.

Let me give one example. Scholars of Epicureanism have detected and debated a crucial unclarity in the surviving evidence for Epicurean ethics. Was Epicurus a *psychological* hedonist – that is, did he claim the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain to be an innate and ineradicable feature of human and animal psychology?<sup>7</sup> If so, adults who profess to pursue honour or virtue and to shun pleasure are simply mistaken: whether consciously or unconsciously, they want the honour or the virtue not for its own sake but for the sake of pleasure they expect to result. Alternatively was Epicurus, as others have maintained, an *evaluative* hedonist?<sup>8</sup> On this latter hypothesis, he regarded pleasure as the only genuine and natural good capable of making a life a happy one, but allowed that many, perhaps most, human beings have been diverted into pursuing an alternative goal that society imposes, such as wealth, power or the possession of virtue

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5 6.29–32 [Epicurus showed] *quidve mali foret in rebus mortalibus passim,/ quod fieret naturali varieque volaret/ seu casu seu vi, quod sic natura parasset,/ et quibus e portis occurri cuique deceret.*

6 I defend this view in Sedley 1998, 160–165.

7 This widespread interpretation is defended by Woolf (cf. Woolf 2004).

8 As defended by Cooper 1999.

for its own sake. Merely saying, as Epicurus is regularly reported as saying, that pleasure is our innate goal and *summum bonum* does not in itself help decide between the competing psychological and evaluative options.

But Lucretius, curiously overlooked in the modern interpretative debate, has a very clear answer. In the book 6 proem his praise of Epicurus includes the following (26-8):<sup>9</sup> “[H]e explained what was the highest good (*summum bonum*) for which we are all aiming,<sup>10</sup> and showed the way by which we could strive straight towards it, along a narrow track.” Uniquely among our Epicurean informants, Lucretius has recognized and eliminated the ambiguity, pronouncing in favour of psychological hedonism: we are already – all of us (*omnes*) – aiming for pleasure as our highest good; hence Epicurus’ contribution was to teach us, by the arts of hedonic calculation and desire-management, the precise means (the “narrow track”, *tramite parvo*, 27) by which we can aspire to achieve the thing we all already want.

One ground on which Epicurean ethics has faced severe criticism, at least since the time of Cicero, is its equation of pleasure with the absence of pain – expressed as an insistence that the state of painlessness, once reached, is not only already a pleasure, but the highest pleasure: further indulgences, such as an extra course at dinner, may vary the pleasure, but they do not increase it. Unfortunately the debate, ancient and modern alike, has revolved too much around the example of bodily pleasures. These do of course provide the most accessible cases for analysis; but Lucretius shares the regular Epicurean view that mental pleasures are far greater in power and scope than bodily ones, so it is almost certainly on these that we should be concentrating. Here are the steps we need to go through.

If pleasure is lack of pain, critics have asked, won’t it be possessed even by a corpse or a stone? To this Lucretius’ first response would no doubt be a return to his formula for our natural goal, as set out in the second proem (2.16–19, p. 12 above): it is “that pain should be absent from the body, and that the mind should enjoy pleasurable *perception* while insulated from anxiety and fear.” Pleasure is available only to actively sentient beings: hence Lucretius’ qualification *iucundo sensu* (2.19), and before him Epicurus’ insistence (*Letter to Menoeceus* 124) that

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<sup>9</sup> *exposuitque bonum summum, quo tendimus omnes, / quid foret, atque viam monstravit, tramite parvo / qua possemus ad id recto contendere cursu.*

<sup>10</sup> 6.26, *quo tendimus omnes*, “for which we are all aiming”, and not (as in the 1975 Loeb translation of W.H.D. Rouse, rev. M.F. Smith) “to which we all move”, which Lucretius would vehemently deny.

“all good and bad [i.e. all pleasure and pain] lie in perception (*aisthēsis*).” Pleasure, that is, consists not in mere lack of pain, but in *perceiving* in a painless way. When it comes to the specifically mental supreme pleasure, freedom from anxiety, then, its attainment will lie, not in the mere absence of worry, but in *perceiving the world* with an entirely tranquil and worry-free frame of mind. To find out what that is like, we must turn once again to Lucretius.

The road to a proper answer must begin in the proem to book 1, and specifically in the passage (1.62–79) where Lucretius extols Epicurus’ pioneering mental breakthrough.<sup>11</sup> With the power of his thought, Epicurus defied and stared down the religious threats that seemed to come from above. Instead of being cowed by them, his intellect burst open the outer gates of the cosmos and explored the measureless space beyond. On that voyage of the mind Epicurus discovered, and duly reported back, the limits of what is physically possible. And it is his insight about those limits that can now protect us from our former religious terrors.

Lucretius cannot be expected to spell out for us, so early in the poem, just what it was that Epicurus discovered about the limits of physical possibility. Instead he focuses his praise on the epic nature of Epicurus’ pioneering feat. Although he does not use the term here, Epicurus’ journey was what Lucretius, like Cicero (*ND* 1.53–4)<sup>12</sup> elsewhere calls an *iniectus animi* or *animi iactus*, corresponding to Epicurus’ *epibolē tēs dianoias*: a projection of the mind which enables it to see beyond the bounds of literal sight. For instance, the eyes cannot gaze upon the infinity of space, and the innumerable worlds that form and disintegrate again in it; but the mind can.

