

CHAPTER EIGHT

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

KATJA M. VOGT

Epicurean epistemology is infamous for the claim that all sense-perceptions are true.¹ This is how Lucretius puts it: what is perceived by any of the senses at any given time is true (*De Rerum Natura* [DRN] 4.499). This claim—which I shall call SPT—seems deeply misguided. It appears obvious that sense-perception can err. The plan for this chapter is to show that SPT is a sophisticated philosophical proposal and, what is more, a proposal that aims to capture the truth in relativism.²

SPT is presented in the midst of a series of anti-skeptical arguments.³ And yet the skeptic is not the only opponent Lucretius has in mind. As I see it, much of the background for his position lies in Epicurean engagement with relativism. According to its best-known formulation in antiquity—in Plato’s *Theaetetus*—relativism embraces the view that all sense-perceptions are true. Epicurean epistemology, as I shall argue, aims to depart from relativism while preserving its insights.

The most difficult question in interpreting SPT is how to understand ‘true.’ In which sense do Epicureans employ the predicate ‘true’ when they say that all sense-perceptions are true? Scholars currently tend to favor a propositional reading: ‘true’ is used in SPT as it is used when propositions are evaluated as true or false. They tend to reject an existential reading, according to which ‘true’ means something like ‘existent.’ By drawing on the comparison with relativism, I argue that both readings are misguided. SPT, I propose, is the claim that sense-perception is *factive*. Before I defend my reading (sections titled “Truth,” “Perception Is Factive,” and “The *Theaetetus*”), an outline of Lucretius’s arguments is needed (sections titled “Lucretius’s Anti-Skeptical Arguments” and “The Criterial Argument and the Parity Argument”).

Lucretius's Anti-Skeptical Arguments

SPT is part of an extended anti-skeptical argument in Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*.⁴ The passage occurs within a section that can plausibly be said to begin at 4.469:

If then someone holds that nothing is known, he also doesn't know
whether this can be known, for he acknowledged to know nothing.
Against him then I give up to fight about this matter,
who has placed himself with his head in his own footprints. (4.469–72)

Lucretius's skeptic says, quite naively, that nothing can be known. This claim is inherently problematic.⁵ An unqualified assertion is plausibly understood as implying that the speaker takes herself to know what she is saying. So how can she claim that nothing is known? She would invite the question of whether she knows this—that nothing can be known.⁶ Perhaps Lucretius assumes that in some commonsensical way one can conceive of the skeptic as someone who says “nothing can be known,” or perhaps he does not care whether any particular thinker indeed holds this view. Whatever the case may be, Lucretius does not respond to the skeptic by arguing that, insofar as there is sense-perceptual knowledge—or some other kind of knowledge—there is knowledge. Instead he defends sense-perception as a basic kind of access to the world. This is a serious project, whether or not the skeptic who is invoked is a straw man. SPT, the claim I am interested in here, is put forward as part of it. Let me thus go through Lucretius's arguments, asking whether any of the points he makes help to explain and defend SPT.

Notions Argument (4.473–79): Lucretius argues that if we could not trust the senses, then we would not even have the notions of truth and knowledge.⁷ He asks the skeptic how, if she has never seen anything true, she knows what knowing and not-knowing are (474–75). As Lucretius sees it, the notion of truth was first created by the senses.

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

Priority Argument (4.483–85): Sense-perception is the beginning of cognitive activity, and thus the root of thinking. Thinking derives from or stems from sense perception (483–84). Thus, if sense-perceptions are not true, how could thinking be true (485)?

Parity Argument (4.486–98): Each sense—vision, hearing, and so on—has its own domain and power (*potestas, vis*), and insofar as it does, the senses cannot interfere with each other. Similarly, Lucretius argues that no sense can correct itself; that is, for example, no particular vision can

correct another vision. All sense-perceptions have the same standing. SPT is presented as following from this consideration (499).⁸ Here is the quote, together with the preceding lines:

And therefore it is necessarily the case
 that the senses are not such that they can compel each other.
 Nor will they be able, each for itself, to correct itself,
 for one must always have equal trust.
 Therefore what is perceived by one of them at a given time is true.
 (4.498–99)

Criterion Argument (513–21):⁹ Lucretius ends his series of anti-skeptical arguments by appealing to the criterial role of sense-perception. This is a core Epicurean commitment: sense-perceptions are criteria of truth. If the senses were false, Lucretius argues, our cognitive situation would resemble a house that is built with crooked measuring sticks and ill-adjusted scales. If such tools are used while the foundations of the building are erected, the whole building will be a mess, in danger of collapsing.

