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## Epicurus on the Truth of Sense Impressions

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Of the three statements that often serve to epitomize Epicurean philosophy — at least for polemical purposes — two seem to be reasonably easy to understand: "The universe consists of bodies and void", for physics; and "Pleasure is the highest good", for ethics. The third, epistemological one, however, which is usually quoted in English as "All sensations are true", has been the subject of some controversy and various interpretations by recent commentators.

In this paper I will try to do three things. First, I will try to make a suggestion as to what might have been Epicurus' own wording of his thesis.

Second, I will examine what seems to be becoming a standard interpretation in recent literature, namely the view that the word *ἀληθές* in this context must be taken to mean "real" rather than "true". I shall try to show that this interpretation is not as firmly based as it might seem to be.

Third, I will propose a fresh interpretation, taking *ἀληθές* in the traditional sense of "true", which places Epicurus' thesis in the epistemological debate of his day, but which avoids some objections raised against earlier versions of the traditional view.

### I

Difficulties begin with the words themselves. We do not have Epicurus' own version of his famous dictum, but it is fairly obvious from the consensus of our sources that he must have said something to the effect either that all *αἰσθήσεις* or that all *φαντασῖαι* are true. It is not so clear, however, whether he used the word *αἰσθησις* or *φαντασία*.

The two words are not usually treated as synonyms, as shown by the fact that they are translated differently. *Αἰσθησις*, where it does not denote the faculty of sense-perception, is translated either as "sensation" — meaning the process of being acted upon by a sensible object — or as "perception" — meaning the recognition of a sensible object (as in "I see a man") or of an observable fact

<sup>9</sup> Arch. Gesch. Philosophie Bd. 59

usually rendered as "sense impression" or "presentation", meaning the result of the process of sensation<sup>1</sup>. The crucial distinction would seem to be that between αἰσθησις in the first sense and the others. For while αἰσθησις in the second sense and φαντασία may plausibly be called true or false because they are expressed in language, this seems at least doubtful for sensations. Although one might say that it is not strictly speaking the impression or the perception which is true or false, but the proposition which expresses it, the use of "true" and "false" is at least easy to understand in these cases. On the other hand, if αἰσθησις is taken in the sense of "sensation", one begins to wonder whether ἀληθείς should not be understood in a different sense.

Now it seems unlikely that Epicurus should have made two parallel statements, the one about αἰσθησις, the other about φαντασία<sup>2</sup>. Thus it would seem important to find out which of the two figured in the original formulation.

Our sources suggest three possible versions of Epicurus' thesis:

- 1) using both terms: Plut. *adv. Col.* 1109 B πάσας εἶναι τὰς δι' αἰσθήσεως φαντασίας ἀληθείς. Aristocles *apud Eus. praep. ev.* XIV, 20, 5 πᾶσαν αἰσθησιν καὶ πᾶσαν φαντασίαν ἀληθῆ λέγοντες εἶναι.
- 2) using only φαντασία: S.E., *M VII* 203—204 τὴν φαντασίαν, ἣν καὶ ἐνάργειαν καλεῖ, διὰ παντὸς ἀληθῆ φησιν ὑπάρχειν ... (204) γίνονται οὖν πᾶσαι αἱ φαντασίαι ἀληθείς (cf. also 210).

<sup>1</sup> These distinctions correspond fairly well to Stoic usage, cf. D.L. VII 50 and 52. Φαντασία also had a wider meaning, including "presentations" that do not arise through the senses; but for the purposes of this paper this is not relevant. For the relation between sense impressions (φαντασία) and propositions cf. below, p. 134ff.

<sup>2</sup> Though both de Witt (Epicurus and his Philosophy, Minneapolis 1954, 138 and 142; see also his articles: Epicurus: Περὶ Φαντασίας, *TAPA* 70, 1939, 414—427; and: Epicurus: All Sensations Are True, *TAPA* 74, 1943, 19—32) and Rist (Epicurus: An Introduction, Cambridge 1972, 19) assume just that. De Witt also offers different interpretations for the two versions. He thinks that φαντασία was defined in such a way that only "true pictures" (Π.Φ. 415, 419—420) could be called φαντασίαι. Hence in his interpretation the dictum would be trivially true. But the evidence for the supposed meaning of φαντασία is simply not sufficient. The word is very rare in the original texts (according to Arrighetti's index, it occurs only twice in the writings preserved by D.L.: *ad Hdt.* 50 and 80), and of Epicurus' treatise Περὶ φαντασίας (D.L. X 28) only the title survives. For de Witt's interpretation in terms of αἰσθησις see the following.

3) using neither, but talking about "the senses": Cicero, *Luc.* 25, 79 veracis suos esse sensus dicit; cf. 26,82 numquam sensus mentiri putat; similar expressions in *de fin.* I 19,64 and *N D I* 25,70 cf. also S.E., *M VIII* 9.

Obviously, version 3) implies that the results of sensation — whether αἰσθήσεις or φαντασίαι — are always true; as Lucretius puts it: (IV 499) proinde quod in quoquest his (scil. sensibus) visum tempore, verumst.