In Lucretius’ view the key to eliminating oppressive creator gods from our vision of reality is to appreciate two things: (a) that mere atomic accident, operating as it must do on an infinite scale, necessarily produces worlds, both like

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**11** *humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret/ in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,/ quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat/ horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,/ primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra/ est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra;/ quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti/ murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem/ inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret./ ergo vivida vis animi pervicit et extra/ processit longe flammantia moenia mundi/ atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque./ unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri,/ quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique/ quam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens./ quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim/ operitur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.*

**12** As Cicero’s Epicurean speaker Velleius explains to his Stoic opponent Balbus in the *De natura deorum* (1.53–4): “You would not be demanding this god’s handiwork if you saw the measureless magnitude of space, endless in all directions, by projecting and focusing itself (*se inciens... et intendens*) into which the mind travels far and wide, seeing as a result no boundary of its extremities at which it could call a halt.”

and unlike our own, without the need for divine craftsmanship; and (b) that the infinite extent of the universe and its constituent worlds makes it impossible that even the most powerful divinity might control it (2.1090–1104; 6.58–67; cf. 5.87–90).

That in its turn requires us to *see*, by mental projection, what the universe's infinity really means. The thought experiments, arguments and mental exercises by which this vision can be achieved are set out by Lucretius towards the ends of books 1 and 2. For example, we are invited to imagine going to some hypothetical boundary of the universe and throwing a spear past it.

I have emphasized the nature of Epicurus' intellectual leap, as described in the book 1 proem, because in the book 3 proem Lucretius will be in a way mirroring that same leap of understanding, and providing a powerful commentary on the pleasure that he experiences as he does so.

However, Lucretius' mental feat is not exactly Epicurus' own. Epicurus, by his intellectual prowess, was able to force his way through the outer barriers of our world, the fiery heavens: 1.72–3 *et extra / processit longe flammantia moenia mundi*. Here *extra* at first looks like an adverb modifying *processit*: Epicurus forced the gates open and marched outside: *extra / processit*. But as we read on we realize that *extra* was in fact a preposition, governing the long-delayed object *flammantia moenia mundi*. By the time we have belatedly gone back and construed the sentence it feels as if the world's boundary has been left far behind, as Epicurus' mind accelerates into the measureless space beyond.

So much for the master. Contrast the pupil. According to the book 3 proem,<sup>13</sup> when Lucretius reads or hears Epicurus' golden words, “the walls of the world” simply “part” of their own accord (3.16–17, *moenia mundi / discedunt*). Where Epicurus' breakthrough was dynamic, Lucretius' role is essentially static. Lucretius' intellect does not actually go anywhere. When the walls of the world open, that is not his own active breakthrough, because Epicurus has already done the work. Through the gap that Epicurus opened up Lucretius simply *sees* what lies beyond. He sees the laws of nature at work everywhere (17), and he sees the abodes of the gods laid bare (18). That he has not had to travel anywhere to see these things is

<sup>13</sup> 3.14–30, *nam simul ac ratio tua coepit vociferari/ naturam rerum divina mente coorta/ diffugiunt animi terrores, moenia mundi/ discedunt. totum video per inane geri res./ apparet divum numen sedesque quietae,/ quas neque concutiunt venti nec nubila nimbis/ aspergunt neque nix acri concreta pruina/ cana cadens violat semper[que] innubilus aether/ integit et large diffuso lumine ridet:/ omnia suppeditat porro natura neque ulla/ res animi pacem delibat tempore in ullo./ at contra nusquam apparent Acherusia templa./ nec tellus obstat quin omnia dispiciantur./ sub pedibus quaecumque infra per inane geruntur./ his ibi me rebus quaedam divina voluptas/ percipit atque horror, quod sic natura tua vi/ tam manifesta patens ex omni parte relecta est.*

confirmed at 3.25–7, when he turns his mental gaze downwards from Olympus to the region below his feet (*sub pedibus*), seeing through a now transparent earth to the regions below, and revelling in the absence of any kind of Tartarus. It is clear from *sub pedibus* that, intellectually speaking, he is not out travelling the universe, but is still enclosed and orientated by the internal structure of the cosmos. Thanks to Epicurus' pioneering voyage, he need do no more than direct his mental gaze this way and that.

It would be mistaken to judge Lucretius' intellectual pleasure inferior to that previously enjoyed by Epicurus on his voyage of exploration. For the static enjoyment of this panorama is on the contrary a supreme and godlike pleasure, as Lucretius tells Epicurus at 3.28–30: "At these things I am seized by a kind of divine pleasure and thrill (*quaedam divina voluptas atque horror*), because by your power nature is thus uncovered and laid bare in every direction". We need be in no doubt that this godlike pleasure is a 'static pleasure', in the technical Epicurean sense of *hēdonē katastēmatikē*. Epicurus himself, if he enjoyed his voyage of discovery as we must assume he did, will have been enjoying a mental *kinetic* pleasure, the process of freeing himself from his previously painful fear and incomprehension about what the universe might threaten. Lucretius is silent about that kinetic pleasure of discovery, and sticks instead to a single Epicurean tenet: it is not the kinetic thrill of eliminating pain, but the resultant stable pleasure of peace of mind, that can make our own state fully equal to that of the gods.

Lucretius' mental projection is not then a voyage of discovery. But neither, as I remarked earlier, is it a purely passive experience. It is the activity of *perceiving one's surroundings* in an entirely tranquil frame of mind. In some other cases the surroundings perceived without perturbation might be very local, for example one's social, domestic or political environment, provided only that one views it without empty fears or desires. But in the present case, where he reaps the benefit of the *iniectus animi* that Epicurus pioneered, it is the entire measureless universe that Lucretius, equipped as he is with intellectual x-ray vision, is able to gaze upon without the least anxiety. And this *divina voluptas*, we must take it, is the kind of pleasure that was already foreshadowed in the poem's opening line, the pleasure that gods themselves enjoy. What then is this pleasure's cognitive content, and what makes it divine?

