might in fact be different criteria (in the weak, Philonian sense) for different sorts of truths,[22] so that the demand for *the* general criterion of truth might be misguided. The term 'criterion' thus remained a part of the philosophical vocabulary, but the problems connected with it faded into the background.

22 Thus the empirical doctors gave several criteria for the truth of a medical report (Galen, *Subfiguratio empirica*, pp. 67 ff. Deichgräber), and Sextus discusses the criteria for the truth of conditionals (*M* VII.112, 118–20).

8

Epicurus on the truth of the senses

STEPHEN EVERSON

Let us quit this gullible man who believes that the senses never lie.
Cicero, *Lucullus* 26.82

Epicurus' epistemology is apt to seem brave to the point of being simple-minded. His central, and most notorious, epistemological claim – that all perceptions are true – certainly struck Cicero, whose interest in the Hellenistic schools was both genuine and extensive, as unworthy of serious consideration. It is true that Cicero was hardly a sympathetic critic of Epicureanism,[1] but here at least he would seem to be right. A moment's reflection on the commonplaces of perceptual failure and disagreement should be sufficient to convince anyone that our perceptions cannot be universally true.

Epicurus, however, was apparently firm on the point: 'he feared that if one perception were false, then none would be true; he therefore said that all the senses give a true report' (Cicero, *de Natura Deorum* 1.25, 70); 'What is Epicurus' principle? If any sense-perception is false, it is not possible to perceive anything' (Cicero, *Lucullus* (*Luc.*) 32.101). If Cicero is to be believed, then it seems that for some reason Epicurus thought that unless *all* perceptions are true then none will be. This is a strange and strong claim, and one far removed from our ordinary beliefs about perception. For, ordinarily, we are quite happy to accept that our senses do sometimes deceive us without thinking that this should make us lose confidence in their ability to report the world at all. Most perceptions are true, but some are false: this is not a fact which, pre-reflectively at least, unduly worries us.

One person who tries to turn the possibility of false perception into a problem is the sceptic. Once it is acknowledged that our senses can on occasion report the world untruthfully, he will press us on how we can be

1 Although Cicero was, as John Glucker describes him, 'one of the most thorough critics of Epicurean philosophy in the whole of extant literature' (Glucker [360], 69), it is clear enough that he did not think Epicurus' claims about the senses serious enough to warrant thorough criticism.

sure either that they ever report it correctly or, even if they do, that we can tell the difference between true perceptions and false. Once this question has been raised then it would seem that we have to make some advance on our pre-reflective thinking if it is to be answered. It will no longer be sufficient simply to maintain that generally the world is as it appears to be and that we can usually tell when it is not.

One way of dealing with the sceptic, of course, would be to deny his initial premise – to claim that, contrary to common belief, the senses do not err; that all perceptions are in fact true. By setting Epicurus' claim beside the sceptic's challenge to common sense, it no longer appears quite so gratuitous. Even if it is not a view which will ultimately prove credible, nevertheless one can perhaps understand why Epicurus should have offered it at all.

Scepticism has tended to dominate our epistemological thinking – and for good reason. The epistemologist's concern is to show how we can gain knowledge of the world; the sceptic's claim is that such knowledge cannot be achieved. Given the nature of that challenge, it would seem a pretty pusillanimous epistemologist who would not take his first concern to be to show that that challenge is defeasible. It might seem that until the sceptical threat has been removed, it is far from obvious that the epistemologist can even have a subject-matter to study.

Not only can scepticism dominate our own epistemological projects, however; its shadow falls readily over our understanding of earlier epistemological enquiries. Whatever the merits of allowing the sceptic to set our current epistemological priorities, his influence on the interpretation of previous philosophers can lead to quite fundamental misunderstandings of their aims and methods – and so, also, of their achievements. This, I think, is true in the case of Epicurus. Although he need not be silent when the sceptic issues his challenge, what he does have to say about our knowledge of the world, and the truth of perception, is not determined by the expectation of that challenge. If we try to read into Epicurus' claims an attempt to rebut at least a certain kind of sceptical strategy then we shall misunderstand what his epistemology is about – or so I shall argue.

Conflicting appearances

I shall begin, however, with the sceptic. In the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus, we find a systematic attempt to turn perceptual conflict into a sceptical weapon. In this set of arguments, the sceptic presents various circumstances which result in differences in the way the world appears: things will appear differently to humans and to animals, for instance, or when sense organs are differently structured, or depending upon how frequently or rarely something is seen.[2] By applying the arguments in the Modes, the sceptic expects to be able to produce or postulate an appearance to conflict with any given appearance.

In the First Mode, for example, the sceptic argues that because animal species differ in the way in which they are reproduced, in the nature of their sense-organs and in their appetitive behaviour, so the world accordingly appears differently to them.[3] Thus, animals with differently coloured eyes are likely to have different colour sensations (*PH* 1.44), animals with differently constructed auditory channels will differ in their perception of sound (1.50) and so on. Again, in the Fourth Mode, the sceptic points to how the circumstances of the perceiver will affect how he perceives. 'The same honey appears sweet to me, but bitter to people with jaundice' (1.101); 'the same air seems cold to old men but mild to the young' (1.105). For any appearance that something has a certain property, it will be possible to find another situation in which it appears to have a different and incompatible property.

Now, the existence of such perceptual conflict is in itself innocuous. We all know that appearances can conflict and we are not all sceptics as a result. What it is important for the sceptic to demonstrate if he is to achieve a sceptical conclusion is that the conflict is irresolvable – that there is no non-arbitrary way of deciding which of the conflicting perceptions reports the world correctly. So, for instance, Sextus concludes in the First Mode that

> If the same objects appear dissimilar depending on the variations among animals, then we shall be able to say what the existing object is like as observed by us, but as to what it is like in its nature we shall suspend judgement. For we shall not be able ourselves to decide between our own appearances and those of the other animals, being ourselves a part of the dispute. (1.59)

All that can be said is that things appear differently to different animals – there is no way, the sceptic claims, to show which of the conflicting appearances is to be preferred to the other and so no evidence for deciding how the world really is.

2 The 'appearances' which the sceptic sets against each other are wider than we might normally take to be strictly perceptual, at least within the empiricist tradition: for instance, he contrasts cultures in which an activity appears good with others in which it appears bad. For the present purposes, however, it will be sufficient to restrict our attention to more straightforwardly perceptual appearances. For a discussion of the notion of 'appearing' in the Modes, see Annas and Barnes [361], 23–4.