In view of the distinctions mentioned above, it may seem surprising that there is so little uniformity in the secondary sources. We should remember, however, that Epicurus wrote at a time before Stoic usage became common ground in epistemological discussions, as it apparently did later. Aristotle's use of the word φαντασία is much more diversified than the Stoics'<sup>3</sup>, and there probably existed no established terminology at Epicurus' time. Now αἰσθησις is by far the more common word in Epicurus' own writings; moreover, it is at least likely that αἰσθήσεις were called criteria of truth because they were all true<sup>4</sup>. So the fact that Plutarch and Aristocles use both terms (in fact, Plutarch seems slightly to prefer αἰσθησις where he reports Epicurean doctrine; cf. *adv. Col.* 1109—1110 passim) can perhaps best be explained if we suppose that Epicurus and his own pupils used αἰσθησις, but in a way which indicated that they meant what came later, under the influence of the Stoics, to be called φαντασία. It would seem important to make this plain, since the Stoics also held that all αἰσθήσεις were true — but then they were using αἰσθησις in a different sense<sup>5</sup>.

Thus the substitution of φαντασία for αἰσθησις in later sources (perhaps even in Epicurean sources like the one used by Sextus, *M VII* 203sq.) may be due to the fact that Epicurus used αἰσθησις in a way which did not correspond to any of the recognized Stoic meanings of that term, but which seemed to correspond closely

<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle's use of φαντασία cf. D. A. Rees, *Aristotle's Treatment of Φαντασία*, in: *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. J. P. Anton and G. L. Kustas, Albany N.Y. 1971, 491—504.

<sup>4</sup> For αἰσθησις in Epicurus, cf. D.L. X 31, 32, 38, 48, 55, 63, 68, 82, 86; K.Δ. XXIV. For αἰσθήσεις as criteria of truth cf. my article "κρίτηριον τῆς ἀληθείας", in: *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, I. Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Nr. 2, 1974, 61—68, 73—80.

<sup>5</sup> Aetius, *Plac.* IV 9, 4 = v. Arnim, *SVF* II 78. For the Stoic doctrine cf. Striker, quoted above, n. 4, 95.

to the narrower sense of *φαντασία*, in which it is restricted to sense perception.

If this is correct, then the usual English formulation of our dictum, "All sensations are true", is probably misleading. For reasons which will, I hope, become clearer in the sequel, I propose to use "sense impressions" instead.

## II

If Epicurus' hedonism made him a subject of contempt for Cicero, his epistemological views seem rather to have provoked ridicule. It is evident that his dictum was taken to mean "all perceptual judgements are true"; and this seemed so obviously untenable that Cicero, for example, does not even seriously consider Epicurus' views in his epistemological treatise, the *Academica*: "sed ab hoc credulo, qui numquam sensus mentiri putat, discedamus...". he says at *Luc.* 26, 82. But even Bailey, writing in this century, considered our thesis as an expression of naïve confidence in sense perception<sup>6</sup>.

Against this view, de Witt<sup>7</sup> has pointed out that such a degree of naïveté is most unlikely for a man with Epicurus' background. He had, after all, studied philosophy for quite a while; he must have known many if not all of the writings of Plato and Aristotle; and finally his own teacher, the Democritean Nausiphanes, is said to have been a student of the Sceptic Pyrrho. Also, Epicurus' own arguments against Sceptic positions make it quite clear that he was familiar with their arguments.

Hence de Witt and more recently Rist<sup>8</sup> have proposed a different interpretation of Epicurus' thesis. The word *ἀληθές*, they suggest, should not be understood to mean "true" in a propositional sense — rather, it must mean "real". What Epicurus meant when he said that "All sensations are true" was not that sense perception is always reliable, but only that all sensations are "actual data through which we obtain contact with the external world" (Rist, 20). Since the senses are our only means of getting

<sup>6</sup> The Greek Atomists and Epicurus, Oxford 1928, 237.

<sup>7</sup> 'All Sensations Are True', quoted above, n. 2, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Epicurus, quoted above, n. 2, 19—21. D. Furley (Knowledge of Atoms and Void in Epicureanism, in: Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy, above n. 3, 610) and A. A. Long (Aisthesis, Prolepsis and Linguistic Theory in Epicurus; Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies 18, London 1971, 116) offer the same interpretation, but Rist gives the fullest arguments.

acquainted with the world around us, the fact that sensations are "true" in this sense is fundamental for our ability to gain knowledge about the world — which explains why Epicurus called the *αἰσθήσεις* criteria.

The arguments for this interpretation can I think be summarized as follows:

① It is abundantly clear from our sources that Epicurus did not believe all perceptual judgements to be true. This is apparent, among other places, from his attempts — reported most fully by Lucretius — to explain certain optical illusions, like the oar that looks bent in water, or the square tower that looks round from a distance (this is de Witt's main argument).

② Three passages from Diogenes and Sextus seem to show that *ἀληθές* should be taken in the sense of "real". The first occurs in a report by Sextus, *M* VIII 9, about Epicurus' views on the question "Whether there be anything true". According to Sextus, Epicurus said that it makes no difference whether you call a thing "true" (*ἀληθές*) or "existent" (*ὑπάρχον*). At D.L.X. 32, last sentence, *ἀληθές* is opposed to *μὴ ὄν* and hence implicitly equated with *ὄν*. These passages are said to show that Epicurus did use the word *ἀληθές* in the required sense.