First, the pleasure is taken in an insight such as only a divine intellect like Epicurus' own could have taught us (3.15, "[the nature of things], brought to light by your divine mind", *divina mente coortam*). Lucretius is privileged to share his master's divine discoveries, but what their 'divinity' consists in remains at this stage unclear. Later, the poem to book 5 will declare Epicurus a god on the grounds, not simply of his great benefaction, but specifically of his conferral

upon the human race of peace of mind, a quintessentially godlike blessing, including a correct understanding of the gods themselves – that is, of our moral paradigm. Here too, in the book 3 proem, by a curious reflexivity, Lucretius’ divine pleasure is his own pleasure at seeing the gods’ enjoyment of *their* divine pleasures (3.18–24). For one of the sights on which his intellect feasts itself is that of the Olympian gods as described in *Odyssey* 6.41–6,<sup>14</sup> lines which Lucretius virtually translates at 3.18–24. As he gazes out, his mind’s eye falls upon

... the gods’ tranquil abodes, which winds do not shake, clouds do not sprinkle with rain, and falling white snow hardened by bitter frost does not assault. It is forever covered with cloudless aether, which smiles with widely spread light. What is more, nature provides all their needs, nor does anything ever diminish their peace of mind.

Although Homer is no philosophical authority in Epicurean eyes, Lucretius is justified in treating the Homeric passage as if it did have a special epistemic status. Compare DRN 5.1169–82), according to which early humans’ awareness of gods embodied their correct intuition that the essential characteristics of divinity are imperishability and a blissful freedom from fear. This intuition was largely played out in dreams where our ancestors pictured the gods’ lives in terms no doubt dictated by their own culture, for example scenes in which these superhuman beings performed feats of indomitable strength (5.1177–82) – hardly part of Lucretius’ own picture of divinity, but still embodying, however primitively, the essential truth about the gods’ invulnerability. Essentially of the same kind is Homer’s description of the Olympians’ divine bliss, presenting it as if it were their enjoyment of a perfect weather system. For all its naivety, it too is, in Lucretius’ eyes, emblematic of a deep truth about divinity.

Another reason for Lucretius’ endorsement of Homer’s Olympus is that benign weather does actually play a part in Lucretius’ own human paradigm of Epicurean pleasure. I mean book 2’s portrayal of an ideal human existence in the guise of a simple pastoral life, “especially”, he adds (2.32–3),<sup>15</sup> “when the weather smiles on them and the season sprinkles the greenery with flowers”. You don’t need constant good weather in order to live pleasantly, but the enjoyment of good weather, as distinct from, say, palatial dwellings, does epitomize the Epicurean

<sup>14</sup> ἡ μὲν ἄρ’ ὥς εἰποῦς ἀπέβη γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη/ Οὐλυμπόνδ’, ὅθι φασὶ θεῶν ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεὶ/ ἔμμεναι· οὐτ’ ἀνέμοισι τινάσσεται οὔτε ποτ’ ὄμβρω/ δεύεται οὔτε χιῶν ἐπιπίλνεται, ἀλλὰ μάλ’ αἶθρη/ πέπταται ἀννέφελος, λευκὴ δ’ ἐπιδέδρομεν αἴγλη-/ τῷ ἔνι τέρπονται μάκαρες θεοὶ ἡματα πάντα.

<sup>15</sup> See note 4 above.

brand of pleasure, a brand of which the gods themselves are the ultimate paradigms.

However, another reason for Lucretius' spotlighting the Homeric paradigm of divine pleasure lies, one may suspect, in Homer's sheer antiquity. In DRN 5, that initial stage in human history at which the gods' detached and invulnerable nature was correctly grasped by a sort of primitive intuition, was regrettably followed by a rational stage in which by a faulty inference those same gods were misconstrued as despotic overlords of the human race, in need of constant appeasement. Of course no records or cultural memories could survive from those very early times to confirm the historicity of either phase in the emergence of religion; but the very earliest witnesses upon whom Lucretius *could* call were Greek poets, above all Homer, whom he elsewhere (3.1037–8) praises as the king of poets, and hence as the ultimate master of Lucretius' own profession. And just as in popular religious belief<sup>16</sup> the correct conception of the divine nature still exists, although obscured and contaminated by that fateful error about divine overlordship, so too it is with Homer. Maybe, that is, Homer does portray gods showing the attitudes of anger and favour that Epicureanism declared to be incompatible with the divine nature. The fact remains that Homer also possessed, and was able to express on occasion, the *true* conception of divinity. Lucretius' meticulous rendition of the Odysseian Olympus turns Homer into the earliest and most kingly of witnesses to the pervasiveness of that correct human intuition.

Homer's description ends "There the blissful gods enjoy themselves day after day" (*Od.* 6.46, τῷ ἔνι τέρπονται μάκαρες θεοὶ ἥματα πάντα). Lucretius' corresponding ending is (3.23–4) "What is more, nature provides all their needs, nor does anything ever diminish their peace of mind (*animi pacem*).” Thus Homer, in speaking of the gods' blissful life, is interpreted by Lucretius as equating it with Epicurean peace of mind, and therefore also with the pastoral paradigm of pleasant living which Lucretius has himself advocated in the proem of the preceding book. Thus the two paradigms of bliss – the Homeric and the Lucretian – become one and the same. In addition, when Lucretius directs his mental spotlight first to the universal laws of nature, then up to the peaceful gods on Olympus, and finally down through the ground to where Tartarus would be if it existed, he is reminding himself of the very insights that have made his life as tranquil as that of the gods.