3 I have taken the numbering from the account of the Modes given by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*) 1.35–163. The ordering in other sources is slightly different. See Annas and Barnes [361], 29–30.

What, in effect, the sceptic is doing is attempting to block any move from the fact that something appears to have a certain property to the claim that it actually has that property. For, if we infer that *X* is *F* from the fact that *X* appears *F*, we shall also have to infer that *X* is *F** from the fact that *X* appears *F**. But where '*F*' and '*F**' designate incompatible properties, this will lead to a contradiction. If we cannot use both appearances to infer the nature of what appears, however, and if we cannot choose between the appearances, then we can use neither appearance as a basis for inferring what the object appearing is really like. Once we realise this, the sceptic claims, we will suspend judgement about the nature of the object.[4]

Two moves suggest themselves for escaping the sceptic's conclusion. Either we could deny his claim that there is perceptual conflict or we could find some way of showing that we can non-arbitrarily discriminate between perceptions as to their evidential value. What would not seem sensible would be to accept that we cannot discriminate between perceptions, not deny that perceptual conflict occurs and yet maintain that all perceptions are true. This is what Epicurus has been taken to do. The Ten Modes, of course, were not formulated as such until around two centuries after Epicurus' death, and we cannot expect him to respond to the detailed sceptical challenge which they present. Nevertheless, interest in perceptual conflict and its implications stretches back well before Plato, and Epicurus' claim does not need to be contrasted with the Modes themselves to appear somewhat naive. It does not require any very sophisticated reflection about perceptual conflict to see that if one believes that every perception is true this will lead, in cases of conflicting perceptions, to holding contradictory beliefs about the world.

It is possible, of course, to acknowledge that perceptual conflict occurs and still to maintain that perception is always true. This indeed is the position of Protagoras as portrayed in Plato's *Theaetetus* – but Protagoras at least has the sense there to realise that this commits him to relativism:

> SOCRATES It sometimes happens, doesn't it, that when the same wind is blowing one of us feels cold and the other not? Or that one feels slightly cold and the other very?
>
> THEAETETUS Certainly.
>
> SOCRATES Now on those occasions, shall we say that the wind itself, taken by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we accept it from Protagoras that it's cold for the one who feels cold, and not for the one who doesn't? (*Theaetetus* 152b, tr. McDowell)

4 This account of the sceptic's strategy in the Modes is indebted to that given in Annas and Barnes [361], 22–5.

Both men's perceptions are true. The wind *is* both warm and cold – but only relatively to the individual observers. It has no intrinsic temperature: there is no true non-relativised statement about what temperature the wind is. The perceptions of the wind do not conflict, since the 'the wind is cold to *x*' and 'the wind is warm to *y*' are not contradictory.[5] Epicurus, however, was no relativist. When he claims that a perception is true, he does not mean by this that it reports how the world is *for the individual observer* but, precisely, how the world really is. It looks as if Epicurus would be forced to maintain, at least on a straightforward reading of his claim, that if the wind feels warm to one man and cold to another, then the wind is simultaneously both warm and cold, *simpliciter*. If he is committed to this, it would seem that he has problems.

Our best hope of saving Epicurus will be to look for a less straightforward understanding of his claim.

Perceptual truth

The first question which must be raised is what it is, on Epicurus' account, for a perception to be true.[6] This, however, raises the problem of whether Epicurus is entitled to talk of perceptual *truth* at all. For, according to some commentators, perceptions, unlike, say, propositions or sentences, are not the sort of thing to be truth-bearers.[7] Truth is a property of linguistic items – and perceptions, whatever else they are, are not that. If this objection is correct, then it would seem that we have to convict Epicurus of a basic philosophical error from the start.

In order to avoid this, some scholars have suggested that we should not understand Epicurus' claim to be that all perceptions are *true* but rather that they are *real*. The Greek word here, *alēthēs*, can mean 'true' but can also mean 'real' or 'existent'. If we take it in this second sense, then we can both avoid convicting Epicurus of wrongly ascribing truth to perceptions and save him from the commitment to contradictory beliefs in cases of perceptual conflict.

Such a move is undeniably attractive and it is not unsupported by our evidence for Epicurus' theory. It is clear, for instance, that he took feelings

5 What in effect Protagoras' position does is to make all properties secondary qualities. For a discussion of Protagoras' relativism, and Plato's response to it in the *Theaetetus*, see Myles Burnyeat's chapter in this volume and Waterlow [170].

6 Although I have talked merely of perceptions proper, the class of things which Epicurus takes to be true is wider than this, including, strikingly, dreams and hallucinations. This should alert us to the fact that a straightforward reading of Epicurus' claim is unlikely to be correct.

7 So, for example, Rist [309], 19f., Long [319], 106, Striker [311], 133–5.

(*pathē*) as well as perceptions to be *alētheis*. Diogenes Laertius (D.L.) reports that according to Epicurus there were three criteria of truth: perceptions, *prolēpseis* and feelings (*pathē*) and, on Sextus' account of the matter, Epicurus explicitly supported his claim about the truth of perceptions by drawing an analogy with the 'primary feelings', pleasure and pain (*adversus Mathematicos* (*M*) VII.203).[8] If perception is supposed to be *alēthēs* in the same way as pleasure and pain are, it would seem much more plausible to take *alēthēs* in this context to mean 'real' rather than 'true'. Pain and pleasure are perfectly real, but it would be odd to treat them as being true or false.

The case is persuasively put, for instance, by A. A. Long:

> Feelings and sensations are indubitable facts of experience in the sense that pain, seeing, hearing, etc., entail awareness of something. Epicurus regarded that of which we are aware in such experiences as *alēthēs*. If we consider truth to be only a function of propositions and translate *alēthēs* by 'true', Epicurus' usage will seem illegitimate. A headache is not something true or false. In Greek, however, *alēthēs* is regularly used to designate what is real or actual as well as the truth of statements. Epicurus' application of *alēthēs* to feelings and sensations is perfectly intelligible if we take him to be saying that these necessarily give us a perch on certain facts, namely: that of which they are the awareness.[9]

If the implication of translating Epicurus' claim as 'all perceptions are true' is that he is committed to making sense of such things as headaches being true, then it would seem that we are committing him to absurdity indeed.