What do these arguments, from the immediate context of SPT, achieve? Lucretius describes the senses as our primary kind of access to the world, so much so that it is not even clear what it would mean to call them into question. However, one might hold this view without holding the claim that every *particular* sense-perception is true. One could agree with the Epicureans that sense-perception is basic to concept-formation and our ability to think. And one could argue that concept-acquisition is such as to secure access to the world, so that knowledge is possible. This line of argument is widespread in Hellenistic philosophy, shared by the Stoics and Epicureans. SPT goes beyond it in characterizing every single sense-perception as true. Lucretius's anti-skeptical arguments do not seem to offer much explanation of this far-reaching claim. Or, at least, they are so condensed that they need unpacking. As I see it, the Parity Argument and the Criterion Argument contain the seeds of a rationale for SPT, but they need to be explained further for this to become clear.¹⁰

The Criterion Argument and the Parity Argument

Consider first the Criterion Argument. Sense-perception, Lucretius says, must play the role of a criterion. According to Epicurean doctrine, sense-perceptions are criteria of truth (DL 10.31).¹¹ Notably, they do not serve to assess each other. Instead, our judgments are to be assessed in their light. A theory that agrees with sense-perception gains support; a theory that is in conflict with sense-perception must be dismissed. Sense-perception can play this criterial role because it is arational (DL 10.31). Perceptions are thought of as deliverances of the senses. We are aware of them, and in that sense they are 'in the mind.' But they do not involve the cognitive

activity of judging. This is of great importance to SPT: error or falsity is germane to judgment or belief-formation.¹² The claim that the senses are arational in the sense of not involving any judgment-activity translates into a further claim, namely, that the senses are truthful: they do not lie. The senses are mere receptacles and reporters of content.¹³ They are passively affected and do not ‘add’ or ‘subtract’ anything to the perception: they do not lie insofar as they do not alter the perception.¹⁴

And yet, the Epicureans locate sense-perception in the sense organs. Put somewhat crudely, this means that the eyes see and the ears hear, rather than the cognizer seeing with her eyes and hearing with her ears. To understand the upshot of the Epicurean position, it is helpful to compare it to two views discussed in Platonic dialogues—views that I here present in a highly schematic fashion, setting aside any number of controversial interpretive questions about the relevant passages.

First, one might think that the sense organs are responsible for perceiving. Qua bodily organs, they are deficient tools: their physicality negatively affects the quality of the input. This idea is discussed in the *Phaedo* (64–68).¹⁵ The eyes, here, are described as windows that the soul uses to glance at the outside. But, figuratively speaking, larger windows made from clearer glass would afford better vision. Human eyes have a particular physiology. This physiology not only shapes how we see, but also affects it in such a way as to ‘blur’ things by its very physicality. Second, one might go to the other extreme and argue that it is misguided to place sense-perception in any important way in bodily organs. They are tools, but the real activity lies with the mind. Sense-perception consists in sense-perceptual judgments, and it is thus a form of thinking. This view is discussed in the *Theaetetus* (184a–186e).¹⁶ The Epicurean account of the senses as non-falsifying deliverers is, as it were, in between. It ascribes the central role in sense-perception to the senses rather than to thought, but it does not see the senses as sources of alterations—it views them as neutral messengers.

Add to this that, according to the Parity Argument, there is no context that alters perception such as to make it erroneous. Consider external circumstances, say, of one’s position vis-à-vis an object: one can be far away from a tower or nearby. Being far away, the Epicureans argue, is not a falsifying circumstance. To think so, they say, is to make the very mistake that one would make if one thought that one could not hear the sound of a bell properly because one did not climb inside the bell (SE M7.206–10, LS 16E). This comparison strikes me as particularly helpful in understanding the gist of the Epicurean proposal. The bell example suggests that, in ordinary life, we assume that things will look differently from different angles and sound differently from different distances. We find this rather obvious and unproblematic. It is not a reason to consider any of these perceptions false.¹⁷ We still think that there are, say, better and worse ‘viewing conditions’ or ‘hearing conditions.’ But it is not as straightforward as one might suspect to explain what ‘better’ and ‘worse’ mean here. In one context—say, the acoustics of a concert hall—audio conditions are better if a certain

ideal of musical sound can be achieved. In another context—say, wanting to judge whether a tower is round or square—viewing conditions are best when we stand at a distance that allows us to see the object as a whole (not too close) and still sharply (not too far away).¹⁸ None of this, however, disputes the Epicurean proposal. The music does sound off in a room with bad acoustics; still, the sound is real and perceived as what it is. It is true that the tower looks round from a distance, and that is a relevant fact about it.¹⁹ Things look, sound, etc., differently from different angles, distances, and so on. These different perceptions are not such that one would ideally identify the one that is best. Instead, all of them provide us with information about the object—for example, how it looks when you look at it from a distance, or how it looks when you come so close that you no longer see the object as a whole.