I have presented Lucretius' reassuring conspectus of the universe, viewed from within our own cosmos, as being superior in his eyes even to the joy of discovery that Epicurus must have experienced. On the other hand, there is no doubt

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16 Cf. 5.82–8.

that Epicurus' moments of philosophical discovery, typically in discussion with his closest colleagues, were kinetic pleasures which textured, or rather 'varied', his life's tranquillity in a way that enabled him to enjoy them again and again in retrospect, reportedly even on his deathbed amidst intense bodily pain.<sup>17</sup> Does Lucretius have anything equivalent to report in his own life? It seems that he does. Not so much the joy of discovery, since that work has already been sufficiently done by Epicurus, but the joy of transmitting the Epicurean message to others. Altruism towards strangers, such as Lucretius' readers may well be to him, is not prominent among Epicurean values. But altruism to friends lies at the very centre of Epicurean life; and from the start Memmius, the addressee of the DRN, is courted as a potential friend.

Lucretius' enjoyment of his benefaction to Memmius not only well exemplifies the pleasures of friendship, it also draws our attention to a frequently disregarded feature of Epicurean pleasures, namely that they are meant to be enjoyed as much in our dreams as in our waking hours. As Epicurus tells the addressee at the close of his *Letter to Menoeceus* (135), if you put into practice the foregoing tenets "you will never be disquieted, *awake or in your dreams*, but will live like a god among humans." Epicurus' excellent point, that a tranquil life depends on the absence of anxiety around the clock, whether awake or asleep, is one that Lucretius takes to heart. He twice notes for example (4.1018–19, 5.1151–60) that unjust people's constant terror of giving away their guilty secrets continues in their sleeping hours too. And in cataloguing the phenomenon of nightmares (4.1011–25) he prominently includes some which continue the dreamers' un-Epicurean daytime ambitions and fears, such as when kings dream about losing as well as winning battles.

The passages I have just mentioned concern success or failure in preserving the static Epicurean pleasure of tranquillity during sleep. But should we not suppose that Lucretius' dreams too were enriched with memorable kinetic pleasures of the mind? Sadly, no. With regard to his waking hours, he does repeatedly emphasize the pleasure which rewards his twin task of simultaneously Latinizing and versifying the Epicurean message for Memmius' benefit (1.136–45, 927–33, 2.730–1, 3.419–20). At night too he likes to stay up late (1.142, *noctes vigilare serenas*) to pursue the same poetic task. But Lucretius is also a witness to an all too

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<sup>17</sup> DL 10.22. For the role of kinetic pleasures in the Epicurean conception of happiness, cf. Sedley 2017.

familiar experience, that solutions to problems devised in dreams typically evaporate in the cold light of dawn. He has the honesty to claim no satisfaction for the illusory verse-composition he attempts in his dreams (4.962–72):<sup>18</sup>

And more or less whatever pursuit each person is tied to, or whatever we have been spending much of our preceding time on with our mind especially concentrated on it, in sleep we seem mainly to be focusing on those same things. Lawyers seem to be arguing cases and formulating laws, generals to be fighting and focusing on battles, sailors to be conducting a declared war against the winds, whereas I seem to be doing what I am doing now, always tracking down the nature of things and, once I have found it, setting it forth written in our own language. In the same way the other pursuits and skills seem to retain their deceptive hold on people's minds.

The emphasis here is entirely on illusory 'seeming'. In a dream Lucretius may enjoy the brief illusion that he has discovered the perfect Latin hexameter to convey accurately this or that Greek Epicurean maxim. But if he does derive so much as a momentary kinetic pleasure from it, he does not say so. Instead he emphasizes the disappointing nature of the experience.<sup>19</sup> The fleeting illusion of success is clearly not among those kinetic pleasures that he expects to revisit in the future and to enjoy reliving. On the other hand – and this will be my closing thought – it is hard to doubt that the authentic waking experiences of constructing the *De Rerum Natura* line by line were kinetic pleasures that Lucretius constantly relived and cherished, perhaps even placing them on a par with his master's own epic voyage of discovery.

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**18** *et quo quisque fere studio devinctus adhaeret/ aut quibus in rebus multum sumus ante morati/ atque in ea ratione fuit contenta magis mens,/ in somnis eadem plerumque videmur obire:/ cauidici causas agere et componere leges,/ induperatores pugnare ac proelia obire,/ nautae contractum cum ventis degere bellum,/ nos agere hoc autem et naturam quaerere rerum/ semper et inventam patriis exponere chartis,/ cetera sic studia atque artes plerumque videntur/ in somnis animos hominum frustrata tenere.*

**19** In 4.972 *frustrata*, which I have translated "deceptive", might also be rendered "disappointing".

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Diego Zucca

# Lucretius and the Epicurean View That “All Perceptions are True”

**Abstract:** The well-known and controversial thesis that “all perceptions are true” is endorsed by all Epicureans. At least three general interpretations of it have been provided by commentators and interpreters, based on respective meanings assigned to the predicate “true” (‘propositional’, ‘existential’, ‘factive’ meaning) as well as on the alleged objects/contents perception is thought to be of (*eidola*/proximal *stimula* or environmental objects/distal *stimula*?). Starting from this puzzle, this paper will address the more general issues involved in the Epicurean theory of visual perception (theory of *eidola/simulacra*) and interpret the epistemological meaning of the ‘controversial thesis’ in the light of Lucretius’ treatment of vision, illusion and dreaming in DRN Book 4. It will turn out that Lucretius has a very sophisticated view on perceptual epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Lucretius, epistemology, perception, Epicureanism, Ancient Philosophy of Mind

## 1 *Theaetetus*’ Protagoras and the Epicureans on all perceptions being true

The well-known Epicurean thesis that “all perceptions are true” (APT)<sup>2</sup> first appears in Plato’s *Theaetetus* as originally held by Protagoras.<sup>3</sup> Here, however, this view is couched in relativist and subjectivist terms: all that appears to me is *true-to-me-now*, and all that appears to you is *true-to-you-now*. Each subject’s appearance is infallible, but it is such precisely because it cannot be objectively (neither

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Francesco Verde for his precious critical advice on a first draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> There is no error in sense-perception (Sext. Emp., *M* 8.9), as all the senses give a true report (Cic., *DND* 1.25, 70) and never lie (Cic., *Luc.* 28.82; see also 25, 79: “*veraces sanos esse sensus dicis...*”, and *Fin.* I 19, 54; Lucr. DRN 4.379, 499).

