

Is Epicurus a Direct Realist?

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Abstract

In his *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus presents a controversial theory of perception according to which "all perceptions are true." In this paper, I argue that Epicurus' theory of perception should be interpreted as a version of direct realism. If this interpretation is correct, then Epicurus holds that typical human perceivers have direct perceptual awareness of mind-independent objects. In the first section, I present an interpretation of Epicurus' theory of perception. I interpret Epicurus as subscribing to the view according to which our perceptions *always* provide us with entirely accurate information about the world. In the second section, I provide an outline of a version of direct realism. The version of direct realism I present here is strongly indebted to the work of Michael Huemer. In the third section, using the framework developed in the second section, I argue that Epicurus should be interpreted as a direct realist.

Introduction

According to direct realism, typical human perceivers have direct perceptual awareness of mind-independent objects. In this paper, I argue that Epicurus holds a version of direct realism. I do *not* argue that Epicurus took himself to be a direct realist; to be sure, he never used such terminology. Rather, I argue that Epicurus' theory can be viewed as a predecessor to the theory of perception that we now call 'direct realism.' I proceed as follows. First, I present an interpretation of Epicurus' theory of perception. I focus on the role he attributes to *eidola* or 'images' in his account of perception. Second, I outline direct realism. Third, I argue that Epicurus should be interpreted as a direct realist.

Epicurus' Theory of Perception

In this section, I give an interpretation of Epicurus' account of human perception. Epicurus' account of perception must be understood in terms of his atomism. Epicurus holds that the world consists of two basic elements: bodies and void.¹ All phenomena can be fully explained in terms of these two elements. Atoms are the simple bodies by

¹ E 39. 'E' refers to Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," in *The Epicurus Reader*, 5-19.

which the world is constituted.² By contrast, void is empty, absolute space.³ Atoms are distinguished from void by their resistance. Atoms are “resistant to blows,” because they do not allow other atoms to pass through them. By contrast, void is “yielding,” because it allows atoms to pass through it.⁴

Material objects, such as tables and chairs, are constituted by atoms bound or “locked” together in compounds.⁵ Atoms bound in compounds are never motionless. But they do not emanate freely like unbound atoms. Instead, they vibrate in place.⁶ This constant vibration causes some atoms to become unbound. When this occurs, the unbound atoms emanate from the object in streams. Thus, streams of atoms, on Epicurus’ view, emanate constantly from all material objects.

Epicurus holds that the streams of atoms that emanate from objects are the causes of our perceptions. He calls these streams ‘*eidola*’ or ‘images.’ *Eidola* are outlines of the objects from which they emanate. For the present purposes, they can be understood as representations of the objects from which they emanate. For example, *eidola* that emanate from a chair represent that chair. Moreover, *eidola* are not themselves objects or “solids.”⁷ While Epicurus holds that all objects contain some amount of void, he claims that *eidola* are “hollow and thin” and “have an unsurpassed fineness,” plausibly meaning that they contain more void than paradigmatic material objects.⁸

According to the present interpretation, Epicurus holds that perceptions are representational mental states: they are mental states that “report” that the world is a certain way.⁹ Perceptions occur when *eidola* impact one’s soul.¹⁰ For Epicurus, the soul is constituted by atoms distributed throughout the body.¹¹ Thus, perceptions are caused by the atoms of *eidola* coming into contact with the atoms of the soul. *Eidola* make contact with the soul by entering the body through the “pores” of our sensory organs.¹² Moreover, the soul is necessary but not sufficient for perception: “[the soul] would not have acquired [the power of perception] if it were not somehow enclosed in the rest of

² E 40.

³ For an alternative interpretation of Epicurus’ notion of void, see David Sedley, “Two Conceptions of Vacuum,” *Phronesis* 27, no. 2 (1982).

⁴ Tim O’Keefe, “Epicurus’ Garden: Physics and Epistemology,” in *The Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. James Warren and Frisbee Sheffield (New York: Routledge, 2014), 457.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ E 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*; E 47.

⁹ Sextus *M* 8.9 in *The Epicurus Reader*, 84. Also see E 51

¹⁰ See E 63: “Further, one must hold firmly that the soul is most responsible for sense perception.”

¹¹ E 63. See Alfred E. Taylor, *Epicurus* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 71.