Consider next ‘internal circumstances,’ states of the cognizer and their potential effect on her perceptions. Lucretius and Epicurus accept an idea that is already formulated in Plato’s *Theaetetus*: dreams and the visions of sick or mad people do not count as examples of false perceptions.²⁰ In the *Theaetetus*, this view is developed as a component of relativism. The relativist finds it arbitrary to prefer one state (say, being awake or healthy) over another (say, being asleep or sick). Similarly, dream-images and hallucinations are simply perceptions in Epicurean epistemology, on par with other perceptions. As Epicurus puts it, Orestes’s perception when he seemed to see the Furies was true, for he was moved by images that really existed. His mind jumped to a false belief, namely, that the Furies were solid bodies, but his perception was true (SE M 8.63).

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

Truth

How should one understand the predicate ‘true’ in the claim that all sense-perceptions are true?²¹ Gisela Striker, Stephen Everson, and Elisabeth Asmis see the puzzle as follows: truth-predicates cannot attach to sense-perceptions. Truth-predicates, it is assumed, must attach to something like propositions. Accordingly, the puzzle would be resolved if the Epicureans talked about the truth of propositions. Absent any texts that explicitly support this, scholars are content with a related idea: the truth-predicates could be applied to representational states, on the assumption that representational states have propositional counterparts.²² It is arguably not far-fetched to assume that, in Hellenistic epistemology, perception is thought to involve representational states.²³ Suppose we envisage such states and

corresponding propositions, say “this looks like a round tower to me now.” And suppose that, according to the Epicurean proposal, the corresponding proposition is the bearer of the truth-value. Then, it is argued, the problem is resolved. We have found a respectable bearer of the value ‘true.’

Interpreters readily admit that the sources are ambiguous and that there is a competing reconstruction. Their proposal stipulates (what can be called) a propositional sense of ‘true’ in SPT. A widely recognized alternative to this view is an existential sense of ‘true.’ Epicurus’s core argument is that perceptions are true insofar as each impression is the product of something existent (M 8.63).²⁴ An existent atomic image causes the perception. Moreover, and interpreters also grant this point, there is a Greek usage that takes ‘true’ in an existential sense, so that ‘true’ means ‘real’ or ‘existent.’²⁵ A version of the existential reading—the version that, for example, Everson engages with—formulates it as follows: SPT means that sense-perceptions exist. Call this the simple existential reading. It does not satisfy interpreters, and rightly so. Arguably, no one denies that sense-perceptions exist: the simple existential reading does not generate a controversial thesis. SPT, however, is put forward and responded to as highly controversial.

Interpreters also advance a positive argument for the propositional reading. As Everson points out, the Epicureans hold two theses: “all perceptions are true” and “beliefs are true or false” (M. 7.210).²⁶ Everson, Asmis, and Striker argue that the Epicureans employ ‘true’ in the same sense in both domains. The existential reading, however, does not allow for a plausible understanding of “beliefs are true or false.” It must be concluded, so the argument proceeds, that the Epicureans employ ‘true’ as one of two truth-values, true and false, which attach to something like propositions. This is presumably the only reading that makes sense of the claim about beliefs. Interpreters conclude that therefore ‘true’ must also be employed in a propositional sense in SPT. That is, according to widespread scholarly views, the existential reading—or what I call the simple existential reading—is to be dismissed as generating an uninteresting thesis, and the propositional reading is accepted as making sense of the comparison between sense-perceptions and beliefs.

However, though Epicurus compares sense-perception and belief, it is implausible that ‘true’ is used in precisely the same way in both contexts.²⁷ If this is the interpretive suggestion, the argument is in danger of turning the debate on its head. In the thesis that beliefs are true or false, ‘true’ is a success-term. In forming a belief, one aims to form a true belief. If one’s belief is, in fact, true, then one has succeeded in doing so. It is crucial to this enterprise that one could also fail, thus forming a false belief. In claiming that beliefs are true or false, the Epicureans are pointing to the activity of judgment, which, in their view, can add to or subtract from the perception, thus introducing falsity (M 7.210).