The third passage is D.L. X 31 (cf. also S.E. *M* VII 210, VIII 9), where Epicurus is quoted as saying that *αἰσθησις* (the senses) is "irrational" (*ἄλογος*). Now an irrational — i.e. literally languageless — faculty, so it is argued, is not the kind of thing to produce propositions. Sensations are, therefore, mere "bodily happenings", which cannot be called true or false in a propositional sense<sup>9</sup>.

Plausible though this interpretation may appear at first sight, it seems to me to involve considerable difficulties. First, it goes against the entire tradition — not just hostile authors like Cicero and Plutarch, but also Lucretius, and Sextus, who seems to be rather impartial in this case, take Epicurus to be asserting something about the truth as opposed to falsity of our impressions,

<sup>9</sup> It is clear that this interpretation implicitly relies upon the assumption that the thesis was formulated in terms of *αἰσθησις*, and that *αἰσθησις* had the first of the meanings mentioned above. However, Rist (19) concedes that Epicurus also said that all presentations (*φαντασίαι*) are true — yet he does not say how this affects his interpretation. If, as I have argued, Epicurus was talking about sense impressions rather than sensations, the interpretation can of course still be maintained, but it loses some of its plausibility.

rather than about "truth" as opposed to nonexistence<sup>10</sup>. What is more, Sextus and Plutarch also report elaborate arguments by which the Epicureans tried to defend themselves against the objection that our impressions cannot all be true because they contradict one another (cf. S.E., *M* VII, 208–209; Plut. *adv. Col.* 1109 B–1110 B). It is not clear why the Epicureans should have thought it necessary to defend a thesis which they did not really hold, especially since the defence was rather difficult.

Second, the passages from Diogenes and Sextus do not really seem to establish the "reality" interpretation.

S.E., *M* VIII 9 is a difficult passage, and so it is perhaps not surprising that it should have been more often quoted than discussed. Sextus begins by saying that Epicurus declared all "sensibles" to be "true and existent", for (he said) it made no difference whether you call a thing "true" or "existent": 'Ο δὲ Ἐπίκουρος τὰ μὲν αἰσθητὰ πάντα ἔλεγε ἀληθῆ καὶ ὄντα. οὐ δὴνεγκε γὰρ ἀληθὲς εἶναι τι λέγειν ἢ ὑπάρχον.

What does Sextus mean by αἰσθητὰ? In the context of books VII and VIII, this term has at least four different uses, between which Sextus feels free to switch without a warning. Αἰσθητόν may denote:

- 1) external or material objects (implied in the contrast νοητόν — αἰσθητόν used in *M* VIII 4, 7; cf. also *M* VII, 167 and 219)
- 2) sensible qualities like colours, sounds etc. (cf. the discussion of αἰσθητόν, *M* VIII 184ff., esp. 203, 206, 210)
- 3) in an Epicurean context, αἰσθητόν may denote the images which cause sense impressions (cf. VII 206, 209, VIII 185)
- 4) sense impressions (φαντασίαι or φαινόμενα) may be called αἰσθητὰ where Sextus has, as here, restricted himself to the dichotomy νοητόν — αἰσθητόν (cf. *M* VIII 10, 67, 185 (*Peripatetics and Stoics*); for φαινόμενα cf. *M* VIII 8 with 216 on Aenesidemus).

The noun αἰσθητόν does not seem to have belonged to Epicurus' own technical vocabulary (Arrighetti lists only one certain occurrence of the word, as an adjective, in D.L. X 47); so Sextus' phrase

<sup>10</sup> Long (*Aisthesis . . .*, above n. 8) implicitly recognizes this when, after having adopted the "reality" view, he goes on to say (117) that "all φαντασίαι are ἀληθεῖς in the sense that they really show something as it appears relative to the distance travelled by the εἰδωλα which actually reach the percipient. The square tower *does* (allegedly) look round from a distance." He does not point out that this involves a switch from "reality" to propositional truth.

is not likely to be a literal quotation. Furthermore, we do not know on what occasion Epicurus made the statement attributed to him: he was probably not trying to give an answer to Sextus' question (*M* VIII 4), whether the true is sensible, intelligible, or both.

However, Sextus repeats the statement that "all sensibles are true" in *M* VIII 63, in an argument about the reliability of the senses, which suggests that our quotation might come from a similar context. (That it was part of an argument is suggested by the γάρ in the second sentence.)

In 63, Epicurus is said to have argued that cases like Orestes' "seeing" the Furies in his madness cannot be used to show that our senses deceive us: for Orestes' αἰσθησις, being affected by real images, was "true"; it was only reason which committed an error in believing the Furies to be solid. In this passage, αἰσθητὰ presumably denotes the images, since it is used alongside φαντασία. The argument seems to be the same as the one given in extremely compressed form by Diogenes, X 32: τὰ τε τῶν μαινομένων φαντάσματα καὶ <τὰ> κατ' ὄναρ ἀληθῆ· κινεῖ γάρ, τὸ δὲ μὴ ὄν οὐ κινεῖ.

Hence it is plausible to think that the two sentences from *M* VIII 9 make a similar point.

It seems clear that in these places Epicurus wants to say that the φαντάσματα or αἰσθητὰ are "true" because they do exist. It seems clear also that this was supposed to be an argument in defence of the senses. What is not so clear is how much this argument was supposed to prove. In other words, the question is whether Epicurus wants to say that "true" in this case means no more than "existing", or whether he wants to argue that reality, i.e. existence, implies truth in a propositional sense.