The trouble with Long's analysis, however, is that it seems either to land Epicurus with a merely trivial claim – all perceptions and feelings are real, hardly a substantive thesis in the philosophy of mind – or with the postulation of mental objects of perception and feeling. When I have a headache, for instance, there really is a headache of which I am aware. Such a move is philosophically undesirable, and there is reason to believe that it is not Epicurus' own. Here it is instructive to follow Sextus' account of the analogy between perception and feeling:

> Epicurus claims that there are two corresponding things, perception and belief, and of these perception, which he calls self-evident, is always true. For just as the primary feelings, that is pleasure and pain, come about from certain agents and in accordance with those agents – pleasure from pleasant things and pain from painful things and it is impossible for what is productive of pleasure not to be pleasant or what is productive of pain not to be painful but that which produces pleasure must necessarily be naturally pleasant and that which produces pain naturally painful – so also with perceptions, which are feelings of ours, that which produces each of them is always perceived entirely and, as perceived, cannot bring about the perception unless it is in truth such as it appears. (*M* VII.203)

The sense in which the 'primary feelings' are *alēthē* can now be seen to be quite straightforward: the feelings of pleasure and pain report objects in the world as having certain properties – those, precisely, of being pleasant and painful – and the feelings are *alēthē* if the object actually does have the property which the feelings report it as having. It so happens – and I shall consider slightly later Epicurus' reasons for claiming this – that the primary feelings are always and necessarily *alēthē*: if I feel that something is painful, then necessarily it is painful.

What is clear is that Epicurus does not introduce mental objects of awareness: the facts on which feelings and sensations 'give us a perch' are facts about the world and not about our mental lives. The Sextus passage confirms that we must, after all, understand *alēthēs* as 'true' rather than 'real' here – for the feelings are said to be *alēthē* just in case what brings them about is such as it appears.

This confirmation is also supported by other texts. In *M* VII.210, for instance, Epicurus is reported by Sextus as contrasting perceptions, which are all *alētheis*, with beliefs (*doxai*), some of which are *alētheis* and some of which are false (*pseudeis*). The sense of *alēthēs* here cannot be that of 'real' rather than 'true', or else the contrast between perceptions and beliefs will be that whereas all perceptions are real (or involve awareness of something real), some beliefs are real whilst others are not (or do not involve awareness of something real). This would be absurd. Moreover, it is only by taking Epicurus' claim to be precisely that all perceptions are true that it will fit in with what he is reported as saying about the veridicality of the senses. Cicero, as we have seen, says that Epicurus claimed that the senses never lie, and Sextus too reports him as saying that perception 'always tells the truth and grasps the existing object as it is in nature' (*M* VII.9). It is clear from these passages that Epicurus did maintain the striking thesis that all perceptions are true and that we should resist the temptation to attribute to him the less interesting claim that they are merely real.[10]

8 For a discussion of Epicurus' notion of a criterion, see Striker's chapter in this book. It will be seen that I construe Epicurus' strategy rather differently from Professor Striker.

9 Long [319], 116.

10 I do not want to deny that there are texts in which *alēthēs* is best understood to signify reality rather than truth or that Epicurus seems to have treated these two senses as very closely related. The point is merely that if we always understand *alēthēs* to designate reality rather than truth, Epicurus' claim loses its interest. For a judicious discussion of this issue, see Taylor [312], 111f.

Epicurus' parallel between perception and the primary feelings also helps to make clear what he takes the truth conditions of perceptions to be. The word translated here as 'feeling', *pathos*, means literally an 'affection': *pathē* are the result of being *affected* by something. In this respect, feelings and perceptions are the same – and indeed in the Sextus passage, perceptions are said to be a type of feeling. Pains, pleasures and perceptions are things one has as a result of being affected by things in the world. It is not accidental that there is great emphasis in the Sextus passage upon the agency of what brings about a perception or feeling – for it is the fact that there is a causally necessary relation between perceptions or feelings and external objects which allows Epicurus his talk of both perceptions and feelings as being true.

> For, say the Epicureans, if a perception is said to be true whenever it comes about from a real object and in accordance with that object, and every perception comes about from a real object and in accord with that object, then necessarily all perceptions are true. (*M* VII.205)

The Epicureans here provide two conditions which a perception has to satisfy if it is to be true: (i) that it is caused by some external object, and (ii) that it 'accords' with that object. The relation of accordance in (ii) may not be immediately obvious but can be elucidated by another passage in Sextus:

> Epicurus used to say . . . that every perception is the product of something existent and like the thing which moves [i.e. affects] the sense. (*M* VIII.63 = LS 16F1)[11]

The perception will be true if it is like the object which causes it; that is, if it shares the relevant property with the object. Thus, the perception that something is red will be true if and only if both the perception and the object are red.[12]

Although it is the second condition here which is most important in capturing the notion of truth, the first condition is not idle. Given that a perception will be true if it is similar to an object in the world, it is necessary to identify which object it is to which it needs to be similar – and this identification is supplied by (i). The object will be that object which caused the perception. The two conditions together thus specify what object the perception must be related to and how it should be related to it, if it is to be true.

It should now seem less obvious that Epicurus' talk of perceptual truth is misplaced. In fact it is difficult to see why commentators should have been so resistant to the idea of perceptions being assessed as true or false. Perceptions, like propositions, are concerned with states of affairs in the world and so are quite properly judged by whether the world is such as it is represented or reported as being by the perception.[13] This should be apparent if we accept that the proper way to describe perceptions is by reference to their content propositionally expressed. Just as the statement 'It is raining' will be true if and only if it is raining, so the perception that it is raining will be true iff it is raining. It is not necessary to postulate propositional items over and above the perception itself for the appraisal of perceptions as true or false to be appropriate. This, of course, raises the question of how Epicurus did think that the content of perceptions should be specified. Whatever the answer to this,[14] the important point is that in taking perceptions to be assessable in terms of how accurately they report the world, Epicurus is not guilty of the low-level philosophical confusion of which some have convicted him.