<sup>3</sup> *Theaet.* 152c. See Vogt 2016 about the relation between APT in Plato’s *Theaetetus* and in the Epicurean tradition.

intersubjectively nor diachronically for the same subject)<sup>4</sup> true. Protagoras' omnialethism is in fact a form of skepticism about knowledge of the external world, as his *homo-mensura* doctrine undermines any claim of an observer-independent truth. The Epicurean APT, despite its apparent similarity to Protagoras' thesis, has an opposite meaning as it is aimed at grounding an objectivist epistemology on the infallibility of perception. It is thus a kind of de-subjectivized and de-relativized version of the first. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that the Epicurean APT, although literally appearing to be the same as Protagoras' APT, is often put forward by Epicureans as a ground for an anti-skeptical move, and is the case for Lucretius<sup>5</sup> in addition to Epicurus himself.<sup>6</sup> What is the genuine meaning of APT in the Epicurean model, and to what extent could Lucretius' account of APT in DRN help us better grasp this meaning?<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Epicurean Epistemology

First, we should review the essential core of Epicurus' epistemology or 'canon'.<sup>8</sup> Perceptions and feelings make original content available for our cognition, and reiterated sensory inputs are the origins of 'preconceptions' (*prolepseis*), which are equally as evident.<sup>9</sup> Leaving feelings aside, as they are more relevant in ethical considerations, perception and preconceptions are *criteria*, or standards leading to truth when applied to something evident. Knowledge is a transition from

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<sup>4</sup> Plato associates APT with the idea that knowledge is perception and with the idea that everything is in flux, so there are neither persistent objects nor any persistent subject to whom perceptual information could be presented at different times.

<sup>5</sup> DRN 4.469–521, see *infra*, Part 5 of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> RS 23: "if you fight against all of your perceptions you will not have a standard against which to refer even those judgements which you pronounce false" (tr. Hicks).

<sup>7</sup> Particularly if Sedley 1988 is right in seeing Lucretius as an 'Epicurean fundamentalist' who is almost pedantically faithful to Epicurus' original doctrines and arguments (for a different view see Clay 1983, Montareso 2012, Schmidt 2016), clarifying Lucretius' account of perception can shed light on the original model. In any case, there is no need to take a position about this *querelle* to value DNR as an interesting source – in fact the best-preserved source – that can be retrospectively (though cautiously) used.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware that the Epicurus' scholars will find this description dramatically rough and oversimplified: my aim is only that of introducing the basic commitments of Epicurus' epistemology, so we can value the contribution of Lucretius. See Asmis 1984 for an accurate study, and Striker 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Preconceptions originate from memory of what is often perceived (Diog. Laert., 10.33). On *prolepsis* see Long 1971, Manuwald 1972, Tsouna 2016, Verde 2016.

the Visible to a) the Invisible<sup>10</sup> and b) ‘what is waiting’ (= a Visible that will come to be),<sup>11</sup> through the application of criteria. A belief can have different logical relations to a perception: it can be made true when ‘witnessed’ by a perception, or it can be made false if ‘counterwitnessed’. Perceptions can falsify or confirm beliefs, and not only empirical beliefs, but also those that posit what we would call ‘theoretical entities’ (the Invisible that is hypothesized to account for the Visible).<sup>12</sup> In this model, perceptions test inferential knowledge, but also preliminarily ‘feed’ our ‘preconceptions’ or notions from which those concepts are formed, which build the propositions to be confirmed or falsified. Thus, perceptions can work as i) original *content-givers* (also by ‘feeding’ preconceptions), ii) *explananda* (the Visible as a Given to be accounted for), iii) *testbenches* for theories concerning the Invisible (a hypothesis is confirmed insofar as it accounts for the Visible and the Visible can be derived from the hypothesized theoretical entities).<sup>13</sup> In particular, the theory of perception is a virtuously circular way of justifying its own origins, as the position of atomic *eidola* that continuously emanate from solid objects (which they are similar to and preserve specific properties of)<sup>14</sup> like films and impact our senses, simply *accounts* for the Visible (the manifest world and the way we experience it) and shows how and why the content of our perceptions (and mediately of our concepts) is objective and reliable. The theory of *eidola* fits with atomistic ontology and is the basis of the empiricist epistemology through which this very theory has initially been introduced. Atomism is in fact an explanation of the Visible in terms of the Invisible, so it is assumed that

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<sup>10</sup> *Ep. Hrdt.* § 38.

<sup>11</sup> A natural explanation or account will exhibit predictive power: if atoms, void etc. are essentially invisible, “what is to be expected” is invisible *de facto* but – if the theory is true – will become manifest in the future.

<sup>12</sup> In case of beliefs concerning the Invisible (*adelon*) – or the not-evident – they are true if not counterwitnessed by perception, and false if counterwitnessed. One may object that two beliefs of this kind could be both ‘not counterwitnessed’ but incompatible: but I leave aside this issue here.

<sup>13</sup> To a certain extent, this model recalls the Aristotelian one: we start from *phainomena* (the ‘first for us’), we posit a hypothetical ‘deep structure’ X (a nature or an essence) of the considered *phainomena*, if we can derive or infer the *phainomena* from the hypothesized X, X is established as the ‘first *per se*’ (see *Phys.* 1.1). Within both models, the original wonder associated to *phainomena* is eliminated as soon as they are explained away. On the epistemological value of wonder in Aristotle and Epicurus, see Milanese 2020.