In the first case, one would have to ask why Epicurus should have chosen to use the obviously misleading term "true"; in the second case, his argument would clearly be fallacious: from the fact that I really perceive something it does not follow that I perceive that thing correctly.

According to the "reality" interpretation, Epicurus was simply pointing out that visions are as real as other impressions; hence the fact that they mislead us into false judgements cannot be used to show that αἰσθησις is not always "true".

But the other interpretation seems at least as plausible. For, as Sextus says, the error of those who think that some of our φαντασίαι are false is said to arise because they do not separate

δόξα (opinion) from ἐνάργεια (what is evident). Still using the first interpretation, this should mean that people tend to identify the process of being affected through the senses — or the impression received through the senses — with the judgement formed about the impression. The falsity of the second does not affect the reality of the first. This, however, does not seem to be the distinction Sextus points out in the Orestes case. The point of saying that reason erroneously supposes the Furies to be *solid* seems to be that it would have been no mistake to say "some Furies are appearing to me" (i.e. the φαντασία that there appear some Furies is true). If this is so, then ἐνάργεια is as propositional as δόξα, and Epicurus is arguing that a real image always leads to a true *as opposed to a false* impression.

The argument is not very satisfactory, but that it is not impossible for Epicurus seems to be shown by the parallel argument about normal sense perception. In *M* VII, 203—204 Sextus reports the following argument: Just as we cannot be mistaken as to the pleasantness of what produces pleasure or the painfulness of that which produces pain, so we cannot be mistaken about "that which appears" (τὸ φανταστόν) being "such as it appears". Thus far, this might be taken to say only that we cannot be mistaken about the fact that we have an impression of something, implying nothing about the correctness of our impressions. But Sextus goes on to explain what is meant by "such as it appears" (τοιούτων ὁποῖον φαίνεται), and his explanation shows that φανταστικὰ are supposed to be true not only with regard to the thing's really appearing, but also with respect to its qualities (roundness, smallness, etc., cf. 209—210). Again the same argument seems to occur in D.L.'s summary of the *Canon*, X 32: καὶ τὸ τὰ ἐπιστήματα δ' ὑφ' ἐστάναι πιστοῦται τὴν τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἀλήθειαν. ὑφέστηκε δὲ τὸ τε ὄραν ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀκοῦειν ὥσπερ τὸ ἀλεγεῖν.

Here again, then, Epicurus seems to use the undoubted reality of our impressions as an argument for their correctness. There is then, indeed, a close connection between reality and truth in Epicurus' thought, as Rist says (15/16), but it does not seem to consist in the doctrine that "A proposition is true if it describes the state in which something actually *exists* and false if it does not"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> This is apparently based on a definition (ὑπογραφή) of "true" and "false" which is given by Sextus immediately after the two sentences discussed above: ἐθεν καὶ ὑπογράφων τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ψεῦδος ἔστι φησὶν ἀληθὲς τὸ οὕτως

The connection between reality and truth seems to be based on a rather dubious argument which exploits the by now notorious ambiguity of the Greek word ἀληθές.

I do not want to suggest that these passages settle the question of the sense of ἀληθές in "All sense impressions are true". One might still argue that Epicurus himself held the "reality" view, and that the transition to propositional truth, which is not made in the two passages from Diogenes, was a later — possibly un-Epicurean — development. But whether this was so or not will have to be decided on other grounds.

Now Rist's second point, namely that the traditional interpretation is incompatible with Epicurus' doctrine that αἰσθησις is ἄλογος, does not seem decisive either. The idea that the senses are irrational was of course no novelty: it belongs to the traditional doctrine of the "rational" and "irrational" parts of the soul. If there was anything new in Epicurus' approach, it must have been his explication of ἄλογος: since the senses are irrational, he seems to argue, they can have no memory and cannot "add" or "subtract" anything. We will come back to this point further below.

While it may seem evident to a modern philosopher that irrational processes cannot involve propositional truth or falsity, we cannot simply conclude from this that Epicurus — or other Hellenistic philosophers who accepted the doctrine of the irrationality of the senses — must have seen this point.

There is, indeed, one argument in Sextus, based on the premiss that αἰσθησις is ἄλογος, which leads precisely to the required conclusion (cf. *M* VII 293—300 and especially 344—345). But a) the Stoics seem to have had a way of defending themselves against the suggestion that αἰσθησις provides us with no propositional knowledge whatsoever (cf. *ibid.*, 359—360); b) Plutarch talks

ἔχον ὡς λέγεται ἔχειν' καὶ 'ψεῦδος ἔστι' φησὶ 'τὸ οὐχ οὕτως ἔχον ὡς λέγεται ἔχειν. Surprisingly, no commentator notices the fact that this can hardly be correct as it stands since, taken literally, it would lead to the absurd conclusion that a table, e. g., is true if it is as it is said to be (say, round), and false if it is not. It seems more plausible to think, as Bailey (*The Greek Atomists* . . . , above n. 6, 237) and Rist apparently do, that Epicurus was talking about the truth or falsity of things said. Hence the original Greek should have run: [λόγος] ἀληθής ἐστίν εἰ [τὸ πρᾶγμα] οὕτως ἔχει ὡς λέγεται ἔχειν κτλ. But then the definition would simply be a restatement of the traditional doctrine that a proposition is true if things are as it says they are, and false if they are not.

about the "irrational affections" (ἄλογα πάθη) of αἰσθησις (*adv. Col.* 1122 F) in a context which makes it quite clear that the outcome of these are φαντασία in the Stoic sense, i.e. ones that can be called true or false; c) in the quotation from the *Canon*, Epicurus does not say what it is that the senses cannot "add to" or "subtract from" — but Sextus supplies φαντασία (*M VII* 210), and it is indeed hard to see what else could have been intended. Thus it appears that for an ancient author, the statement that the senses are irrational does not imply the conclusion that sense impressions cannot involve propositional truth or falsity.