All perceptions are true

To show that Epicurus is entitled, at least in principle, to his talk of perceptual truth is not, of course, to make any more plausible his claim that *all* perceptions are true. To do this, and to understand what it in fact amounts to, it is necessary to try to reveal the arguments which Epicurus put forward to justify it. The claim that all perceptions are true is clearly an epistemological one: it is concerned to secure man's epistemic relation to the world. What we might expect, then, is to find it justified in straightforwardly epistemological terms – by reference, say, to the consequences for the possibility of knowledge if all perceptions were not true, or by denying that

11 Where possible I cite texts in the translations given in Long and Sedley [288] and give their number for the text. I have, however, uniformly preferred the term 'perception' to their 'impression', since the latter has Humean associations which are misleading in this context. I also dislike the subjective overtones of 'feeling' for *pathos*, but have retained this for want of anything better.

12 This should not be taken to introduce some notion of sensational redness which somehow resembles physical redness without being identical to it. The relation is that of straightforward property identity. Epicurus is not offering the dubious Lockian use of resemblance which is supposed to hold between mental items and physical objects.

13 It should be noted that Epicurus is in good company here, both ancient and modern. Aristotle, for instance, talks happily of perceptions being true. More recent support comes from Christopher Peacocke, who claims that the 'representational content [of perceptions] concerns the world external to the experiencer, and as such is assessable as true or false' [410], 9. If one remains firmly wedded to the view that something cannot be properly described as true or false unless it is *intentionally* representational, then one could use something like Searle's notion of a 'satisfaction-condition' instead of truth ([413], ch. 1). Intention apart, however, this amounts to very much the same thing.

14 There is not, unfortunately, space to provide an adequate discussion of this issue here. I shall, however, make some comments about it once it has become clearer what the objects of perception actually are on Epicurus' account.

one can justify, from the point of view of the subject, treating some perceptions as true and others as false. If we can find an argument for the thesis along these lines, we should be able to place Epicurus firmly within the tradition of *a priori* epistemological enquiry.

It is not difficult to attribute to Epicurus an argument which seems to be of precisely this sort. Thus, Cicero reports Epicurus as maintaining that 'if one sense has ever lied once in a man's life, no sense must ever be believed' (*Luc.* 25.79). In the twenty-fourth of his *Principal Doctrines*, Epicurus himself warns against rejecting 'any perception absolutely' since this would 'confound all your other perceptions with empty opinion and consequently reject the criterion in its entirety' (Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* (RS) 24 = LS 17B). Unless one treats all perceptions as being true, one will not be entitled to treat *any* as true and so will have relinquished the possibility of achieving knowledge of the world. The argument seems to work as a *reductio*: if the consequence of denying that all perceptions are true is that knowledge is made impossible then, since knowledge obviously is possible, all perceptions must be (treated as if they are) true.

What is still required, of course, is some reason for accepting the claim that in order to treat any perceptions as true one has to treat them all as true. Here a passage in Diogenes Laertius seems to be of help:

> Nor does there exist that which can refute perceptions: neither can like sense refute like, because of their equal validity; nor can unlike, since they are not discriminatory of the same things; nor can reason, since all reason depends on the senses; nor can one individual perception refute another, since they all command our attention. (D.L. X.32 = LS 16B3–7)

This argument, which I shall call the 'epistemological argument', is that there can never be sufficient evidence to show that any perception is false. Take a perception which is suspected of being false. What evidence could there be for its falsity? A perception of the same sense cannot provide such evidence, since as they come from the same sense, there is as much reason to believe the one as there is the other. Perceptions from another sense cannot provide evidence either, since they will report different features of the world. Nor will one be able to work out rationally that a perception is false since the only evidence available to the reason comes from the senses – and such evidence, as has just been argued, can never be sufficient. Thus, there could never be evidence to demonstrate that any perception is false – and so one could never be justified in treating any perception as being other than true.

It is important to note how strong Epicurus' conclusion is here. He is not merely claiming that all perceptions should be taken to have *equal* evidential value. It would be entirely consistent with this claim that one could use some perceptions to cast doubt on others. If I and everyone else taste some wine and it seems to all except me to be corked, my perception could be given equal evidential value with all the others, but the weight and consistency of the others would still be sufficient to cast doubt on mine. Only if the evidential value of each perception is taken to be absolute and unchallengeable will it be the case that *whatever* the strength of evidence of any conflicting perceptions, the truth of that perception must still be maintained.

It is clear, however, that if this is what the argument is supposed to demonstrate, it is a total failure. The most it can show is that if one contrasts isolated perceptions it is not possible to have any reason for deciding that either or any of them is false. But this, of course, provides no argument at all against those who would want to contrast individual rogue perceptions with the patterns and consistencies of normal experience. What is needed is some further reason to accept the absolute rather than just the equal evidential value of perceptions – and it is precisely this which is lacking. Indeed, the move to claiming that all perceptions must be given absolute epistemic status would seem to require rather than to support the claim that all perceptions are true.

It is useful at this point to distinguish between the claim that all perceptions are true and the rather different – and weaker – claim that all perceptions should merely be *treated* as if they are true. The second claim allows the possibility that some perceptions are false, whereas the first does not. Now, it is the first claim which requires justification – but the epistemological argument simply will not provide any. The most it could hope to show is that one cannot discriminate between perceptions as to their truth and falsity and so can have no reason to treat any as false. (Although, as I have argued, it does not in fact succeed in showing even this.)

If one perception reports that something is the case and another perception reports that it is not, this obviously does not entail that both perceptions are true – and the issue of whether there are grounds for deciding which of the perceptions is true and which false is quite irrelevant to this. Indeed, as it stands, Epicurus' argument would seem to be more suitable for helping the sceptic to demonstrate that perceptual conflicts are irresolvable – and so to induce sceptical doubt – than to affirm the constant veridicality of perception. If the argument is that because we cannot discriminate between perceptions in respect of their truthfulness therefore all perceptions are true, it is obviously, and crudely, fallacious.

It might seem tempting, then, to see the desired conclusion to be not that all perceptions *are* true but rather that all perceptions must be treated as if they are true. This would seem a much more reasonable claim to make. If we

cannot discriminate between true perceptions and false ones – and so there is as much reason to believe that any perception is true as there is to believe that any other is – then either we should treat every perception or no perception as if it were true. It is at this point that Epicurus and the sceptics would part company: whereas the sceptics will choose the second option and not believe anything the senses say, Epicurus will choose the first and believe everything they tell us. However appealing this strategy might seem initially, however, it is hardly coherent. For, given a case of perceptual conflict, it would entail treating two contradictory claims about the world as both being true – and this does not seem possible. So, whichever claim the argument is supposed to support – that all perceptions are true or that all perceptions should be treated as being true – it will not do so.