In discussing propositions or representational counterparts of propositions, interpreters move away quite significantly from the discussion of belief. The truth and falsity of propositions are, arguably, studied in logic

or philosophy of language. If beliefs are characterized as true or false, this tends to be part of what we today call normative epistemology.²⁸ It is part of a discussion of *how to think*—how to judge and not to judge, which criteria to employ in forming judgments, and so on. These kinds of questions are a central preoccupation of Hellenistic epistemology, including Epicurean epistemology. Contrary to what recent interpreters assume, with respect to belief, truth is not well explained as the notion one uses when speaking about truth-values of propositions. Instead, the relevant notion of truth includes the idea of truth as an *aim*.

The currently widespread reading is thus doubly problematic: it does not offer a compelling analysis of the claim that beliefs are true or false, and its assumption that ‘true’ is used in the same sense in SPT and in “beliefs are true or false” is misleading. If this were the case, it would imply that sense-perceptions can be false, which is denied in SPT. Moreover, to understand ‘true’ in the sense in which it attaches to propositions moves rather far away from the pervasive references in the relevant texts to the existence of atomic images and the perceptions they cause. Accordingly, a third interpretive option is needed, one that goes beyond the simple existential reading and that does not stipulate that ‘true’ is used as a success-term in SPT, as it is in “beliefs are true or false.”

Perception Is Factive

To find such an option, consider the question of whether there are other things that are characterized as true even though each instance is true and could not be false. There is an obvious candidate: knowledge. Knowledge is unerring, as Plato puts this premise in the *Theaetetus* (186c–e). The claim arguably goes back as far as Parmenides, who associates being, knowledge, and truth: knowledge is of what is, and “truth accompanies knowledge.”²⁹ This is a deep insight about knowledge, one that has not been disputed since. If one knows that *p*, it follows that *p* is true. One cannot know something that is not the case: what is known is a fact. This idea is today sometimes expressed as the thesis that the verb ‘to know’ is factive.

To say that knowledge is factive is to use a formulation that avoids the perplexity of assigning the truth-predicate to something that could not be false. The thesis “all pieces of knowledge are true” is one that, as far as I can see, no one holds—not because people think that knowledge can be false, but because people think that the relevant intuition is better expressed by saying “knowledge is unerring” (Plato) or “truth accompanies knowledge” (Parmenides) or “knowledge is factive” (contemporary epistemology). In colloquial terms, one may perhaps say that all knowledge is true. But after philosophical reflection one would reformulate this claim, saying, for example, that knowledge by its very nature is factive.

Perhaps Lucretius is putting forward the claim that perception is factive. SPT might be reconstructed as saying that every sense-perception

is of *what is* and therefore is *true*. This is my proposal: ‘true’ in “all sense-perceptions are true” means ‘factive.’³⁰ To see the advantages of this view, return to the simple existential reading, according to which SPT means that all sense-perceptions exist. This reading neglects what Epicurus says, namely, that perceptions are true insofar as each impression is the product of something existent (M 8.63). That is, Epicurus says here that the cause of perceptions exists, not that perceptions exist. A more sophisticated reading that takes seriously Epicurean concern with ‘what is real’ must begin with the question of what precisely exists: the sense-perception? its cause? or both?

To answer this question, turn to Epicurus’s explanation of the truth of pleasure and pain, which he claims is analogous to the truth of sense-perception. Pleasure and pain “come about from certain agents and in accordance with these agents,” pleasure from pleasant things and pain from painful things (M 7.203). There exist things that are productive of pleasure and others that are productive of pain. The former necessarily produce pleasure, the latter pain. The same applies to sense-perception. “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 7.203).³¹ Accordingly, the answer must be “both”: the cause of the sense-perception exists and the sense-perception exists. Together, this accounts for the truth of sense perceptions. Every sense perception is caused by something that exists, and it is of that which causes it. This is, I submit, precisely the thought that sense-perception is factive. A sense perception is generated by some atomic image, and it is this atomic image that is perceived.³²

The factive reading of ‘true’ meets several constraints of interpretation. First, it reads ‘true’ in such a way that what is characterized as true is not thereby something that could also be false. Second, it makes sense of the comparison with beliefs. “All perceptions are true” translates into the claim that perception is factive; “beliefs are true or false” can translate into the claim that belief is not factive. Third, it takes seriously Epicurean concern with the ‘real’ or ‘existent.’ Fourth, it generates a significant epistemological thesis—as significant as the analogous claim about knowledge. Fifth, it fits well with the upshot of the Parity and Criterial Arguments that Lucretius discusses. Sense-perceptions are the starting points of cognitive activity; judgments and theories are to be tested by whether they are in agreement with them. If sense-perception is factive, it plausibly supplies us with such starting-points.

