

EPICUREAN ILLUSIONS

Illusions play a central part in Epicurean philosophy. One of its fundamental assumptions is that men are the victims of a certain grand illusion and, as long as they remain so, can never aspire to a happy life. This is the illusion that pleasures can be increased in intensity without limit. It is as a result of this that men go to enormous lengths to enlarge their capacity to procure more pleasure, struggling in pursuit of goals that can rarely, if ever, be achieved. But here mankind has made a disastrous mistake: the limit of pleasure is reached with the removal of pain, and after that point it cannot be increased, only varied. The illusion has therefore led to a tragic state of affairs, a sad history of fruitless war, struggle and ambition and it is a vital part of Epicurus' programme to rid men of this evil by teaching them the true limits of pleasure.

The very fact that Epicurus thinks it necessary to point all this out suggests an extreme pessimism about man's cognitive achievements in the area. Whatever faculties we may have for learning about pleasure and pain, they do not appear to have been of any great benefit. But if we look to his epistemology to find an explanation for such pessimism, we are in for a surprise. For pessimism is not the first thing that strikes one about his epistemology: on the contrary, its most remarkable feature is perhaps its generosity. Epicurus equipped all of us with the basic tools of knowledge – perceptions, feelings and primary concepts, or 'prolepses'; all these represent the criteria of truth, the tribunals to which we refer every judgement we make. Of these criteria it is the feelings which provide infallible testimony about bodily states of pleasure and pain.

How then are we to explain the illusion of infinitely increasing pleasure? Having admitted that we all have perfectly reliable reports about our pleasures and pains, Epicurus turns round and tells us that on the whole men have failed to realize that after a certain point their pleasures stop increasing and only vary. How can we be so mistaken about our own states of pleasure if our feelings are so trustworthy? Were these criteria of truth beyond the reach of the common man, it would be immediately obvious why Epicurus is so pessimistic about man's susceptibility to illusion. But for Epicurus the criteria are readily available to everyone: we are all constantly receiving information about our bodily pleasures *via* our feelings. However these illusions do happen, it is not because we lack the fundamental grounds for testing our judgements. So Epicurus seems faced with a dilemma: either the feelings are false or the limit of pleasure is not where Epicurus places it.

It looks as if there is a tension then between Epicurus the moralist and Epicurus the epistemologist. On one hand he pronounces a gloomy diagnosis, on the other he cheerfully appeals to our cognitive well-being. If this tension turns out to be real, the threat that it poses to Epicurus' philosophy can hardly be exaggerated. The danger is that in the very act of diagnosing the illusion to which mankind has succumbed Epicurus has destroyed any chances he might have had for curing it: the statement of the diagnosis and the promise of a cure produce an outright contradiction.

I. THE PROBLEM OF HEDONIC ILLUSIONS

To clarify the problem that the occurrence of hedonic illusions poses for Epicurus, we need some background. Epicurus thought that pleasure is the primary and congenital good for any living creature and that pleasure is the goal of human life.¹ This, however, does not imply that every pleasure is to be pursued as a vital constituent of a good life. If any pleasure is likely to lead to pain in the future it is to be avoided. Likewise, if any pain will lead to pleasure in the long term it should not be avoided.² Epicurus made a distinction between a pleasure being good (*qua* pleasure) and its being choiceworthy. Of its very nature any pleasure is good, but whether or not it is choiceworthy depends upon whether it promotes our *long-term* pleasure. This made Epicurus a firm believer in the hedonistic calculus: judging whether a pleasure is to be pursued involves weighing up its consequences for the future and comparing it to other pleasures and pains.

When Epicurus advocates a life of pleasure, however, he has in mind pleasures that many would consider somewhat parsimonious, which do not include those of fine wine and food, for instance. The reasons for this lie in two controversial claims that he made about pleasure. First, the absence of pain is a sufficient condition for pleasure, there being no neutral state between pleasure and pain.³ Second, once a pleasure has been achieved by the removal of pain it is not possible to increase it any further. All we can do is to vary it.⁴ So, for example, we are in pain so long as we are hungry, but as soon as we have satisfied the hunger by eating (and so removed the pain) we are *ipso facto* in pleasure, and after this point we cannot be in any greater pleasure: however hard we try, however much more we eat, and however exquisite the food, it makes no difference to the intensity of our bodily pleasure.