Now I do not want to suggest that the Hellenistic philosophers identified sense impressions with propositions. They did not. But when they discussed the truth or falsity of sense impressions, they did in fact argue in terms of propositions. As the Stoics explained (*S.E. M VIII* 10), an αἰσθητόν (in this context, that must be a φαντασία) is not called "true" directly, but by reference to the corresponding νοητόν, which is a proposition. I think this characterizes more than just Stoic usage. The Stoics seem to have thought that sense impressions are transformed into propositions by a kind of automatic translation (cf. *D.L. VII* 49). A λογική φαντασία (and such, it seems, were all human φαντασία, cf. *D.L. VII* 51) is one "in which what is presented can be shown forth in speech" (*S.E. M VIII* 70)<sup>12</sup>. So there must be a one-to-one correlation between sense impressions and propositions such that, for the most part, it is sufficient to consider only the propositions. Perhaps φαντασία were thought of as a kind of mental image that goes into words. One has only to read the British Empiricists to realize that the transition from mental images to meanings of words may seem to be an easy one.

Epicurus does not explicitly distinguish between an impression and the proposition which expresses it. However, his use of "true" and "false" with regard to αἰσθησις seems to have the same background. In contrast to the Stoics, he seems to have suggested that our perceptual judgements are sometimes interpretations rather than translations. But this does not necessarily imply that he thought there could not be a (correct) translation.

If there is anything wrong with these theories, it does not seem to be the view that perception involves conceptualization or classification. No doubt what we can perceive depends on what

<sup>12</sup> For this translation cf. A. A. Long, *Language and Thought in Stoicism*, in: A. A. Long (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism* (London 1971) 82.

we can say we perceive. The mistake seems to lie in the assumption that there is something there to be translated: translation can only work between linguistic items, and what we receive through our senses does not seem to be of this kind. Our impressions do not completely determine the outcome of the process of verbalization. I'm afraid Epicurus, like his contemporaries, still thought that they did.

Lastly, it should be noted that the proposed interpretation, apart from vindicating Epicurus, also trivializes what seemed to be a rather provocative epistemological thesis. To say that all sense impressions are "true" in the sense of having real causes in the external world would — at that time at least — have appeared as a perfectly harmless statement. What Epicurus is made to say is just that the senses provide a way of getting into contact with reality — which does not imply anything about how they do this, or how this kind of experience might lead us to find out truths about the world.

On the other hand, if ἀληθές can be understood to mean "true", the thesis is obviously important. If we can say that the senses provide us with indubitably true propositions, we do indeed have good reasons to rely upon them as the foundation of our knowledge.

Thus it seems at least worth investigating whether Epicurus' dictum cannot after all be interpreted as a statement about the truth or falsity of certain propositions. As regards the first argument — that Epicurus did not hold all perceptual judgements to be true — de Witt and Rist do not seem to have seriously considered the possibility that αἰσθησις might not include everything that could pass for a sense impression. If there was a restriction on what could be called an αἰσθησις, then perhaps it might have been possible for Epicurus to say that they are all true without having to accept contradictory propositions as true.

### III

In order to give an interpretation along these lines, I should like to turn to another question, which does not seem to be answerable by an interpretation of our dictum alone: how did Epicurus arrive at his thesis?

There seem to be two possibilities here: either he reached it through an analysis of perception, which convinced him that all sense impressions — or those of a certain kind, perhaps, to which

he then chose to restrict the term ἀσθησις — must be true; or his initial arguments for the thesis were independent of such analysis, and the analysis was developed later to defend the thesis against obvious objections.

I think that the second view is correct. In the following I shall try to reconstruct the argument which, I think, led Epicurus to adopt his rather uncomfortable epistemological position.

The clue to our question seems to lie in an argument which is given some prominence by Cicero, who quotes it four times (: *de fin.* I 19, 64; *ND* I 25, 70; *Luc.* 25, 79 and 32, 101). According to this argument, knowledge through perception is possible only if all sense impressions are true. Cicero mostly states this in negative form: if any sense impression is false, nothing can be known (by perception) (so *Luc.* 32, 101: *si ullum sensus visum falsum est, nihil potest percipi*). In a similar version the argument also occurs once in Epicurus, *K.A.* XXIV: "If you reject any ἀσθησις without qualification . . . you will by your foolish opinion disturb all others with it, so that you will reject the criterion altogether". Neither Epicurus himself nor Cicero tell us in the respective passages how Epicurus arrived at this argument. It does not seem difficult, however, to find the requisite premisses in Epicurean writings.