The *Theaetetus*

To assess further whether the factive reading is compelling, I turn to Hellenistic engagement with Plato’s *Theaetetus*. The *Theaetetus* has long been recognized as a text that influenced Hellenistic epistemology

greatly.³³ It offers a host of arguments that became crucial to Hellenistic discussions about perception and that relate immediately to the questions discussed above. Accordingly, it seems rather plausible that Epicureans engage with some of Plato's arguments, if not as readers of the *Theaetetus* then as participants in debates about the ideas that are discussed in the dialogue.

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

In Plato, "perception is knowledge" is taken to be a thesis that interprets Protagoras's claim that "man is the measure."³⁴ That is, "each perception is true" is seen as a component of the larger proposal that every appearance—every case of "it appears to A that p"—is true, and this larger proposal counts as relativism. Now, one possible reaction to Plato's *Theaetetus* is the following: one could argue that Plato, by extending "each perception is true" to "each appearance is true" arrives at an unpalatable position, global relativism, a position that he goes on to reject. But suppose one were to stop at the initial intuition captured by the well-known Cold Wind Example: when I am cold, then there is a fact of the matter—a fact about how the wind feels to me—and my perception is true by virtue of this fact.³⁵ Is not this an insight about perception worth holding on to, even though the larger relativist perspective is flawed? Moreover, this example may lead one to think about the two components mentioned earlier: my state of being cold is real, and if it is, then it would appear that it must be *of* something real—perhaps a 'cold-wind-for-me'—that causes it. This is one of the ways in which Plato thinks through the implications of relativism.³⁶ As I see it, this cluster of ideas is precisely the motivation behind SPT.

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

At one point in the discussion of Protagoras's Measure Doctrine, Plato toys with an interesting concession to relativism. As a theory about all appearances or all judgments, relativism fails in multiple ways. But Socrates temporarily grants that there might be some truth to it. The claim that

“what seems to A is true-for-A,” he suggests, might be plausible for sense-perceptions in the present tense (171d–172c and 177c–179c).³⁷ It seems to be true for “things like hot, dry, sweet,” and so on, but not insofar as the future is concerned. It seems true only insofar as we consider what seems hot, dry, sweet, and so on, to a given cognizer now. In this context, Socrates introduces a notion that gains much importance in Hellenistic philosophy, and it is Epicurus who is credited with making it central: the notion of a *kriterion* (“criterion,” 178b). Socrates says that Protagoras’s doctrine seems to hold for white and heavy, and so on, as perceived in the present. In these cases, he says, people have the *kriterion* in themselves. Indeed, it seems as if Epicurus could have lifted this claim directly from the Platonic text.

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

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

Conclusion

From the point of view of Epicurean philosophy, the insight that each perception is factive—what is perceived is the case and thereby the perception is true—is too important to be glossed over. In the *Theaetetus*, this insight motivates relativism. Relativism goes too far, according to both Plato and the Epicureans. Still, from the point of view of Epicurean epistemology, relativism justly takes an interest in the kind of phenomenon that the Cold Wind Example captures. When I say “the wind is cold,” I say something that is true; and implicitly, I mean it to refer to me

qua cognizer and to the present tense—“the wind is cold for me now.” Present-tense perceptions are interesting because they occur in such a way as to make talk about them being true plausible, *and* in such a way as to make talk about them being false implausible. This, I think, is the Epicureans’ truth in relativism.