Corresponding to this doctrine about the limit of pleasure is a distinction between different types of desire.⁵ The basic distinction is between necessary and unnecessary desires. A necessary desire is for the removal or avoidance of pain; an unnecessary one is for any pleasure that merely varies a state of pleasure that has reached its limit. An example of a necessary desire is to satisfy hunger, an unnecessary one to eat exquisite food *qua* exquisite. Epicurus also distinguished natural from unnatural desires: some desires are natural and necessary, such as the desire to satisfy hunger or to keep warm; others are natural but unnecessary, such as the desire for exquisite food; and the final group consisted of unnatural and unnecessary desires, such as the desire for the erection of statues in one's own honour. In order to attain a life free from pain we only need to satisfy our natural and necessary desires, and this means understanding the limit of pleasure. If we pursue the other types of desire we merely make our lives more difficult – and hence more prone to pain – by becoming dependent upon what is, more often than not, beyond our reach – and all this effort for pleasures that are no greater than those more readily available.⁶

When it comes to deciding whether one pleasure is greater than, not merely different from, another, most people, according to Epicurus, are prone to error, having little or no idea of the point at which pleasure stops increasing.⁷ Let us take a supreme example of this. Imagine a gourmet sitting down to his six-course dinner. Imagine the relish with which he anticipates the fourth course, for instance, a

¹ Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 129.

³ *Ep. Men.* 128; *K.Δ.* 3; Cicero, *Fin.* 1.37–8.

⁵ Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 128; *K.Δ.* 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, esp. 14–19; 6.9–42.

² *Ibid.*; Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.95.

⁴ Cicero, *Fin.* 1.38.

⁶ Lucretius 2.1–19.

tournedos Rossini. Let us suppose that at the start of the meal he is not particularly hungry and that all the pangs of hunger are removed by the consumption of a couple of bread rolls. The Epicurean analysis has it that a tournedos Rossini will indeed give him bodily pleasure but no more than when he eats the rolls, merely a different pleasure. Thus on seeing the relish with which our gourmet sits down to his dinner Epicurus convicts him of an illusory desire based upon a false anticipation of the degree of future pleasure.

But it may not simply be a question of illusory desire. There is the issue of false pleasure. Do not suppose that once the gourmet gets round to eating the tournedos the scales will fall from his eyes and that he will quickly realize that Epicurus was right all along: he is most unlikely to admit that the pleasure of eating the tournedos is no greater than that of eating the rolls. If he thinks that the tournedos is more pleasant while he is actually eating it, Epicurus will have to accuse him not of illusory desires and false anticipations as to the degree of future pleasure, but of an illusion about the present feeling of pleasure. He will claim that the gourmet is right to think that the tournedos is productive of pleasure, wrong to suppose that this present bodily pleasure is any greater than that produced by the bread rolls. His illusion is to think that in comparison with the earlier pleasure of the bread rolls (and whatever else removed the pain of hunger), the fourth course is more pleasant.⁸

But the gourmet is unlikely to stand down over this point either. In fact he will now produce his trump card: in reply to Epicurus he will protest that it is his *feelings* that are telling him that the tournedos is more pleasant than the bread rolls, and if Epicurus wants to maintain that the two give equal amounts of pleasure he will have to accuse the gourmet's feelings of the alleged deception. In short he will have to rely on a version of false pleasure to explain this hedonic illusion. Now some philosophers may have no qualms about false pleasures,⁹ but Epicurus is not one of their number. Feelings, like perceptions, were for Epicurus criteria of truth, and he could no more allow false pleasure than he could false perception.

The feelings of pleasure and pain are criteria in the sense that we use them to help decide what things to pursue and what to avoid.¹⁰ Any hedonistic calculation will use the reports of the feelings as its basis: in deciding to choose a glass of wine or a glass of water I must know the relative pleasures of each. That is not to say, of course, that just because I feel something pleasant I can automatically take it as choiceworthy: for instance, if *x* is pleasant now but gives me punishment tomorrow morning I will not choose it. Decisions about choice involve calculation and hence reason. Nevertheless, feelings supply the fundamental data upon which any such calculation must rest.