Thus, if we try to make what Epicurus says about the absolute evidential status of perceptions into an argument which is supposed to demonstrate that all perceptions are true, we cannot but saddle him with a disastrous set of confusions. This ought to make us pause before attributing to him this kind of argument. For, whilst it is clear that Epicurus certainly did not regard his claims about our inability to discredit the truth of any perception as unrelated to the claim that all perceptions are true, there is no indication at all in the passage that he intended the first to *prove* the second.

It is possible, moreover, to find a better argument for the thesis that all perceptions are true. Just before Diogenes reports the epistemological argument, he writes:

> All perception, he says, is irrational and does not accommodate memory. For neither is it changed by itself, nor when changed by something else is it able to add or subtract anything. Nor does there exist anything which can refute perceptions . . . (D.L. x.31 = LS 16B1–3)[15]

What determines the nature of a perception? Not reason, since the sense is irrational. Not memory, since it does not 'accommodate' memory. It is not self-caused but must be produced by an external object and, since it cannot itself add or subtract anything from this process, it is entirely determined by that object.

This provides a much more promising defence of Epicurus' thesis. We have already seen that what it is, on Epicurus' account, for a perception to be true is for it to 'accord' with whatever object gives rise to it. If, however, as Epicurus seems to be saying here, the perception is entirely determined by its cause, then it cannot but accord with it. The truth of the perception will be guaranteed by the processes which bring it about. If this is correct, the emphasis noted in Sextus' report of Epicurus' argument on the causal role of what is perceived is fully justified. There we are told that that 'which produces each [of the perceptions] is always entirely perceived and as perceived, cannot bring about the perception unless it is in truth such as it appears' (*M* VII.203). Given the total passivity of the senses, what the perception is like must be determined by the nature of what brings it about. An object can only bring about a red perception if it is itself red.

Here it is important to see that the parallel claim in Sextus' report concerning the primary feelings – that whatever causes pleasure must necessarily be pleasant and what causes pain necessarily painful – is not, as it might plausibly seem, a definitional or conceptual claim. The point is not that something is, say, pleasant in so far as it causes pleasure, but that its causing pleasure is a necessary effect of its being pleasant. This at least must be the point of the claim that the cause of the pleasure must necessarily be *in its nature* pleasant. The necessity here, as in the case of perception, is causal.[16]

The importance of causation to Epicurus' account of perception is confirmed by what he himself says about it in the *Letter to Herodotus*. In section 49, he argues against the theory that there is a medium between the perceiver and the object of perception by claiming that, if there were a medium, 'external objects would not imprint their own nature [on the perceiver]' (D.L. x.49 = LS 15A7). The external object imprints itself – or its relevant property – on the perceiver, and it does so with total accuracy:

> And whatever perception we get by focusing our thought or senses, whether of shape or of properties, that is the shape of the solid body, produced through the *eidōlon*'s concentrated succession or after-effect.[17] (D.L. x.50 = LS 15A9)

Error can only occur once this process has been completed: 'But falsehood and error are always located in the opinion *which we add*.' At the stage of perception, however, before the perception can be affected by the mind itself, there is no possibility of error – and so the perception must be true.

The claim that the senses never lie is thus not merely a variation of the claim that all perceptions are true, but precisely what supports it. 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 deter-

15 I have preferred 'change' to Long and Sedley's 'move' as a translation of *kinein*, since it captures better, I think, the central notion of generally affecting something.

16 A good discussion of Epicurus' account of pleasure can be found in Gosling and Taylor [23].

17 For the term *eidōlon*, see below, n. 19.

mined by the nature of the external object which gives rise to it by affecting the sense-organ. This gives Epicurus the following position: a perception is true if and only if it accords with – is like – whatever causes it. Every perception is true since the way in which it is brought about guarantees that it will accord with whatever does cause it. Given the causal passivity of the senses, there simply is no place for error.

It should be seen how much more successful this argument is than the epistemological one – and how different in spirit. Instead of a question-begging and fallacious attempt to defeat the sceptic by assuming that scepticism must be false and then arguing, fallaciously, that this commits one to treating all perceptions as if they are true, we now have a cogent argument which does provide Epicurus with justification for his claim that all perceptions are true. The truth of perceptions is simply a consequence of the way they are produced. Moreover, with his claim justified in this way, it is no longer mysterious why Epicurus should be committed to the absolute evidential status of every perception: this too is a consequence of the processes involved in perception. Since every perception is produced in the same way, they will all be true. If the process of perception guarantees the truth of any perception, it guarantees the truth of them all. Having a true perception is a straightforward consequence of perceiving at all. The initially puzzling claim reported by Cicero that 'if any sense-perception is false, it is not possible to perceive anything' (*Luc.* 32.101) can now be placed within Epicurus' general account.

The epistemological argument itself can now also be placed within the structure of the argument as a whole. It is the nature of perception which leads to the claim that all perceptions are true. This claim would seem, however, to face obvious and immediate objections – and it is these which the epistemological argument is intended to counter. Although it may seem that some perceptions cast doubt on others – and hence on the claim that all are true – this is not the case. There is in fact nothing which can be used to show that any perception is false. This makes good sense of the argument: the fact that it can only show that there is no reason to *believe* of any perception that it is false – rather than itself showing that all perceptions are true – is no longer worrying. All that Epicurus needs to show is precisely that perceptual conflict cannot provide any reason for treating any perception as false and thereby threaten the conclusion that all perceptions are true.

The objects of perception

It would seem, however, that the epistemological argument is not up to even this more limited role. It may be that in a case of perceptual conflict we would not have reason for deciding which of the conflicting perceptions was true and which false – but all an opponent would need to argue is that in a case of conflict at least one of the conflicting perceptions must be false, even if we cannot tell which. This would successfully threaten Epicurus' claim – and would not seem to find a response in the epistemological argument. If the opponent were a sceptic, the fact that we could not tell which of the perceptions was true and which false would be all the more useful to him.

Not only will the epistemological argument not support the conclusion that all perceptions are true, however; it would seem to be of little use against the claim that we can often have reason for deciding that particular perceptions are false. If I have a visual perception that a tower is round (seen from a distance) and then another that it is square (seen from close at hand), the second perception would indeed cast doubt on the first. To say that the two must be equally valid merely because they are both visual would seem to beg the question. So, even when the epistemological argument has been relegated to the status of a supporting argument, it apparently remains unsalvable as a good one.