<sup>14</sup> On *eidola* in Epicurus’ *On Nature* Book II, see Leone 2012 and 2015; *eidola* preserve *morphe* and *schema* of their solid sources: as Corti 2015 shows, ‘*schema*’ denotes the inner structure of the solid body and ‘*morphe*’ denotes the external form. See also *Ep. Hrdt.* §§ 46, 48, 49 (on which, see Verde 2010, *ad loc.*). According to Sext. Emp. (*M* 7.207) colour is also preserved.

the Visible is not an area of deceit. That “all perceptions are true” – whatever “true” may mean here – is a requirement for our concepts to be non-‘spurious’ or contentless, for our theories to explain something real and to be controlled by reliable ‘confirmers’ or falsifiers. We may take APT as pragmatically assumed at a first step<sup>15</sup> and theoretically confirmed (circularly, though not in a vicious way)<sup>16</sup> by the theory of *eidola*, which is an explanation of how it is that all perceptions are ‘true’ and therefore *ab origine* epistemologically reliable. Given this framework, how are we to read APT? Particularly, what does the predicate ‘true’ mean in APT?

### 3 APT and its Readings

Before considering the predicate “true” in APT, we should note that “perceptions” in APT have a broader extension than we may at first think. The term does not only refer to illusions, which we also take to be inaccurate perceptions, as hallucinations, dreams and similar perception-like experiences are also credited with truth by APT: indeed it is part of the very theory underlying APT that such appearances (*phantasiai*) of a sensory kind (with a sensory phenomenology) in fact *are* perceptions, and it is only insofar as they are such that they are true. Thus, a “dream” is true, what we term optical illusions (like a stick looking bent when partially underwater) are true, and conflicting appearances at different times (a tower looking round from a distance and square when nearer)<sup>17</sup> are *both* true, as are hallucinations like the Centaur or the Furies that appear to Orestes.<sup>18</sup> Now, the puzzle is that either we take APT as a thesis *à la* Protagoras so we understand why all ‘perceptions’ are true but do not understand how on earth they

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<sup>15</sup> This is Asmis’ suggestion (Asmis 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Gavran Miloš 2015, 168 writes that “appearances are not considered as genuine pieces of knowledge since they do not reveal the truth, but just the contrary, they misrepresent the real atomistic nature of things”; I disagree: the gap between appearances and atomic structures is not an opposition, as appearances are neutral about the fine-grained nature of appearing objects, rather than contradicting it. The gap needs to be inferentially filled, but no misrepresentation is involved in perception: on the contrary, the atomistic theory accounts for how and why things appear as they do.

<sup>17</sup> That of conflicting appearances is considered a fundamental issue by Epicureans: see Sext. Emp., *M* 7.208; Plutarch, *Adv. Col.* 25; Sen., *NQ* I 3. 9., Lucr., DRN 4.353–363 and 500–506, Tert., *De anim.* 17.

<sup>18</sup> See DRN 4.728–744 for the Centaur example, and Sext. Emp., *M* 8.63 for the Fury example.

could ground our knowledge of an objective world in addition to our subjectivities, or we take perceptions to be genuine relations to mind-independent worldly objects so we make sense of this empiricist epistemology as a whole, but then we do not make sense of why illusions, conflicting appearances, dreams, and hallucinations should be equally true!

Disregarding the other more detailed differences between scholars' views, we can sketchy distinguish three main ways of reading APT, depending on the way the predicate “true” is interpreted, and I will propose adding a fourth option, which seems to me consistent with the primary and secondary sources, and which may let us better grasp the evidential role of perception in Epicurean epistemology.

### 3.1 Propositional Reading (PR)

According to PR,<sup>19</sup> all perceptions are true, just as a proposition can be true or false, but they always have the same truth-value and they cannot be false, like beliefs can. As perceptions are not propositions, the idea is to distinguish a propositional counterpart for a given perception, which makes its content explicit. Thus, what is the proposition which can express the content of a given perception, so that the perception itself can become truth-evaluable?

According to one reading of PR, if I see a round object, the proposition that expresses the content of my perception is something like “this object looks round to me now”.<sup>20</sup> This may be read as a type of subjectivist view of the propositional reading, insofar as the proposition does not report on the environment that is supposedly experienced, but about how the environment looks to the subject of the experience. What is true is *that* a certain perception represents O as F to me, not that “O is F”. This reading accounts for the ‘truth’ of dreams, hallucinations, experiences of madmen, and for the conflicting appearances concerning the same object (for example, seen at a distance and then from nearby). However, in this case, what epistemological importance will APT have? It is part of the very concept of “looking” that something can look as it is not, so a subject can have many true beliefs based on his/her perceptions concerning the ways things look to him/her, according to his/her experience. But if anything can be different from the way it looks to S, then S is not in a position to know anything about the environment if all S can rely on are true propositions expressing how things look to

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<sup>19</sup> See Striker 1977, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Striker 1977.

him/her. Thus, it becomes clear why all experiences (including hallucinations, dreams and so on) are ‘true’, but it becomes unclear why APT should ground any knowledge of the world, so APT would be epistemologically trivialized. I can know my experiences, but not whether they are accurate *vis-à-vis* the objective world: in the same way I know which beliefs I have but this does not at all guarantee that such beliefs are all true. In addition, APT is often stated as a claim *against* skepticism, and this reading would perfectly align with skepticism about the external world (all I perceptually know are my experiences: how things look to me now).<sup>21</sup>

A stronger and more promising propositional reading would take APT to mean that all perceptions are true just as beliefs are, i.e., they represent obtaining states of affairs (made out of objects and their properties/relations) in the world:<sup>22</sup> this would make APT epistemologically robust, but then it would again be problematic to explain why Epicureans also call “true” hallucinations, illusions and dreams. In any case, perception, says Diogenes Laertius, is considered “a-rational” (*alogos*) by Epicureans,<sup>23</sup> and thus is conflicting with the idea that “true” in APT is propositional: a proposition is truth-evaluable only insofar as it is a *logos*.