In order to perform this criterial role, feelings must not deceive us. Indeed, for Epicurus, 'all feelings are true': the feeling of pleasure always comes about in accordance with the object that produces it, i.e. if my feelings tell me that *x* is pleasant, then *x* is pleasant.¹¹ If this were not so, we would undermine the role of feeling as a criterion of truth. But equally, it is difficult to see how the feelings could function as criteria if they told us that *x* is more pleasant than *y* when in fact *x* and *y* were equally pleasant: any hedonistic calculus based on such reports would be doomed from the start. Yet this is exactly what the gourmet is saying has happened in his case: Epicurus

⁸ I should stress that I am concerned here with *bodily* pleasures not mental ones. For some evidence that mental pain is produced by false beliefs about pleasure see n. 26 below on Lucretius 6.17ff.

⁹ i.e. Plato, *Philebus* 36c–44a.

¹⁰ D. L. 10.34.

¹¹ S. E., *M* 7.203. Sextus is about to explain the Epicurean thesis 'All perceptions are true' and begins by taking the truth of all feelings as the paradigm for perception to follow.

insists that the *tournedos* is no more pleasant than the roll; the gourmet says that his own feelings are telling him that the *tournedos* is more pleasant. So either it *is* more pleasant or his feelings are deceiving him, in which case he cannot use them as reliable data upon which to base hedonistic calculations.

So the problem is that, by insisting that it is his feelings that inform him of the great pleasure of the *tournedos*, the gourmet brings out a conflict at the basis of Epicurean ethics. Epicurus, it appears, cannot claim both that the limit of pleasure is reached with the removal of pain and that feelings are reliable criteria of truth. If he chooses to defend the first claim he does so at the expense of espousing false pleasure, and this is made impossible by his canonic. So the essential task is for Epicurus to explain errors that occur despite the presence of a reliable criterion. He must ward off the claim that either the errors do not occur or the criterion is not reliable.

II. PROBLEMS WITH OTHER ILLUSIONS

One interesting thing about this dilemma is that it crops up in two other contexts. Remember that, for Epicurus, feelings were not the only criteria of truth. He also included perceptions and primary concepts (or *prolepses*, as he called them). With both these types of criterion, perceptual and conceptual, illusions can and do occur, and so two more dilemmas face Epicurus: if our senses never misinform us and if we are the recipients of a constant stream of reliable perceptions, how do we make mistakes about what we see? How can our senses deceive us, as some suppose they do when we experience optical illusions? Epicurus cannot allow the spectre of false perception to haunt him, and so both he and Lucretius go to some lengths to exorcize it. Similarly with conceptual illusions – at least where one concept is concerned, that of the gods: on one hand we are told that men have so misunderstood the nature of the gods that they imagine them intervening in human affairs. On the other, we are told that knowledge of the gods is based upon a concept or *prolepsis* that is common to everyone, perfectly clear, trustworthy, and the standard to which we can refer all other judgements about the gods. If everyone is in possession of this crucial knowledge, how do they fall victim to such illusions about the gods?

These problems are so close to the gourmet's challenge that one may suspect that whatever solutions apply to the perceptual and conceptual illusions may help with the hedonic variety as well. So before we confront the gourmet's challenge head on let me show how Epicurus copes with the threat posed to his perceptions and *prolepses* respectively. I shall be laying stress on two things in particular: first, that he distinguishes carefully between raw criterial information and the interpretations we make of it; second, he claims that the criterial information can easily be confused with a compound of interpretation and criterion.

(i) *Optical illusions*

Epicurus' treatment of optical illusions is reported by Sextus in *M.* 7.203ff. In 206, we are shown how a sceptic might exploit optical illusions by arguing that, if the same object yields different and conflicting impressions to a near and to a distant viewer, one of the two impressions must be false. For instance, the same tower looks large and square from close up but round and small at a distance. Epicurus replies that the sceptic has simply misunderstood what is actually happening when someone views such an object from a distance. A series of films of atoms or 'images' (*εἰδωλα*) flow from the solid object and, coming into contact with the viewer's eyes, produce an impression that corresponds precisely to the actual state that the images are in upon

reaching him. However, between leaving the original object and meeting the distant viewer the images collide with many other atoms so that eventually their edges get rubbed away leaving them rounded and smaller. So when the large square tower looks round and small to the distant observer it is not that his eyes are deceiving him: they are reporting with perfect accuracy on an impression produced in exact accordance with the images.