The factive reading has the great advantage of recognizing Lucretius’s argument as a rather good one. Recall that leading up to SPT Lucretius explains how all sense-perceptions are on a par, the point I called the Parity Argument. This point turns out to be crucial to the more complicated story in the background of the Epicureans’ commitment to the truth of all sense-perceptions. All sense-perceptions are deliverances of the senses, and all of them are of something that is; this is why they are factive, and in that sense true.³⁸

Notes

1. Important discussions of this claim include Gisela Striker, “Epicurus on the Truth of Sense-Impressions,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977): 125–42, reprinted in Gisela Striker, *Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77–91; David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Elisabeth Asmis, *Epicurus’ Scientific Method* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984) and Elisabeth Asmis, “Epicurean Empiricism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 84–104; David K. Glidden, “‘Sensus’ and Sense Perception in the ‘De rerum natura,’” *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 12 (1979): 155–81; James Warren, “Lucretius and Greek Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19–32; Stephen Everson, “Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses,” in *Epistemology*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161–83; Fritz Jürss, *Die epikureische Erkenntnistheorie* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1991); C. C. W. Taylor, “‘All Perceptions Are True,’” in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, ed. Malcolm Schofield et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 105–24; Paul Vander Waerdt, “Colotes and the Epicurean Refutation of Skepticism,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 30 (1989): 225–67.
2. I borrow this phrase, the “truth in relativism,” from Bernard Williams’s famous paper “The Truth in Relativism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75 (1974–75): 215–28. The expression can serve as a catchphrase for critical responses to relativism, responses that, nevertheless, concede that relativism makes some philosophically worthwhile proposals or addresses philosophically perplexing phenomena.
3. Throughout the chapter, I will be concerned with a subsection of Book 4 in Lucretius’s *DRN*, 4.469–521. Other contributors to this book, most notably Jacques Lezra and Philip Mitsis, explore the reception of Lucretius among modern philosophers such as Locke, Marx, and others. My chapter aims to take this one step further, asking how Lucretius’s views about sense-perception relate to contemporary discussions in epistemology. I hope to demonstrate that the relevant portion of *DRN* contains arguments about sense-perception and relativism that we can take seriously. Like the modern philosophers referenced in other essays, philosophers today have reason to turn to Lucretius’s writings.

4. I agree with David Sedley's outline of the sections of Book 4 (Sedley, *Lucretius*, 150); 26–238: existence and mobility of images; 239–468: vision, truth, and falsity; 469–521: refutation of skepticism; 522–721: the other senses; 722–822: thought; 823–57: critique of teleology; 858–1287: nutrition, motion, sleep, dreams, sex. For the Latin text, see Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 3 vols., Books 1–4, commentary by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
5. It is so obviously problematic that it was already improved upon by the Pre-Socratic Metrodorus of Chios, a student of Democritus. Metrodorus says at the beginning of his book *On Nature*: “None of us knows anything, not even this, whether we know or we do not know; nor do we know what ‘to not know’ or ‘to know’ are, nor on the whole, whether anything is or is not” (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.73, trans. Mi-Kyoung Lee, “Antecedents in Early Greek Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13–35, 19 = DK 70B1 [H. Diels, and W. Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1996). [= DK; hereafter cited as DK]; SE M 7.48, 87–88 [*Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians*, ed. and trans. R. Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). [=SE; hereafter cited as SE or Sextus]; Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.19.9 [*Eusebius Werke, Band 8: Die Praeparatio evangelica*, ed. K. Mras. *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, vols. 43.1 and 43.2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954 [43.1], 1956 [43.2]).
6. If Lucretius intends to address the skepticism of those who wrote during the second and first century BC, he fails. Here are some dates that may help situate Lucretius: Pyrrho (360–270); Epicurus (341–270); Arcesilaus, the first Academic skeptic (316–241); Aenesidemus, a major Pyrrhonian skeptic (first century BC); Lucretius (99–55). In general, I suspect that skepticism develops more in exchange with Epicurean epistemology than it is standardly assumed. But Epicurus does not yet have sophisticated skeptics as interlocutors. Skepticism was significantly advanced by the need to reply to Epicurean and Stoic challenges. At the time when Lucretius writes there are sophisticated kinds of skepticism to respond to.
7. “You will find that by the senses was first created / the notion of truth; and that the senses cannot be refuted.” [*Invenies primis ab sensibus esse creatam / notitiam veri neque sensus posse refelli.*] (478–79); *notitiam veri* is ambiguous: it could mean “notion of truth” or “acquaintance with truth.” The context suggests that Lucretius wants to cover both ideas. This argument is in line with what appears to be an Epicurean argument against skepticism, namely, the charge that skeptics cannot have concepts and accordingly cannot think. Cf. Katja Maria Vogt, “Skepticism and Concepts: Can the Skeptic Think?,” in *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato*, ed. K. M. Vogt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 140–57.
8. Sextus ascribes SPT to Epicurus (M 8.63), but there is no explicit version of it in the surviving letters.
9. I skip some famous lines, because they are, for current purposes, a distraction. They contain an Apraxia Argument (500–12): Lucretius asks his reader to suppose that an object looks square from nearby and round from a distance. Even if one were to make a false judgment, ascribing one's perception of the distant object to a false cause—a round object causing the perception—one would be better off, in Lucretius's view, than if one were to generally mistrust the senses. Life and safety depend on trust in the senses.
10. Cf. Epicurus's defense of the truth of sense-perceptions: “All sensation, he says, is arational and does not accommodate memory...Nor does there exist that which