These objections can be met, however, if the epistemological argument is seen as attacking the very possibility of genuine perceptual conflict. I said earlier that to escape the sceptic's attempt to use perceptual conflict to generate doubt, one has either to show that it is possible to discriminate between perceptions as to their truth or falsity or to deny that perceptual conflict occurs. Although the first of these options is the more obvious and intuitive, Epicurus is clearly committed to rejecting it. The second option seems hopeless – surely it is just a fact of experience that our perceptions can and do conflict. Nevertheless, as I shall argue, this is indeed the move which Epicurus makes.

It has been assumed so far that Epicurus' claim that all perceptions are true commits him to accepting the following entailment: if one has a perception that *X* is *F* then *X* is *F*, where '*X*' is the object of perception and '*F*' is some property. Indeed, it is difficult to see what content there could be to the claim that all perceptions are true unless it did imply this entailment. A second assumption has also been made, however, about what sorts of thing can stand as the objects of perception. In the case of the tower, for instance, it was assumed that the contents of the conflicting perceptions were, respectively, 'the tower is round' and 'the tower is square'. Only if these were the contents of the perceptions would there have been any conflict between them – and, of course, it is only if there is perceptual conflict that Epicurus' claim that all perceptions are true will lead to contradiction.

Here a supporting premise from the epistemological argument should make us pause:

> nor can unlike [sense refute] unlike, since they are not discriminatory of the same things.

A perception of one sense cannot be used to refute a perception of a different one, since they do not discriminate the same objects. This might at first glance seem quite innocuous – the claim might be read simply to be that each of the senses discriminates properties which are specific to itself. Only sight perceives colours, hearing sounds, and so on. But if this were all Epicurus intended here, the point would be much too weak to support the argument. Whilst it will be true that an auditory perception will not be able to challenge the visual perception that something is of a certain colour, this will do nothing to block conflicting perceptions of different senses concerning, say, the shape of an oar as perceived by sight and by touch. Unless such conflicts as this are removed, the epistemological argument will be rendered ineffective. If that argument is to be made good, Epicurus' point must be not merely that there are some objects which cannot be perceived by more than one sense but that there are *no* objects which more than one sense can perceive.

What, then, are the objects of perception? Here it is necessary to consider Epicurus' account of how perception works.

> Moreover, there are delineations which are the same shapes as solid bodies[18] and which in their fineness of texture are far different from things evident. For it is not impossible that such emanations should arise in the space around us, or appropriate conditions for the production of their concavity and fineness of texture, or effluences preserving the same sequential arrangement and the same pattern of motion as they had in the solid bodies. The delineations we call *eidōla* . . .[19] Also that the creation of *eidōla* happens as fast as thought. For there is a continuous flow from the surface of bodies – not revealed by diminution in their size, thanks to reciprocal replenishment – which preserves for a long time the positioning and arrangement which the atoms had in the solid body, even if it is also sometimes distorted; and formations of them in the space around us, swift because they do not need to be filled out in depth; and other ways too in which things of this kind are produced . . . And we must indeed suppose that it is on the impingement of something from outside that we see and think of shapes. (*Letter to Herodotus* 46; 48; 49 = LS 15A1; 4; 6)

We are able to perceive solid objects in the world because they are constantly emitting streams of very fast-moving and fine atoms – and these *eidōla*, as Epicurus calls them, affect the sense-organs.[20] Because the *eidōla* are so fine and move so rapidly, they generally preserve the relevant properties of the solid object from which they emanate. However, as Epicurus explicitly acknowledges in this passage, the *eidōla are* sometimes distorted during their passage between the solid object and the perceiver, and when this happens the properties of the *eidōla* will be different from those of the solid object.

The fact that solid objects do not act on the senses directly but only by means of these streams of atoms has important implications both for what can be taken to be the objects of perception and for the claim that all perceptions are true. For a perception was said to be true only if it accords with what causes it. On Epicurus' account of the way solid objects act on the senses, however, it is not these themselves but the *eidōla* they emit which give rise to perceptions. The objects of perception, then, to which the perceptions must accord if they are to be true, are not solid objects but the films of atoms which strike the senses. Moreover, it is only if the objects of perception are indeed the *eidōla* rather than the solid objects themselves that the claim that all perceptions are true could stand a chance of being plausible. Epicurus himself, in the passage cited, acknowledges that the films of atoms *do* get distorted, however infrequently, during their passage from the objects which emit them. Given this, it would be quite extraordinary if he were still to maintain that our perceptions always correctly report what solid objects are like. In cases where the *eidōla* have been distorted, such a perceptual ability would be nothing short of miraculous.

By taking the objects of perception to be the *eidōla* rather than the solid objects, it is possible to see why Epicurus should claim that different senses do not discriminate the same things, since the atoms emitted by solid objects will only be able to affect one sense: each sense is responsive to a different type of atomic emission.[21] More importantly, perhaps, we can now make sense of Epicurus' otherwise very puzzling claim that the perceptions we have in dreams and hallucinations are true:

> At any rate, in the case of Orestes, when he seemed to see the Furies, his sensation, being affected by the *eidōla*, was true, in that the *eidōla* objectively existed; but his mind, in thinking that the Furies were solid bodies, held a false opinion. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* VIII.63 = LS 16F3)

Orestes' perception of the Furies was in fact true because his sense was accurately reporting the nature of the external cause of that perception: Fury-shaped *eidōla* were indeed affecting his senses. If in order to be true, a

18 Long and Sedley translate this: 'there are delineations which represent the shapes of solid bodies'. The notion of representation is not explicitly in the Greek, however, and is not required to make sense of the passage.

19 Long and Sedley translate Epicurus' term *eidōla* as 'Images'. Since the term is a technical one, and 'image' has unwanted mental associations, I have preferred merely to transliterate the Greek.

20 For discussions of how the *eidōla* affect the senses, see Long and Sedley [288], 1, 76f., Avotins [316] and Asmis [310], ch. 6 and 7.

21 See the *Letter to Herodotus* 52–3 (= LS 15A14–18).

perception had to accord with a solid object, however, the notion of dreams and hallucinations being true would, of course, be absurd.