To make a statement about the tower itself the distant viewer has to go beyond his perception and make a judgement inferring – however quickly and unconsciously – from the state of the images to that of the original object. He could be judicious and wait until he has a nearer view and only make the provisional judgement that he has had a view of something small and round: here he has stopped short at a description of what he has perceived. But if he forms the opinion that the object itself is like the well-travelled images he has fallen victim to an illusion, the error being to think that the tower itself is round. This supposition, however, is in no way the work of perception but is an act of interpretation on the part of the mind which, on this occasion, happened to be false.

So far, Epicurus' strategy is to point out to the sceptic that in what we consider perception of the distant viewer, there are two components, the raw criterion itself and a judgement inferred from it. If there is an optical illusion, the blame need not rest on the perception, and Epicurus transfers it from the criterion to the judgement. In 209–10, he takes this strategy further by arguing that of the two components, the criterion cannot be responsible for the error. If someone receives rounded images from a distant tower and then adds the [false] judgement that the tower itself is round he is in fact judging that the image he sees from his position is the same as that seen close-up.¹² So between having a perception and forming a judgement about an object Epicurus interposes a judgement which relates the images we see in different views to each other. Now this has to be a judgement rather than a perception because perception is simply incapable of performing so complex a task. As we are told in the next sentence, perception can only report on what is actually present to it at any one time, so it cannot make judgements about the relation between images, some of which are not actually before it. This limitation upon perception saves it from the sceptic's attack: perception cannot be responsible for the error attributed to it because once analysed the error proves to be too complicated for our epistemologically unambitious perception.¹³

Throughout the whole of this passage Epicurus relies heavily on the distinction between the raw criteria of perception and the judgements or interpretations we add to them. This distinction is made all the sharper by the limitations he imposes upon perception. It becomes a distinction between the type and quality of information provided by a faculty which can consider only information that is actually present (*τὸ παρόν*), and one which can reflect and compare several at any one time none of which need to be present to it. The same distinction is made in his *Principal Doctrine* 24 in

¹² This interpretation of 209–10 has been proposed by C. C. W. Taylor, “‘All Perceptions are True’”, in J. Barnes, M. Burnyeat & M. Schofield (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford, 1980), p. 116 with n.5.

¹³ This limitation upon perception is also alluded to in Diogenes' introductory account of Epicurean epistemology in 10.31. Just before saying that perception cannot add or subtract anything from the information it receives Diogenes calls it *ἄλογος* and *μνήμης οὐδεμίας δεκτική*. The point about denying memory to perception is that again perception can only consider what is before it, it cannot recall past perceptions and use them to interpret present ones.

which we are warned that if we reject any sensation and do not distinguish between a judgement that awaits confirmation (*τὸ προσδοξαζόμενον κατὰ τὸ προσμένον*) and what is actually present in perception (*τὸ παρὸν ἤδη κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν*) we shall destroy the credibility of all our remaining sensations.

In addition to the explicit distinction between a present perception and an added judgement this passage makes an implicit assumption that will be of crucial importance to us: why does Epicurus think it necessary to labour this distinction in the first place? Obviously because he thinks we are apt to confuse the two. If so, it must be because he thinks that a raw perception and one interpreted by judgement are so alike as to be easily confused. Epicurus commonly called his criteria, including perception, 'clear'.¹⁴ This does not mean, however, that the criterion is clear to us, and clear as a criterion as opposed to a mere opinion; it only means that perception gives a perfectly clear or accurate picture of the images.

The fact is that in the case of many optical illusions our interpretation of the image is made immediately and unconsciously, an implication of which is that we may never have been aware of the image as it actually is. This in turn can make it very difficult not to confuse the interpretation with the perception itself; and if we continue to maintain this confusion even after we realize that it was an illusion we shall blame the perception, and so scepticism looms. This is why it is necessary for Epicurus to prise the criterion free from our unconscious interpretations, as he does in *Principal Doctrine* 24.