The first of these is: I) All knowledge must ultimately be based on sense perception. I do not think one needs to adduce evidence to show that Epicurus held this view — which, by the way, seems to have been surprisingly uncontroversial among the Hellenistic schools.

The second premiss is more difficult: II) All sense impressions have the same status with respect to their reliability. Epicurus uses this in *D.L.* X 32 (πάσας γὰρ προσέχομεν), and Plutarch emphatically attributes it to him several times (*adv. Col.* 1109 B; 1121 D, E; 1124 B; cf. also *Lucr.* IV, 498). Finally, it is obviously presupposed in the passage from *K.A.* quoted above: for if to reject one sense impression is to "disturb" them all, this can only be because they all have the same status.

Nevertheless one would like to know why Epicurus held this to be true. We seem to find no arguments for this premiss in Epicurean sources — but then it should be remembered that II played an important role in the arguments of the Sceptics against the reliability of sense perception. Sextus has quite a battery of arguments to support it (appended to each of the ten "tropes" in *PH* I), but these could of course be of later origin. A brief version

of such an argument is, however, to be found already in Aristotle's treatment of Protagoras' doctrine, *Met.* Γ 5, 1009 a 38: "And similarly some have inferred from observation of the sensible world the truth of appearances. For they think that the truth should not be determined by the large or small number of those who hold a belief, and that the same thing is thought sweet by some when they taste it, and bitter by others, so that if all were ill or all were mad, and only two or three were well or sane, these would be thought ill and mad, and not the others.

And again, they say that many of the other animals receive impressions contrary to ours; and that even to the senses of each individual, things do not always seem the same. Which, then, of these impressions are true and which are false is not obvious; for the one set is no more true than the other, but both are alike. And this is why Democritus, at any rate, says that either there is no truth or to us at least it is not evident"<sup>13</sup>.

This is, of course, the old argument from contrary sense impressions. It seems that Epicurus' teacher Nausiphanes might have argued in a similar way, since Seneca reports him as saying that "ex his quae videntur esse nihil magis esse quam non esse" (*Sen. ep.* 88, 43; frg. B 4 in Diels-Kranz).

We may safely assume that Epicurus knew these arguments, and his adoption of II shows that he attributed some weight to them.

The third premiss is not used explicitly, but it is, I think, implicit in the universally recognized postulate that anyone who wants to claim that knowledge is possible must be able to provide a "criterion of truth". The third premiss, then, is: III) Knowledge must be based on propositions (impressions) that are known to be true.

With these three steps we have reached Epicurus' argument. From I and III we can infer that some sense impressions must be known to be true. II says that they must either all be taken as true, or all as false. Hence if there is to be any knowledge, all sense impressions must be (known to be) true.

Now obviously this argument can be used in either of two ways: to establish a sceptical conclusion, or to infer Epicurus' thesis, that all sense impressions are true. The Sceptics, as is well known, used the argument from contrary sense impressions to show that they cannot all be true, and that, therefore, knowledge is im-

<sup>13</sup> Ross' translation. (The Works of Aristotle translated into English, VIII, 2nd edn. Oxford 1928.)

possible. Epicurus, on the other hand, wanted to maintain that knowledge was possible, and thus found himself saddled with the thesis that all sense impressions are true. So Cicero is likely to be right in his remark that our thesis was among the implausible doctrines to which the Epicureans subscribed because they thought that their rejection would have even less acceptable consequences than the paradoxical theses themselves. (*ND* I 25, 70. Cicero's other examples are the spontaneous swerve of the atoms and the denial of the law of excluded middle.)

Now we have seen already that Epicurus, unlike Aristotle's Protagoras, did not want to deny the law of non-contradiction. If his thesis is as closely connected with Sceptic arguments as I have supposed, he must have tried to refute the argument from contrary sense impressions by showing that the alleged contradictions were only apparent. And this is indeed what we find him doing. Of course he also tried to find independent arguments for his thesis, but those of them that survive (e.g. *apud* D.L., X 32, and S.E., *M* VII 203—205, discussed above) are so weak that it is hard to believe that they could have been his reasons to adopt the thesis in the first place.

Two versions of his defence have been preserved in our sources — the first is given by Lucretius and in part by Plutarch, the second by Sextus. They are indeed mostly treated as one by commentators, but I think it is important to see that they are different and even incompatible.

According to Plutarch, Epicurus explained the apparent contradictions between perceptual judgements containing what one would now call secondary quality-predicates by pointing out that they are often too general. If we fill in the necessary qualifications, the contradictions disappear. Thus we should not say "wine heats the body", but rather "wine heats such-and-such a body", which will not be contradicted by the statement that wine cools such-and-such a (different) body. Similarly, "this is cold" should probably be replaced by "this feels cold to me now", etc. To explain these phenomena, Epicurus could of course use Democritean atomism (for these points cf. *Plut. adv. Col.* 1109 B—1110 E.)