¹² Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 160. See 1109c of Plutarch’s *Against Colotes*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, 68.

the aggregate.”¹³ According to Epicurus, the body and the soul are in a “harmonious relationship.” We possess the faculty of perception in virtue of this relationship between the body and the soul.¹⁴

As Ana Miloš notes, Epicurus holds that perception is passive in two respects.¹⁵ First, perception is passive because perceptions are always generated by external causes: namely, *eidola* emanating from material objects. That is, according to Epicurus, perception *only* occurs as the result of external causes; it is never self-generated. Second, perception is passive because it is non-rational. What one perceives is not the result of rational mental processes; rather, it is the result only of the external causes by which one’s soul is affected.¹⁶ Activities of the mind do not contribute content to perceptions. Perceptions therefore do not report anything beyond what is represented by the *eidola* by which they are caused. For example, suppose a stream of *eidola* emanate from a chair. When those *eidola* impact one’s soul, the resulting perception will report that the chair is exactly as the *eidola* represent it as being. If the *eidola* represent the chair as being large and brown, then the perception caused by those *eidola* will report that (a) there is a chair and (b) it is large and brown.

According to Epicurus, *eidola* and the objects from which they emanate have the same properties (excluding their density or fineness).¹⁷ For example, if *eidola* emanate from a brown chair, then those *eidola* have the same properties as the chair, such as its shape and situation. Thus, on the present interpretation, Epicurus holds that *eidola* accurately represent their objects. There is significant textual evidence for this interpretation. For example, Epicurus states:

For it is not impossible for such compounds [i.e., *ediola*] to come into being in the surrounding environment, nor that there should be favorable opportunities for the production of hollow and thin [films], nor that [*eidola*] should retain the relative position and standing that they had in the solid objects.¹⁸

At first pass, it appears that Epicurus says here only that *eidola could* retain the same situation of their objects. For example, if *eidola* emanate from a chair in the far corner of the room, then the *eidola* could represent the chair as being situated in the far corner of the room. But Epicurus also appears to say that it is only *possible* that material objects should emit *eidola*. But it is clear that he thinks material objects *do* emit

¹³ E 64.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ana G. Miloš, “Epicurean Perceptual Content,” *Prolegomena* 14, no. 2 (2015): 170-171.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Epicurus*, 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43. See also J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), 83.

¹⁸ E 46.

eidola.¹⁹ Likewise, I take Epicurus to indicate here that he holds that *eidola* do retain—that is, represent—the situation of the objects from which they emanate.

Epicurus holds that our perceptions provide us with accurate information about the world. In fact, he holds a stronger view than this, according to which our perceptions are *entirely* accurate representations of the world.²⁰ This follows from what has been said above. Recall that what one perceives is all and only the result of the *eidola* that impact one's soul. Recall also that *eidola* have the same properties as the objects from which they are emitted. Thus, if a perception reports that a material object has certain properties, then the object does, in fact, have those properties. In other words, our perceptions represent the material objects we perceive exactly as they are. All of our perceptions are veridical.

There is strong textual evidence for this interpretation. For example, Epicurus states: “whatever presentation we receive by a form of application [i.e. *eidola*], whether by the intellect or by the sense organs, and whether of a shape or of accidents, this *is* the shape of the solid object, produced by the continuous compacting or residue of the image.”²¹ Here, Epicurus claims that our perceptions of objects represent “solid objects” exactly as they are. Recall that *eidola*, on Epicurus' view, are thin and fine. Thus, it is implausible that Epicurus referring to *eidola* with the phrase ‘solid objects.’ Epicurus therefore is not claiming that our perceptions represent *eidola* exactly as they are. Rather, he is claiming that our perceptions represent *material objects* (e.g., tables and chairs) exactly as they are.

Epicurus does not deny that we can be mistaken about the objects we perceive. Rather, he denies that *perception* is responsible for such error. According to Epicurus, when one is mistaken about an object one perceives, this mistake is the result of an *opinion* one has about one's perception of the object.²² For example, suppose a subject sees a stick halfway submerged in water. Suppose further that she believes on the basis of her perception that the stick is bent, when, in fact, the stick is straight. Epicurus holds that the subject's error is the result of an opinion she has *about* her perception; her error is not the result of her perception itself.

¹⁹ E 49.

²⁰ I say ‘entirely accurate’ here because accuracy comes in degrees, according to contemporary work in the philosophy of mind. Perceptions, then, can be more or less accurate. For a discussion, see Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Perception* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 30-33.

²¹ E 49.

²² Elizabeth Asmis, “Epicurean Empiricism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren (New York: Cambridge UP, 2009), 95. See E 50.