What is implicit in Epicurus' diagnosis of optical illusions is made more explicit in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* Bk. 4. The book as a whole has an enormous amount to say about perception generally, and by 379 Lucretius has brought us to the subject of optical illusions. Having just mentioned the illusion we can have where our shadow seems to follow in our footsteps and to imitate our gestures, he categorically denies that such a mistake is the fault of the eyes themselves ('nec tamen hic oculos falli concedimus hilum', 4.379). This comment can leave us in no doubt as to the overall purpose of this passage: Lucretius is attempting to beat off sceptical doubt about the reliability of the senses, and he does so by proceeding to underline the lack of epistemological ambition of Epicurean perception. In the case of the shadow illusion, all our senses can tell us is whether there is light or dark in a particular place (380–1); they cannot relate different perceptions of light to each other, some of which are no longer present; hence they cannot invent stories about shadows walking behind us because that would involve thinking that one patch of darkness is the same as one seen a second ago, though in a different place (382). This is very close to the point underlined in Sextus, *M* 7.209–10: sight sees colour, and only so long as the colour is present; it cannot say that this here is the same as that there. To make a judgement about that, right or wrong, requires opinion or *ratio* (385) which goes beyond the cognitive limitations of perception.¹⁵ Perception is therefore innocent in the whole matter ('proinde animi vitium hoc oculis adfingere noli', 386).

Although Lucretius makes this point only in relation to the example of the shadow, there can be no doubt that a similar diagnosis should apply to all the other examples he goes on to list in lines 387–461. After going through all these cases, he appends the following moral (462–8):

cetera de genere hoc mirande multa videmus
 quae violare fidem quasi sensibus omnia quaerunt –

¹⁴ See, for instance, *Ep. Hdt.* 48, 52, 82.

¹⁵ 'nec possunt oculi naturam noscere rerum' (385); cf. Epicurus' description of perception as *ἄλογος* cited in D. L. 10.31.

nequiquam, quoniam pars horum maxima fallit
 propter opinatus animi quos addimus ipsi,
 pro visis ut sint quae non sunt sensibu' visa.
 nam nil aegrius est quam res secernere apertas
 ab dubiis, animus quas ab se protinus addit.

We see many other wonderful things of this kind which all try, as it were, to break the good faith of our senses – in vain, since the majority of them deceive because of opinions of the mind which we add ourselves, with the result that things which have not been seen with our senses are thought to have been seen. For nothing is more difficult than to separate out clear evidence from the doubtful things that the mind adds immediately of its own accord.

In optical illusions there is a hidden interpretative component in addition to the reception of sense images, and it is in this addition that the error creeps in. The fact that 'nothing is more difficult' than the separation of these two can only imply a strong similarity between criterion and judgement as far as the subject is concerned. The former is clear (*aperta*) in an objective sense, but, obviously in this context, not in a subjective one. As Lucretius goes on to show in his use of the word *protinus* (468), such interpretations are immediate and, presumably, unconscious, hence there was never a moment when we were aware of the raw criterion alone. This would explain why we are tempted to take the interpreted perception as the perception itself. If this identity did hold, then there would indeed be something wrong with raw sensation.

(ii) *Theological illusions*

When it came to curing optical illusions, then, both Epicurus and Lucretius pressed the distinction between a *res aperta* (a sensation) and a *dubium* (an opinion) that were subjectively very similar to each other. The same diagnosis applies to theological illusions, only here the relevant *res aperta* is another criterion of truth, prolepsis.

Epicurus thought that the gods exist as immortal and supremely happy beings who would never upset their well-being by intervening in human affairs, rewarding those they like and punishing those they dislike. He believed that our knowledge of the gods' existence, blessedness and immortality lies in our 'prolepsis', a criterion of truth and a clear notion capable of acting as an arbiter in disputes concerning the nature of the gods. Yet he also thought that most people, in spite of having so clear a concept, were under appalling misconceptions about the gods and convinced of their interference in human affairs.

The problem should by now be familiar: how can Epicurus suppose people to be at once so knowing and so ignorant? The answer, I suggest, is also familiar: Epicurus can allow us this knowledge and accuse us of illusion if he distinguishes the criterion from beliefs about it and stresses the difficulty with which the criterion is separated from misinterpreted versions of itself.

In the words of Diogenes a prolepsis is

... an apprehension, true judgement, concept, stored-up general notion (i.e. a memory), of what has often appeared from without, for example, 'such and such a kind of thing is a man'.¹⁶

The epistemological importance of prolepses is that, like perceptions and feelings, they are criteria of truth. To use Diogenes' example of 10.33, in order to ascertain whether the approaching object is a cow we need, as well as a perception, the notion of a cow already in our minds to check the truth of our conjecture. In any dispute, in fact, we should refer the matter to our prolepses for arbitration, a procedure also

¹⁶ D. L. 10.33. I am following the punctuation here of Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987), ii.92–3.

recommended by Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in the *De Natura Deorum* 1.43–4. A similar point is made in the *Letter to Menoeceus* 123–4: our prolepsis of the gods is epistemologically basic in the sense that any belief we have about the gods must be in agreement with it. The prolepsis itself has no further standard to fall back upon.