### 3.2 Existential Reading (ER)

An existential reading of APT suggests that “true” means “real” and “existent”: all perceptions are real/existent. But what is credited with existence according to APT? From one perspective of ER, APT would suggest that any perception is a real

<sup>21</sup> In fact, this is rather the Cyrenaic view, as well as the skeptical Pyrrhonist view.

<sup>22</sup> See Striker 1990, 90ff., Everson 1990, 168. Striker renders APT as follows: “all propositions expressing no more nor less than the content of a given sense impression, are true” (142).

<sup>23</sup> Diog. Laert., 10.31 “All sensation, he says, is a-rational (*alogos*) and does not accommodate memory. For neither is moved by itself, nor when moved by something else is it able to add or subtract anything” (tr. LS). Gavran Miloš 2015 effectively argues that Epicurean perceptions are credited with non-conceptual content. Bown 2015 proposes to distinguish perceptual truth from doxastic truth (propositional) as involving a “predicative complex” made out of an object and a property (ex: tower, round): a perception is true *if* the object has the property, but unfortunately this ingenious maneuver is not witnessed by any source and thus faces the same problem as the propositional reading: if perception is “*alogos*”, its content cannot have such a semantically structured nature; moreover, as perception does not involve memory, it cannot include any cognitively ‘thick’ kind of “seeing-as”, such as seeing a tower as round would be.

affection, an existent event in the act of sensing.<sup>24</sup> Again, this conception of APT accounts for illusions, hallucinations and dreams but not for the epistemological role APT is credited with by the Epicureans. Every perception, as an act of sensing, is existent, but this may well be compatible with our perceptual experience being radically deceptive and unable to ground any knowledge of the external world. We cannot be asked to trust our perceptions simply because they exist, just as we cannot be asked to trust our beliefs simply because they exist. Moreover, “true” is usually contrasted with “false”, not with “inexistent”.<sup>25</sup> The notion that every perception exists is so trivial that it cannot express the controversial, provocative thesis the Epicureans themselves and also their critics take APT to be.<sup>26</sup>

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**24** Long 1971, Rist 1972, De Witt 1943, 1954; See also O’Keefe 2010. Sextus also attributes such an equivalence between “true”, “real” and “existent” (as referred to *aistheta*) to Epicureans in *M* 8.9; but he then explains that for them “‘true’ is what is in the way it is said to be, ‘false’ is what is not in the way it is said to be” and “since perception is capable of grasping what it is presented with, without adding or subtracting anything as it is a-rational, it is absolutely truthful and it grasps what it is in the way this (object) is in its nature. While all sensibles (*aistheta*) are true, all things-that-are-believed (*doxasta*) are different: some are true, some are false” (see also *M* 7.210). The explanation makes clear that what we perceive is not “true” and “existent” because our perceptions exist but because they somehow represent their object the way it is, without adding or subtracting anything to the information received. Thus, perceptions are *accurate*, and their content is always instantiated: this is more than just existing, and is also more than just having an object, as it is accurately representing the object. Diog. Laert., 10.32 attributes to Epicureans the idea that “seeing and hearing are as real as feeling pain”: the comparison with pleasure and pain *prima facie* fits very well with the existential reading, but we need to consider that pains and pleasures carry information about the environment and are not regarded as simply internal phenomenal states.

**25** Everson 1990, 167; Striker 1996, 81. Cicero, Plutarch and Lucretius never speak of true as opposed to nonexistent.

**26** Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1121B–D) says that Epicureans are like Cyrenaics who think that we only perceive our own internal affections, but this source does not at all support the existential reading, as Plutarch also adds that Epicureans do not want to admit this. The subjectivist (therefore skeptic) consequences of their theory is, according to Plutarch’s criticism, an unavoidable but undesired consequence, therefore he is aware that Epicureans’ intention is not that of limiting APT to the sphere of perceptions meant as just ‘real affections’. In any case, we cannot rule out that Plutarch misunderstood the genuine epistemological meaning of APT.

### 3.3 Factivity Reading (FR)

A more fruitful and plausible view is that APT means that all perceptions are *brought about* by something existent, i.e., by *eidola*.<sup>27</sup> They are “real” in the sense that they always have a real object in the *eidola*, which are objective,<sup>28</sup> worldly items we are presented with, even in case of dreaming, hallucinating, and the like.<sup>29</sup> This option does justice to the objective implication of perception, and thus to its epistemological significance: we are always confronted with real objects when perceiving, as the films our senses come in contact with. This view is articulated by Vogt who terms it “factivity reading”.<sup>30</sup> Factivity is a property of certain propositional attitudes such as knowledge: if S knows P, P is true, and indeed you cannot ever know P unless P is true, because you cannot know false propositions (if anything, you can know *that* P is false, so you know the true proposition P<sup>1</sup>: “P is false”). Similarly, APT claims that perceptions are *of what is*, so they are true. What is real is not just the perception itself (‘simple’ existential reading) but its object, which is also its genuine cause. The analogy with factivity is that any perception must necessarily have an object as its cause. The direct objects or causes of perception are atomic images. Thus, it is clear why perceptions are true and cannot be false even if their “truth” is not incommensurable with that of belief (this is similar to the truth of justified beliefs, which makes them knowledge).

However, a basic problem remains: how can I rule out the possibility that I am not confronted with a dream or a hallucination now? Even these types of experiences are certainly *of something* (floating and coincidentally combined *eidola* that do not emanate from a solid object near to the perceiver), but how can the subject distinguish the *eidola* that come from solid objects from those that only remotely originate from environmental objects, after undergoing modifications and ‘fusions’? Infallibility and objectivity are involved here, but the object is the proximal *eidolon*, not its distal source. In any case, if *all there is* to the evidential role of a perception is the same as that of a hallucination or a dream – the

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<sup>27</sup> Asmis, 2009, 94–95. FR seems to fit well with Sextus (*M* 8.63) and Diogenes (Diog. Laert., 8.32): both emphasize that what moves the sense are existent *eidola*, therefore all sensations are true.