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- can refute sensations: neither can like sense refute like, because of their equal validity nor unlike unlike, since they are not discriminatory of the same things; nor can reason, since all reason depends on the senses; nor can one individual sensation refute another, since they all command our attention. And also the fact of sensory recognitions confirms the truth of sensations. And our seeing and hearing are facts, just as having pain is... The figments of madmen and dreaming are true. For they cause movement, whereas the non-existent does not move anything” (DL 10.31–32 [Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, with an English translation by R. D. Hicks, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Wm. Heinemann, 1958–59); vol. 1, 1959 [=DL; hereafter cited as DL]; trans. LS 16B [A. A. Long, and D. N. Sedley, eds. and trans., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) [=LS; hereafter cited as LS].
11. Asmis, “Epicurean Empiricism” focuses on Epicurean criteria of truth. Cf. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 23 [=LS 16D]: “If you argue against all your sensations, you will then have no criterion to declare any of them false.”
 12. Epicurus says: “There is no error in sense-perception” (SE M 8.9).
 13. Lucretius uses the same word, *sensus*, for sense-perception in general, for sense-organs (physiologically conceived), and for their deliverances (the perceptions); cf. Glidden, “‘Sensus’ and Sense Perception,” 155. Accordingly, it is not always evident that “all sense-perceptions are true” and “the senses are truthful” are two theses—but they are. It is likely that Epicurus can be credited with the view that the senses never lie (*Lucullus* 26.82; Cicero, *Akademische Abhandlungen Lucullus*, ed. and trans. Christoph Schäublin [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998]). Moreover, it is likely that Epicurus took that claim to be immediately related to another claim, one that is rather close to SPT, namely, that if one perception were false, then none would be true. According to Cicero, Epicurus says, for this reason, that all of the senses give a “true report” (*De natura Deorum* 1.25, 70). Cicero, *De Natura Deorum. Academica*, with an English translation by H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1933).
 14. Everson argues that, for Epicurus, this point provides the rationale for SPT: “What allows Epicurus his confidence in the truth of all perceptions is the fact that the processes involved in perception are such that external objects ‘imprint their natures’ on the senses: what perception is produced is entirely determined by the nature of the external object which gives rise to it by affecting the sense-organ” (“Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses,” 173–74).
 15. *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).
 16. Cf. Michael Frede, “Observations on Perception in Plato’s Later Dialogues,” and John Cooper, “Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge (*Theaetetus* 184–86),” both in *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355–76 and 377–83.
 17. Cf. Lucretius 4.379–86 on shadows and light (LS 16H).
 18. The claim that all sense perceptions are true is compatible with the claim that, for a given purpose, there are good viewing (hearing, etc.) conditions. The sound of a bell does not, *simpliciter*, sound right from a given distance, though it can sound right for calling people to lunch, or for patients in hospitals calling a nurse when they need assistance, and so on.
 19. Architects tend to design buildings such that, from different angles and distances, they generate different ‘vistas.’ This is not a misleading side effect, occurring when viewers are not in the ‘right’ place vis-à-vis the building; it is essential to good architecture.