In the *Letter to Herodotus* 37–8 the same point is being made, although Epicurus does not actually use the word *πρόληψις*. Here we are told to use primary concepts to test opinions and to settle matters of doubt and inquiry, and if we did not have them everything would be undecided. In this passage the primary concept or prolepsis is to be used to stem a regress of explanations: it itself is in no need of further judgement but is self-evident.

Now these invaluable criteria are not the exclusive property of expert philosophers. The Epicurean appeal to *consensus omnium* arguments in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* 1.44 can leave us in no doubt that the prolepsis of the gods at least is common to all mankind. Another indication of this stems from the fact that, apart from their criterial role, prolepses were basic to the use and acquisition of language. In D.L. 10.33 we are told that as soon as the word 'man' is uttered the form or picture of man appears to us in virtue of our prolepsis. Later on he says that we could never have given anything a name if we did not already know it by a prolepsis. A prolepsis is thus 'what underlies words' (*Letter to Herodotus* 37), and as such it must be common to all users of a language.

Epicurus is now beginning to look like an epistemological optimist: everyone is in possession of concepts which can act as arbiters in disputes. Now this might leave open the possibility that the concepts in question are inchoate and sufficiently hazy for muddle and illusion to set in, but it would then be very difficult to see how they could act as arbiters in a dispute. Furthermore, any haziness in our prolepses is ruled out by Epicurus' views on the philosophical significance of definitions:

In the other branch of philosophy, logic, which concerns inquiry and argument, your master [Epicurus] seems to me unarmed and naked. He abolishes definitions. He teaches nothing about division and partition.¹⁷

Epicurus says that names are clearer than definitions, and indeed it would be absurd if instead of saying 'Hello Socrates' one were to say 'Hello mortal rational animal'.¹⁸

For if we were going to explain the words known to everybody, we would explain either all or some. But to explain all is impossible, whereas to explain some is pointless. For we will explain them either through familiar locutions or unfamiliar. But unfamiliar words seem unsuited to the task, the accepted principle being to explain less well known things by means of better known things; and familiar words, by being on a par with them, will be uninformative for illuminating language, as Epicurus says. For the informativeness of language is characteristically ruined when it is bewitched by an account, as if by a homeopathic drug.¹⁹

As we have already seen, words have their meaning because of the user's proleptic knowledge; we have also been told that prolepses are 'clear' (*ἐναργεῖς* D. L. 10.33). The informativeness of language mentioned at the end of this last passage most likely refers to the fact that when we hear a word a clear concept corresponding to it comes before our minds. The clarity of that concept cannot be improved upon by weaving words together: more words will bring more prolepses before us which are no more

¹⁷ Cicero, *Fin.* 1.22 (trans. Long & Sedley).

¹⁸ Anonymous Commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus* 22.39–47 (trans. Long & Sedley).

¹⁹ Trans. Long & Sedley. This evidence comes from Erotianus (34.10–20) who is writing the introduction to a lexicon of Hippocratic medical terms. He is saying that in his work he will not be providing explanations of words such as 'cheek' which we all know anyway; this would be a pointless exercise. He then provides the above argument in defence of this.

clear than the original one. So whatever we think we learn from definitions is purely a verbal affair: they teach us nothing about reality that we do not already know from our proleptic knowledge.

So if prolepses are so clear how does confusion on the nature of the gods, for instance, arise? If we were to make a parallel between optical and theological illusions we would expect Epicurus' answer to involve distinguishing the prolepsis from superadded judgements and locating the error in the latter only. If we look more closely at the *Letter to Menoeceus* 123–4 we see that this is indeed the strategy that Epicurus follows:

Firstly, consider God to be an immortal and happy being, as the common notion of God indicates, and do not attribute to him anything that is inconsistent with his immortality or inappropriate to his happiness, but believe everything which can preserve his happiness together with his immortality. For there are indeed gods, and knowledge of them is clear [*ἐναργής*], but they are not as the majority of people conceive them to be: for they do not preserve the gods as they conceive of them. It is not the man who denies the gods of the many who is impious, but he who attributes the opinions of the many to the gods. For the claims of the many about the gods are not prolepses, but false suppositions (*ὑπόληψεις*).