<sup>28</sup> This fits well with Sextus’ formulation as “all *aistheta* are true” (rather than “all *aistheseis*”) (the same is to be found in Demetrius Lacon, PHerc. 1012: see Verde 2018, 89–90: like Sextus, Demetrius makes the equivalence true = existent).

<sup>29</sup> By externalizing any perceptual content, Epicureans want to rule out *any* informational modification of the percept *inside* the mind: this accounts for their somehow counterintuitive objectivist account of dreams and hallucinations.

<sup>30</sup> The Factivity Reading is shared by Vogt 2015 and Gavran Miloš 2015.

presence of a proximal object, i.e., *eidola* – the empiricist epistemology is in trouble and the skeptical challenge cannot be avoided. The ‘distal’ reality remains perceptually unreachable, which is not a helpful consequence if we regard *prolepseis* and beliefs, and thus all human cognitive effort, as ultimately based on perception.

### 3.4 Truth-Conduciveness Reading (TCR)

I now propose a fourth reading of APT along the following lines: perceptions are *truth-conducive* insofar as they are *bona fide* ways to truth. “True” in APT does not refer to the mere existence of perceptual states, or to the truth-value of propositions expressing how things look to a subject, nor does it simply mean “having a real object”, as in the factivity reading. The ‘truth’ of a criterion – unlike the truth of a belief obtained through the application of the criterion itself – is its capacity to make us come to believe true propositions, and thus its reliable *truth-conduciveness*.<sup>31</sup> Criteria are truth-conducive *par excellence*, and perception is a criterion (the most basic one).<sup>32</sup>

Perception leads to objective truth concerning *steremnia*, or the distal objects: it does so *in virtue of* the subject being in real contact with the *eidola* emanating from solid objects and exhibiting a structural similarity to them (*sympatheia*).<sup>33</sup> Thus, the factivity of perception does hold, but it is that in virtue of which perceptions are truth-conducive, insofar as the *eidola* carry genuine information about their sources, but knowledge and truth are *about* the sources rather than about the *eidola*. Each subject has its own *eidola* (proximal stimuli/objects) to which he/she is in proximal contact, but distal sources are shared by all subjects who perceive them. Perceptions are “true” – i.e., truth-conducive – because the

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<sup>31</sup> The advocates of the Existential Reading argue that the Greek use of “*alethes*” to mean “real”, “existent” is not at all extravagant (besides being explicitly attributed to Epicureans by Sextus, Diogenes and Demetrius Lacon), but this also holds for “truth-conducive”: for example, in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 5.29 – usually called *lexicon* as it is a philosophical dictionary which also draws on common usages – one meaning of “false” is: something real, but from which false appearances derive (1024b21–26), and another is: something (or someone) that produce false notions in people” (1025a1–6); in the same vein, it is plausible that “true” could also mean: something that gives rise to/produce/conduces or leads to true appearances or representations: for example, to true beliefs.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, perception is *alogos* and does not deliver propositionally structured information: it enables us to form true beliefs only insofar as we are also endowed with conceptual, propositional and inferential abilities (*prolepsis*, *dianoia*, *logismos*).

<sup>33</sup> See Diog. Laert., 10.50; *Ep. Hrdt.* §§ 46–48, § 50.

*propositions* we come to believe through them are reliably true, so they are pieces of knowledge. Our knowledge is *of reality*, not simply of *eidola* (a small piece of reality) or, worse, of those *eidola* we happen to come in contact with:<sup>34</sup> if perception is a grounding criterion and thus secures knowledge, it cannot only concern nearby *eidola*, it must be *about* solid distal objects. What about the alleged truth of dreams, hallucinations, conflicting appearances then? How can we make sense of these cases within TCR?

## 4 The Proper Object of Perception: Distal, Proximal and Disjunctive views

The readings of APT depend on what we take the object of perception to be: is it the *eidola* impinging on our sensory organs or the solid objects the *eidola* come from? The proximal/distal distinction can be applied to the various readings of APT. APT could involve the truth of propositions about perceptual states,<sup>35</sup> or about proximal stimuli (*eidola*) or about things themselves;<sup>36</sup> it could involve factivity as always having a proximal object (*eidola*)<sup>37</sup> or a distal object;<sup>38</sup> or it could more generally refer to the existence of a proximal object.<sup>39</sup> As discussed, the proximal view appears to be promising in accounting for the truth of conflicting appearances (these concern different *eidola* that are as they appear, so there is no genuine conflict), hallucinations and dreams (these concern real though non-solid objects, the floating *eidola* that ‘arrive’ to us), illusions (the tower’s *eidolon* is round when we are at a distance from the solid tower), and *prima facie* the view seems to fit better with some of the relevant sources. However, this too obviously leads to scepticism about knowledge of the external world, in addition to conflicting with other sources: although genuine knowledge would be guaranteed in this view, it would not be knowledge of the right things!

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34 The Proximal Reading is shared by Everson 1980, Gavran Miloš, Vogt, Taylor 1980; Císař 2001, among others.

35 See Striker 1977.

36 See Striker 1990. She holds that the exclusion of distant things from the field of perception is a doctrine added by late Epicureans.

37 See Vogt 2015 and Gavran Miloš 2015.

38 See Asmis 2009. The ‘extreme’ existential reading as “something is happening in me” is indifferent to the proximal/distal difference.

39 Taylor 1980, Tsouna 1998, 118–119, Everson 1990, 176–177.