20. Epicurus was firmly committed to this view. Cf. DL 10.32 [= LS 15F] and Plutarch *adv. Col.* 1109B; 1121 D, E; 1124 B. Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes in Defense of the Other Philosophers*, in *Plutarch: Moralia*, vol. 14, trans. Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. de Lacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 151–315.
21. Asmis argues that there is a correspondence between the appearance (as a mental representation) and the influx of atoms (“Epicurean Empiricism,” 94, n.19). Asmis writes: “All perceptions are true in that they correspond to something from the outside; in addition, we are able to perceive enduring external objects” (“Epicurean Empiricism,” 85), and “whatever appears in perception corresponds to something that enters us from outside; in every case, therefore, we perceive something from the outside as it really is” (“Epicurean Empiricism,” 95).
22. Say, if the tower looks round to me, Striker thinks that a proposition corresponds to it, namely, “this looks like a round tower” (“Epicurus on the Truth of Sense-Impressions,” 90). This kind of proposition—that is, one that refrains from judging how things are, merely capturing what Epicurus calls *to paron*, what is ‘present’—might plausibly always be true.
23. For example, Stoic impressions (*phantasiai*) seem to be of this sort. For current purposes, the question of how precisely representational states are thought of in Epicurean epistemology need not be pursued.
24. At M 8.9, Sextus says that, according to Epicurus, it makes no difference whether you call something “true” (*alêthes*) or “existent” (*huparchon*).
25. Rist argues that “a real event takes place in the act of sensing” (John M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972], 19–20). Striker, “Epicurus on the Truth of Sense-Impressions,” says that the interpretation that “true” means “real” is, at the time, the standard view in the literature.
26. Everson, “Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses,” 167. Cf. SE M 7.203.
27. If the report in Sextus Empiricus is to be trusted, Epicurus says that sense-perception and belief are ‘two corresponding things’ (Ἐπίκουρος δὲ δυεῖν ὄντων τῶν συζυγούντων ἀλλήλοις πραγμάτων, φαντασίας καὶ [τῆς] δόξης) (M 7.203). However, this need not mean more than that they are to be compared with each other, and that there is a sequence and connection to explore: sense-perception comes first and belief, which is in danger of adding or subtracting something, second.
28. On this distinction, cf. Vogt, “Why Beliefs Are Never True: A Reconstruction of Stoic Epistemology,” Chapter 7 in Vogt, *Belief and Truth*, 158–82.
29. “But come, I will tell you—preserve the account when you hear it— / the only roads of enquiry there are to be thought of: / one, that it is and cannot not be, / is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it)” (B 2.1–4, trans. Jonathan Barnes, ed., *Early Greek Philosophy*, 2nd ed. [New York: Penguin Books, 2001], 80, with changes) [εἰ δ’ ἄγ’ ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας, / αἴπερ ὁδοὶ μοῦναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοήσαι· / ἢ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, / Πειθοῦς ἔστι κέλευθος (Ἀληθείη γὰρ ὀπηδεῖ)]. Assuming that “persuasion” is the domain of knowledge, the opening lines in Parmenides’s poem associate *truth*, *knowledge*, and *what is*. Knowledge is true and ‘of’ what is. I am glossing the relevant idea about knowledge and truth as “truth accompanies knowledge.”
30. Today, many philosophers assume that, while perceptual experience is non-factive, perception is factive. Cf. Tim Crane: “I assume the now standard terminological distinction between perceptual experience, which is non-factive or non-relational, and perception, which is both factive and relational.” (“Is Perception a Propositional Attitude?,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 59 [2009]: 452–69.)

31. I am here adopting Everson's translation of the passage ("Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses," 166–67).
32. Note that this is not a proposal about correspondence, as if the pleasure (or pain or perception) was true by virtue of corresponding to its cause. The relevant relation is one of production. Cf. M 7.205.
33. Everson, "Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses" also draws on the *Theaetetus*, though not to the extent that I do.
34. "Man is the measure of all things, of things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not." (*Theaetetus*, 152a2–5; this is a quote from Protagoras's book *Truth (Alêtheia)*; cf. SE M 7.60). "That as each thing appears to me (*emoi phainetai*), so it is for me (*estin emoi*), and as it appears to you, so it is for you." (152a2–5, 152a7–9). Later in the dialogue the Measure Doctrine is rephrased in terms of what we might call Truth Relativism (cf. 157e): what seems to A is true-for-A and what seems to B is true-for-B.
35. Here is how the Cold Wind Example is introduced (152b): The same wind is blowing. One of us feels cold, the other does not. The wind is cold for the person who feels cold, and not cold for the other person.
36. *Theaetetus* 153d–160e.
37. Socrates suggests that the Measure Doctrine might hold for *two* domains: present-tense sense-perceptions and the law as it applies to the present. The latter, however, is irrelevant for present purposes (though obviously there are interesting questions about the interrelations between both domains).
38. I am grateful to Jacques Lezra for inviting me to present this chapter at a conference on *Lucretius and Modernity*, and to the other speakers and audience for lively discussion. Jens Haas contributed extensive feedback on several versions of the chapter.