By taking the objects of perception to be the *eidōla* which directly affect the senses rather than the solid objects, both the epistemological argument and the claim that all perceptions are true become more comprehensible. Apparent conflicts between different senses will indeed be merely apparent as the perceptions will be reporting different things. Where there is an apparent conflict between objects of the same sense, there can again be no real conflict, since each perception will be the result of different *eidōla* striking the sense.

That Epicurus took the truth-conditions of perceptions to be the nature of the *eidōla* rather than of solid objects is happily confirmed by Sextus:

> Some people are deceived by the difference among perceptions seeming to reach us from the same sense-object, for example a visible object, such that the object appears to be of a different colour or shape, or altered in some other way. For they have supposed that, when perceptions differ and conflict in this way, one of them must be true and the opposing one false. This is simple-minded, and characteristic of those who are blind to the real nature of things. For it is not the whole solid body that is seen – to take the example of visible things – but the colour of the solid body. And of colour, some is right on the solid body, as in the case of things seen from close up or from a moderate distance, but some is outside the solid body and is objectively located in the space adjacent to it, as in the case of things seen from a great distance. The colour is altered in the intervening space, and takes on a peculiar shape. But the perception which it imparts corresponds to what is its own true objective state. Thus, just as what we actually hear is not the sound inside the beaten gong, or inside the mouth of the man shouting, but the sound which is reaching our sense, and just as no one says that the man who hears a faint sound from a distance is mishearing just because on approaching he registers it as louder, so too I would not say that the vision is deceived just because from a great distance it sees the tower as small and round but from near to as larger and square. Rather I would say it is telling the truth. Because when the sense-object appears to it small and of that shape it really is small and of that shape, the edges of the *eidōla* getting eroded as a result of their travel through the air. And when it appears big and of another shape instead, it likewise is big and of another shape instead. But the two are already different from each other: for it is left to distorted opinion to suppose that the object of perception seen from near and the one seen from far off are one and the same. (*M* VII.206–9 = LS 16E1–4)

Here the move from the existence of perceptual conflict to the rejection of the claim that all perceptions are true is dealt with explicitly. It is 'simple-minded' and 'characteristic of those who are blind to the real nature of things' – a criticism which confirms the Epicurean recognition of the need for the would-be epistemologist to consider how perception works before jumping to conclusions about the truthfulness or otherwise of the senses. Epicurus denies that what are taken to be conflicting perceptions do in fact conflict and his reason is, as we should now expect, that their objects are different. When someone sees a tower from a distance and then from close at hand, although the *eidōla* which strike his senses are all derived from the same solid object, they will differ depending on the distance they have to travel between the tower and the perceiver. Once one has realised how the senses are affected, and so is no longer 'blind to the nature of things', one will also realise that, since the senses can only report what affects them, when they report the nature of what brings about the perception, they will be reporting the nature of the *eidōla* – and it is taking the properties of the *eidōla* to be those of their respective solid objects which leads one into error.

Epicurean epistemology

This might seem a disappointing result. We have moved from an Epicurus defiantly expounding a bold, if somewhat crazy, epistemological thesis to one who claims only that the senses accurately report the nature of external stimuli – the *eidōla* emitted by solid objects. Epicurus can no longer be seen to offer an easy way with scepticism: the perceiver cannot simply move from the information given by his senses to beliefs about solid objects in the external world.

Sextus' report of the Epicurean response to the supposed problem of perceptual conflict has not found universal support, however. Gisela Striker, for instance, rejects it as '"one of those superficially clinching arguments which a philosopher is sometimes tempted to throw in for good measure, thereby spoiling his case"', and suggests that 'it was not Epicurus' own invention, but a – rather infelicitous – "addition" of later Epicureans'.[22] If the reconstruction of Epicurus' argument which I have offered is correct, then Sextus' report merely confirms what we should anyway have expected from the epistemological argument and from what Epicurus himself has to say about perception in the *Letter to Herodotus*.

Striker's worries about the account found in Sextus are, I think, revealing of the expectation that Epicurus will adopt a purely epistemological strategy to the problem of perceptual conflict, and so place no reliance on his particular account of how perceptions come about:

22 Striker [311], 141. The quotation is from Crombie [91], 1, 282.

> Now while this theory effectively refutes the argument from contrary sense impressions, it has the obvious flaw of making it impossible to arrive at any truth about external objects on the basis of sense impressions. This was seen by Plutarch, who attacks the Epicureans for taking this way out in cases of perceptual error. If all sense impressions are to have the same epistemological status, he argues, then it is not to be seen why some of them should justify assertions about external objects, others not. To be consistent, the Epicureans ought to have adopted the Cyrenaic position and said that only the affections of the senses can be known, while nothing can be said about their causes in the external world.[23]

The mistake here is to think that if the objects of perception are *eidōla* rather than solid objects then perception will not report on the external world. It is crucial to realise, however, that all perceptions report the nature of external objects because all report the nature of *eidōla* and these are as external as anything else.

Even if Striker's challenge were recast, however, so as to replace 'external objects' with 'solid objects', it would still not hold. Nothing at all in the Epicurean position as reported by Sextus makes it impossible to find out the truth about solid objects. Certainly it does not guarantee that one will automatically have true beliefs about the solid objects from which the *eidōla* are derived. But this is quite different from its being *impossible* to arrive at any truth about them. As we begin to make judgements about the nature of solid objects – or, as in the case of Orestes, that there are solid objects at all corresponding to the *eidōla* – we become vulnerable to error, but it is by reflecting on the nature of the evidence provided by the senses that that vulnerability can be diminished. The opponent in Sextus' report who falsely believes that the objects of perception are identical when they are in fact distinct has been led into error precisely because he has not understood what sort of evidence the senses provide for the nature of the world.

We should only feel dissatisfied with Epicurus' strategy if we expected him to engage in *a priori* reflection on the nature of our conscious experience and from this to reach conclusions as to which parts of our experience can be taken to provide access to the external world. The claim that all perceptions, as well as hallucinations and dreams, are true could never possibly have been justified in this way, however, and would have to have stood apart as a hopelessly optimistic and unjustified assumption – a wild and flagrantly question-begging attempt to defeat the sceptic.