With regard to certain optical illusions on the one hand — the stock examples are of course the oar in water and the distant tower — and plain perceptual error on the other (like mistaking a statue for a man) he developed his well-known theory of error. According to this theory, the supposed false sense impressions

are not really sense impressions at all, but rather opinions made up by the mind by adding to or subtracting from the content of the original impression. Error arises when the modified impression is taken to be the original<sup>14</sup>. Thus the opinion that the oar is bent would presumably arise from "subtracting" the fact that the oar is seen through water, and the tower case can be explained by saying that the mind adds to an incomplete or blurred impression, thus transforming it into that of a round tower. The "additions" come, as appears from D.L. X 31, from memory — that is, an incomplete image is "filled out" as it were and then assimilated to others to which it is in fact not similar<sup>15</sup>.

If one attends closely to what is given or "present" to the senses (τὸ παρόν)<sup>16</sup>, such error can be avoided: as Lucretius

<sup>14</sup> The fullest statement of this doctrine is in *Lucr.* IV, 462—468. In other places it is summarized as "distinguishing opinion (δόξα) from what is evident (ἐνάργεια)" (*Cic. Luc.* 14, 45; S.E. *M* VIII 63, cf. *Lucr.* IV 467—8) or "what is present" (τὸ παρόν) from "what awaits confirmation" (τὸ προσμένον; K. Δ. XXIV). That τὸ παρόν and ἐνάργεια go together appears from D.L. X 82 (*ad Hd.*): προσεκτίον . . . πάσῃ τῇ παρουσίᾳ καθ' ἕκαστον τῶν κριτηρίων ἐνάργεια. This seems to have led de Witt (l. cit.) and Long (*Hellenistic Philosophy*, London 1974, 22) to think that only "clear" sense impressions are reliable. Long then points out that Epicurus did not say how we are to distinguish "clear" from "unclear" impressions. The reason for this is, I suggest, that Epicurus did not think that some were clearer than others (cf. *Plut. adv. Col.* 1121 D—E) — they were all equally ἐνάργεις, though some were more informative than others. There might be some justification for this view: On a clear day, I can clearly see a tower from two miles, but I get more information if I look from fifty feet.

<sup>15</sup> These memory images are the προλήψεις; cf. A. A. Long, *Aisthesis . . .* (above, n. 8) 119—122.

<sup>16</sup> There must also have been some general restrictions on what could come within the range of the senses. Both Diogenes (X 31) and Lucretius (IV 486—496) report an argument to the effect that different senses cannot refute one another because they have different objects — the objects being obviously Aristotle's "proper sensibles". Lucretius also makes the point that judgements of identity cannot be made by the senses — they must come from the intellect (IV 379—385).

This need not mean, however, that αἴσθησις was restricted to judgements in terms of proper sensibles. An "image" does not usually consist of one proper sensible at a time — it must be a complex made up of such sensibles. It is possible that Epicurus called complex impressions φαντασίαι, while αἴσθησις was in a terminological sense restricted to proper sensibles. If so, he did not always adhere to these terminological distinctions. Now a complex impression is as much "given" as a simple one. It seems possible that the obscure expression φανταστική ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας was used to denote the grasping and classifying of the content of a complex impression, cf. K. Δ. XXIV: τὸ



points out (IV 360—363), the image of a distant square tower may be similar to that of a round tower, but still it is not exactly like that of a round tower seen clearly from near by. Hence the impression only warrants a more guarded statement, e.g. "this looks like a round tower" — which is true, and does not contradict "this is a square tower"<sup>17</sup>.

This type of explanation may not be successful in all cases — as Cicero says (*Luc.* 15, 81), to explain why the senses deceive us is not to show that they tell the truth, but only that they don't tell a falsehood without a reason — yet it seems that Epicurus insisted that it must in principle<sup>18</sup> be possible to distinguish "what is present" from the "additions of opinion" and thus to arrive at a proposition which is both true and consistent with all others. As Lucretius puts it in a famous passage (IV 500—506), it is better to give a faulty explanation (of an optical illusion) than to shake the foundations of our life and safety.

But then Epicurus' interpretation of the traditional ἄλογος — his doctrine of the senses being incapable of memory and of adding or subtracting anything — comes to look less like the foundation of a new theory and more like a defence of the thesis that all sense impressions must be true.

Sextus' account (*M* VII 206—210) is simpler and more radical, but not more helpful. According to him, what is perceived is not, as one tends to assume, an external object, but the atomic film or image which reaches the sense organ. Thus contradictions between sense impressions cannot arise, because in fact each observer "perceives" a different object; and with respect to these objects, all sense impressions are true. Error arises only from the mistaken

παρόν may be given by αἰσθησις, πάθη, or φανταστική ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας. This would of course explain why later Epicureans added φανταστική ἐπιβολή to the criteria.

<sup>17</sup> For the weaker statements based on faint or distorted impressions, cf. *Plut. adv. Col.* 1121 C: λέγοντων καμπυλοειδῆ φαντασίαν λαμβάνειν, εἰ δὲ καμπύλου ἐστὶ, μὴ προσσποφαινεῖσθαι τὴν ὄψιν μηδ' ὅτι στρογγύλου, ἀλλ' ὅτι φάντασμα περὶ αὐτὴν καὶ τύπωμα στρογγυλοειδὲς γέγονε.

<sup>18</sup> "For the wise man", as Cicero says (*Luc.* 14, 15). In epistemological contexts the wise man seems typically to be invoked to indicate that the question is not one of fact, but of principle. Thus Cicero repeatedly says in the *Lucullus* that the wise man is "the subject of all this discussion" (18, 57; cf. 20, 66; 33, 105; 36, 115). This serves to bring out the point that the question is not, e.g., whether we do usually succeed in distinguishing two very similar objects, but whether this can in principle be done.

assumption that the same object has been perceived in different cases.