Direct Realism

In this section, I give an outline of direct realism. There are several versions of direct realism present in the contemporary literature on perception. My aim here is not to argue for one version over another; such a task is outside the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, I outline only one version of this theory. The version that I outline here is strongly indebted to the theory Michael Huemer develops in his *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*.²³

According to direct realism we have *direct perceptual awareness* of mind-independent objects.²⁴ ‘Awareness’ is technical term in the philosophy of mind. On the present view, in order for a perceiver P to be aware of an object *x*, three conditions must be met. *First*, P must have a mental representation of *x*.²⁵ A mental representation is a type of mental state. A mental state is representational just in case it has representational content. What it is for a mental state to have representational content is (roughly) for it to represent the world as being a certain way.

Second, in order for P to be aware of *x*, *x* must (a) exist and (b) at least roughly satisfy or correspond to the representational content of P’s mental representation.²⁶ With respect to (a), on the present view, awareness is a relation between a subject who is aware and the thing of which she is aware. When one is aware, that is, one is always aware of something.²⁷ The present use of awareness is thus distinct from the “folk” usage of the term, according to which to be aware is roughly to be conscious (i.e., not knocked out). Since awareness is a relation between a subject and a thing, if P is aware of *x*, then *x* exists.²⁸ If *x* did not exist, then P could not stand in relation to it, and P therefore could not be aware of *x*. Moreover, according to (b) of this second condition, P is aware of *x* only if *x* at least roughly satisfies the content of P’s mental representation.

Third, in order for P to be aware of *x*, there must be a causal connection between P and *x* in virtue of which *x* satisfies the content of P’s representation.²⁹ According to this condition, cases of “accidental awareness” are not cases of genuine awareness. For example, suppose that a subject in Portland has a mental representation of a pink elephant walking through Times Square. Suppose further that there is, in fact, a pink

²³ Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

²⁴ See Laurence Bonjour, “In Search of Direct Realism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, no. 2 (2004): 353-354.

²⁵ Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

elephant walking through Times Square. By this third condition, the subject is not aware of the pink elephant, because there is no causal connection between her mental representation and the pink elephant.

There is a distinction between *direct awareness* and *indirect awareness*. This distinction can be understood in terms of the *basing relation*.³⁰ If a perceiver P is *directly* aware of an object *x*, then P's awareness of *x* is not based on an awareness of anything else. By contrast, if P is *indirectly* aware of *x*, then P's awareness of *x* is based on an awareness of something else.³¹ For example, suppose one goes to one's window and sees that the ground is wet. That is, one has an awareness of the ground being wet. From this awareness, one may become aware of it raining. If so, then one's awareness of the weather is based on one's awareness of the ground being wet. Thus, in this case, one is indirectly aware of it raining, because this awareness is based on a mediating awareness of something else.

The basing relation is a relation between mental states—for our purposes, it is a relation between awarenesses.³² The basing relation is *not* a relation between a mental state and an object: an awareness cannot be based on an object. Moreover, the function of the basing relation is to transmit one's awareness from one thing to another.³³ The basing relation, that is, involves a "movement" from one awareness to another. The principal (but not necessarily only) way whereby this movement occurs is inference. For example, suppose one is aware of something *x*. Suppose further that one becomes aware of something *y* by inferring *y* from *x*. In this case, one's awareness of *y* is based on one's awareness of *x*, because one inferred *y* from *x*.

Before returning to Epicurus, a final distinction needs to be made: namely, the distinction of between *objects of awareness* and *vehicles of awareness*.³⁴ An object of awareness is a thing of which one is aware. For example, if one is aware of the ground being wet, then the object of one's awareness is the ground and its properties. By contrast, a vehicle of awareness is something by which one is aware of something else. A vehicle of awareness, as I use the term, need not be a mental state. A vehicle of awareness, rather, is anything by virtue of which one is aware of something else.

Epicurus and Direct Realism

In this section, I argue that Epicurus holds a version of direct realism. In the following argument, I assume that Epicurus is committed to two claims. First, I assume that

³⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 55.

³³ Ibid., 56.

³⁴ Ibid., 81.