One problem remains. Although Epicurus' claim that all perceptions are true is justifiable only if we take the objects of perceptions to be *eidōla* rather than solid objects, there is some evidence that Epicurus allowed that we do in fact perceive solid objects. Thus, Lucretius reports that 'although the images which strike the eyes cannot be seen individually, the objects themselves are perceived' (*de Rerum Natura* IV.257–8 = LS 15c1) and Epicurus himself says that the *eidōla* are different from 'things evident' (*tōn phainomenōn*) in respect of their fineness of texture. It would seem that the reference of 'things evident' here must be solid objects. If Epicurus allows that we can perceive the solid objects, however, then it will be objected that he cannot take the objects of perception to be the *eidōla*.

One needs here to guard against one's post-Cartesian, and even post-Pyrrhonian, expectations. Epicurus' approach to the study of perception neither starts with nor centres on the perspective of the subject. The subject is treated from the start as a part of the natural world, whose perceptions and cognitions are to be explained – by reference to the action and interaction of atoms. Such an account needs to respect the content of perceptual awareness, but it need not take it that the full content of perception is available to the perceiver. On any naturalistic account of intentional states, including those of perception, it is likely that the content of those states will be wider than what is subjectively available.[24]

Epicurus wisely does not claim that we are aware of the *eidōla* themselves. When we perceive our experience is indeed (as of) perceiving solid objects and the beliefs it gives rise to – at least pre-theoretically – are beliefs about them. In this sense our perceptions are about solid objects. There is no inconsistency, however, in claiming also that, in another sense, our perceptions are about *eidōla* – that their truth or falsity is determined not by reference to solid objects but to the *eidōla*. There would only be a problem here if perceptions could only have one level of content – but there is no reason to believe that this is true or that Epicurus thought it to be true.[25]

It may be, of course, that Epicurus did not fully distinguish the different answers that can be given to the question of what content a perception has. To decide this will require a proper investigation of how exactly Epicurus

23 Striker [311], 141.

24 The point is one made often in contemporary naturalistic accounts of intentionality. See, for instance, Dennett [399], especially pp. 312–13, Millikan [406], and Burge [396]. It is likely that the current attempts to provide naturalistic accounts of both intentionality and epistemology will provide important insights for the understanding of Epicurus – and Aristotle – and perhaps also vice versa.

25 The best account I know of this is that of Peacocke, in his [410]. He distinguishes three levels of perceptual content: representational, sensational and informational. Of these only the first two will necessarily be available to the subject. The assumption that there is only one proper way to specify the content of perception has perhaps had a worse effect on the study of perception than any other.

saw the relations of perception, belief and *prolēpsis*.[26] Without this, we cannot be sure what the content of pure perceptual awareness will be on Epicurus' account. What is important, however, is that he provides explanations both of how it is that the senses never lie and of how, although our perceptions are brought about by *eidōla*, they nevertheless represent to the subject the nature of solid objects. Given this, it might seem churlish to worry about whether, if he is committed to treating both solid objects and *eidōla* as objects of perception, he is entitled to do so. Perhaps he did hold both that in one sense, that of perceptual awareness, we see solid objects and that in a different sense, that of what the perception reports on, we see the *eidōla*. What is at stake here is a matter of terminology rather than substance.

To claim that perceptions are true because they accurately report the nature of the *eidōla* which give rise to them provides, of course, no response to the radical sceptic who will allow the epistemologist no recourse beyond the data of subjective experience. If the sceptic demands proof that objects in the world affect the senses so as to produce perceptions and requires further that that proof should appeal to nothing beyond the perceptions themselves, then Epicurus has no answer and we shall only misunderstand him if we take him to be attempting one. No one does have an answer to this demand, however. The project of defeating scepticism without lapsing into idealism has not been achieved, and there is good reason to think that it will not be. It is a project in which Epicurus does not attempt to participate. Scepticism is taken by him to be no more relevant to the study of epistemology than it would be to any other branch of natural science. Epicurus' project is rather to ensure that our beliefs are as truth-preserving as we can make them than to show that they can be true at all.

Even perceptual conflict is not treated as providing a particularly *sceptical* threat: whereas the argument in the Modes is that in cases of conflicting perceptions it is not possible to decide which of the perceptions is true and so one should suspend judgement, the opponent who is attacked by Epicurus in the Sextus passage is merely arguing that when perceptions conflict 'one of them must be true and the opposing one false'. This is certainly seen as a threat to the claim that all perceptions are true but not, at least here, as carrying the additional danger of suspension of belief.

Even if Epicurus offers no explicit strategy for dealing with the arguments of the Modes, however, he need not be defeated by them. For it is far from obvious that the sceptic is entitled to demand that the epistemologist should make no reference beyond the conflicting perceptions. It is not the case, for instance, when an oar looks straight in the air and then looks bent when in water that we have no reason for preferring the one perception to the other. Of course, if these were the only two perceptions to which we could make reference, then we would not have reason to choose between them. There would be many ways of accounting for the change in the way the oar looks – perhaps oars actually bend when in water; perhaps the rays of the sun affect our eyes when reflected by water. The greater our perceptual evidence, however, the fewer the theories which will explain the data available, and at some point we should be able to achieve a single most successful theory of how differences in the media through which objects are seen affect the content of the resulting perception. In the case of the oar, we have achieved a satisfactory theory of how light is refracted, and this provides good reason for the belief that the oar is straight even though it looks bent when in water.

To avoid the sceptical conclusion which the Pyrrhonist desires from the Modes we need precisely to look for an explanation of why the appearances conflict: once we have this then we will have reason enough for making claims about what the world is like on the basis of our perceptions. To do this, however, we need to make reference beyond our perceptions themselves. This is what we do, for instance, when we apply our theory of light refraction to the problem of the bent oar, and it is what Epicurus did by turning to his theory of *eidōla* to explain how the appearances of things are related to what they are like. That theory itself may have been wrong, but the strategy was precisely right.

If we judge Epicurus' contribution to epistemology as if it were an attempt to provide a defence against the sceptic on his own terms, as indeed it has generally been judged since antiquity, then we will have no choice but to judge it badly. If we judge it instead as an attempt to place cognition and belief within a general theory of the physical world and to explore the practical consequences of this for ensuring that our beliefs about the physical world should be as truthful as we can make them, then it can be seen to be as serious and important a contribution to epistemology as any made by an ancient author.[27]

26 For a useful discussion of *prolēpsis*, see Glidden [324].

27 I am grateful to Julia Annas, Jonathan Barnes and Christopher Taylor for criticism of an earlier draft of this chapter.