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. But this, as Plutarch emphasizes, they certainly did not want to do (cf. *adv. Col.* 1121 B—D).

If we do not want to charge Epicurus with inconsistency, as Plutarch does, we must conclude, I think, that he did not hold both of the rival theories outlined above at the same time. I should suggest that the "sense datum" theory of Sextus, which does not appear in Lucretius, was a later development, probably derived from Epicurus' own explanation of the tower case. A statement like "this looks like a round tower" may be taken either as a guarded statement about a material object, or as a description of a sense datum<sup>19</sup>. In Lucretius' version of the error theory, it should be the former; in Sextus' version it is obviously the latter. But what appears at first sight as an elegant solution of all problems in fact subverts the entire theory. It is, as Crombie has said in a different context, "one of those superficially clinching arguments which a philosopher is sometimes tempted to throw in for good measure, thereby spoiling his case"<sup>20</sup>. The fact that the theory does not seem to be known to Lucretius<sup>21</sup> indicates perhaps that it was not Epicurus' own invention, but a — rather infelicitous — "addition" of later Epicureans.

We can now return to our initial question concerning the interpretation of "All sense impressions are true". The discussion of

<sup>19</sup> For this point, and a modern discussion of what is "given" in sense perception, cf. e.g. A. Quinton, 'The Problem of Perception', *Mind* 64 (1955), 28—51.

<sup>20</sup> An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, II (London 1963), 282.

<sup>21</sup> Assuming that Lucretius was mostly using Epicurus' own works, rather than later Epicurean sources. Cf. Bailey's introduction to: Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, vol. I, 2nd edn. Oxford 1950, 22—28.

<sup>22</sup> *Arch. Gesch. Philosophie* Bd. 59

Epicurus' defence against the argument from contrary sense impressions has shown, I hope, how Epicurus wanted this to be understood. It obviously does not mean "All perceptual judgments are true". Nor does it mean "All sensations are real". Nor, again, that all sense impressions are accurate reports of sense data. What it means can perhaps be put this way: "All propositions expressing no more nor less than the content of a given sense impression are true."

If this interpretation of Epicurus' dictum is correct, Epicurus can perhaps be seen as the first in a long tradition of empiricist philosophers who tried to analyse sense perception in the hope of finding an infallible foundation for knowledge. True, the idea that the mind interprets rather than translates what is given to the senses was not entirely new — that point had been made by Plato in a passage of the *Theaetetus* (184 B—185 E) which Epicurus probably knew<sup>22</sup>; but within the framework of a metaphysics that Epicurus was not willing to accept. So he has at least the merit of having adapted Plato's suggestion to an empiricist theory. And if his way out proved, in the end, to be as much of a blind alley as the Stoics' attempts to specify the conditions under which a sense impression is "cataleptic", it is perhaps a more interesting one. For once we can say, I think, that Epicurus learned Plato's lesson better than his respectable neighbours, the Stoics\*.

<sup>22</sup> Apart from general plausibility, two things seem to indicate that Epicurus knew the *Theaetetus*: a) Lucretius repeats Plato's point (185 A—B) that identity cannot be judged by the senses (IV 381—384); b) there is a striking similarity between Epicurus' terminology and Plato's language in a passage (179 C) in which Plato concedes that there might be something to the view of those who say that sense reports of "present affections" (τὸ παρὸν ἐκάστῳ πάθος) are ἐναργεῖς and instances of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). No doubt other parallels could be found. The most plausible interpretation seems to be that Epicurus used Plato's arguments against the cognitive value of sense perception in his own attempt to show its infallibility.

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## Termini Obliqui and the Logic of Relations

by Paul Thom (Canberra)

Medieval theories of 'oblique syllogisms' represent a genuine development of the Aristotelian logic, and contain the beginnings of a formal logic of relations. An 'oblique' syllogism is one containing an oblique term, i. e. a term in some grammatical case other than the nominative, e. g.:

Nullum hominem videt asinus Omne risibile videt hominem

Nullum risibile est asinus

([4] Part IIIa, ch. 9, 11. 27—28), in other words:

No man [is such that]	Everything that laughs
an ass sees [him]	sees a man

Nothing that laughs is an ass

(The term "man" is in the accusative in both its occurrences here.)

The oblique propositions with which Ockham deals contain a verb plus two terms, one in the nominative and the other in an oblique case. If the verb is "is" the oblique term cannot be in the accusative case, but may be in other oblique cases:

This foot is Mary's (for Mary etc.).

Propositions of this kind contain no explicitly relational expression, but can be seen as being implicitly relational (Some relation is asserted to hold between the foot and Mary, whether it be the relation of belonging or something else.) So Ockham is dealing with propositions which explicitly or implicitly contain relational expressions.

Given that a relational expression is flanked by (at least) two terms, an Aristotelian like Ockham is faced with the problem which of these terms to treat as subject. He always treats the first term as subject. This is *not* an arbitrary decision designed to force relational propositions into the subject-predicate mould. He does not treat the first term as subject because it comes first, but rather adopts the convention that whatever is subject shall be put first. And the reason why a given term is subject is, not that it appears