Epicurus is a realist: he holds that objects do not depend for their existence of the existence of minds. Second, I assume that Epicurus holds that typical humans are perceptually aware of paradigmatic material objects, such as tables and chairs. Epicurus does not deny, that is, that we perceive material objects. My argument can be stated as follows:

- P1: If one holds (a) that we are perceptually aware of mind-independent objects and (b) that our perceptual awareness of such objects is direct, then one holds direct realism. [Definition of Direct Realism]
- P2: Epicurus holds that we are perceptually aware of mind-independent objects.
- P3: Epicurus holds that our perceptual awareness of mind-independent objects is direct.
- C: Therefore, Epicurus holds direct realism.

Is P2 true? Recall that there are three conditions for (perceptual) awareness. In order for P2 to be true, Epicurus must hold that, in typical cases of human perception, these three conditions are met. *First*, in order for a perceiver P to be aware of an object x , P must have a mental representation of x .³⁵ On the present interpretation, Epicurus does hold that we have mental representations of objects—he calls these ‘perceptions.’³⁶ *Second*, in order for P to be aware of x , x must (a) exist and (b) satisfy (at least roughly) the content of P’s mental representation.³⁷ With respect to (a), recall that Epicurus holds that perceptions are never self-generated. Thus, according to Epicurus, in order for P to be perceptually aware of x , x must exist. With respect to (b), recall that Epicurus holds that all perceptions are veridical. Thus, according to Epicurus, the content of a perception is always satisfied by the object of that perception. *Third*, in order for P to be aware of x , there must be a causal connection between P and x in virtue of which x satisfies the content of P’s mental representation.³⁸ According to Epicurus, objects are causally connected to perceptions by *eidola*, which are emitted from objects and cause our perceptions by impacting our souls. Thus, Epicurus holds that, in typical cases of human perception, the three conditions for awareness are met. P2 is therefore true.

P3 is true only if Epicurus holds that, in typical cases of human perception, our awareness of mind-independent material objects is not based on an awareness of anything else, such as *eidola*. Textual evidence indicates that Epicurus holds that we are perceptually aware not of *eidola*, but of material objects. For example, he states: “One must also believe that it is when something from the external objects enters into us that

³⁵ Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 55.

³⁶ E 51; E 63.

³⁷ Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

we see and think about their [i.e., the objects'] shapes."³⁹ Likewise, when introducing *eidola*, he states: "there exist outlines [i.e., *eidola*] which are similar in shape to solids, only much finer than observed objects."⁴⁰ In this statement, Epicurus contrasts *eidola* with "observed objects." Plausibly, this implies that *eidola* are not themselves perceived. Moreover, consider (again) this statement: "whatever presentation we perceive [...] this is the shape of the solid object, produced by the continuous compacting or residue of the image."⁴¹ Here, Epicurus claims that our perceptions are representations not of *eidola*, but of objects. Thus, textual evidence does not support an interpretation according to which Epicurus holds that we are perceptually aware of *eidola*. Moreover, there doesn't seem to be anything of which we could be perceptually aware besides objects and their *eidola*. Thus, according to the present interpretation, Epicurus holds that all perceptual awareness is awareness of objects (and their properties).⁴² If so, then our perceptual awareness of objects is not based on awareness of anything else. Thus, P3 is true. And if P2 and P3 are true, then the conclusion follows: Epicurus is a direct realist.

One might object that it is unclear where *eidola* fit into the picture, if the present interpretation is true. If the present interpretation cannot give an adequate account of the role of *eidola*, then it fails as an interpretation of Epicurus; for Epicurus ascribes to *eidola* a significant role in perception. Recall the above distinction between objects of awareness and vehicles of awareness. According to my interpretation, *eidola* are not objects of awareness; rather, *eidola* are vehicles of our awareness of material objects. That is, *eidola* are things by virtue of which we are perceptually aware of material objects. *Eidola* are causally responsible for our awareness, but they are not the things of which we are aware. Thus, the present interpretation is able to give an adequate account of the role of *eidola* in perception.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have given an interpretation of Epicurus' theory of perception, as presented in his Letter to Herodotus. Moreover, I have argued that Epicurus holds a version of direct realism. I have argued, that is, that Epicurus holds (a) that we are perceptually aware of mind-independent, material objects and (b) that this perceptual awareness is not based on awareness of anything else. In order to establish (b), I have used textual evidence to show that Epicurus does not hold that we have perceptual awareness of *eidola* themselves, and so our awareness of material objects could not be based on awareness of *eidola*.

³⁹ E 49.

⁴⁰ E 46.

⁴¹ E 50.

⁴² I am using the term 'object' in an informal sense, such that it is synonymous with 'thing.'

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