Epicurus is concerned to correct the popular misapprehension about the gods and so affirms their existence but denies any intervention on their part in human affairs – that would be inconsistent with their happiness. Notice how keen he is to stress the innocence of the prolepsis in the whole affair: at the beginning of 124, he presses a distinction between a prolepsis and a false supposition (*ὑπόληψις*), a distinction between the information that the criterion gives us (that the gods exist, and are blessed and immortal) and the false opinion about divine intervention that is added to it. He is clearly anxious lest any of the blame attributable to the supposition be attached to the prolepsis itself. Whereas their existence, blessedness and immortality can be put down to the prolepsis these other claims are merely false suppositions. The vulgar conception of the gods is a compound of the original prolepsis plus superadded beliefs about them.

Now all this is very close to the way in which Epicurus defended perception from the blame that attached to its interpretation. As with perception, he distinguishes between the criterion (the prolepsis of the gods) and false suppositions about them. But the very fact that this distinction has to be emphasized suggests that it is a very difficult one to draw –

nam nil aegrius est quam res discernere apertas
ab dubiis, animus quas ab se protinus addit.

Implicit in 123–4 is an assumption exactly analogous to the one that we encountered in the treatment of optical illusions: what the prolepsis itself is need not be evident to the person who has it. It is evident in an objective sense, i.e. in that it is an entirely accurate picture of the common property of godhood, indeed it requires no further clarification. But this does not imply subjective clarity: a prolepsis does not have 'prolepsis' written all over its face. Our prolepses are by no means easy to distinguish from other, more dubious, notions we may have.

The similarities in Epicurus' treatment of both optical and conceptual illusions should now be clear. In both cases he underlines the distinction between the criterion and its interpretation, and assumes that, to the perceiver or thinker concerned, the one is so like the other that it is easy to confuse the two. Using this strategy he can claim that the dupe of either kind of illusion is in possession of trustworthy information but is misusing it; in one way he does grasp the truth in another he does not. Thus there is no contradiction between robust Epicurean epistemology and an

acceptance of optical illusions or criticism of popular religion: such ignorance is not caused so much by a shortage of information, but by a mishandling of information already available.

III. THE DEMISE OF THE GOURMET

Now it is time to turn back to the main item of business, hedonic illusions and the challenge of the thinking gourmet. The problem we finally set out was that, on one hand, Epicurus endows us with reliable testimony about our pleasures and pains *via* the feelings, while on the other he says that most people are quite mistaken about those same feelings. This problem is obviously similar to that of optical and theological illusions; so could – and did – Epicurus work out a similar solution?

I wish to show that he did, i.e. that where hedonic illusions were concerned he also stressed the distinction between criterion and interpretation and assumed the ease with which they could be confused. Furthermore, apart from this similarity between optical, theological and hedonic illusions, there is a further point of contact between optical and hedonic in that he makes feelings similarly limited in their cognitive content.

To discover the parallel solution for hedonic illusions we need to start with his comments not about illusory pleasure itself but about illusory desire. Take the gourmet with his passionate desires for good food and his horror of the Epicurean diet of bread and cheese. Epicurus will say that he is ignorant of the limit of pleasure and is labouring under the illusion that there will be an increase in bodily pleasure after hunger has been satisfied. It will only be varied. Now corresponding to this diagnosis is Epicurus' distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires. The former are for the removal of pain, i.e. the limit of pleasure, the latter for pleasures that will only vary the limit that pleasure can reach. Here is a text that describes some necessary desires:

The flesh cries out not to be hungry, thirsty or cold; for anyone who has all this in the present and expects to do so in the future could rival even Zeus in happiness.²⁰

The point is that necessary desires have their roots in the bodily feelings. Now our indignant gourmet can simply protest that his desire for lots of fine food is just as deeply rooted as his desire for water when thirsty: that, after all, is why he spends so much effort in the acquisition of wealth.

To this Epicurus can reply:

Whenever intense passion is present in natural desires which do not lead to pain if they are unfulfilled, these have their origin in empty opinion; and the reason for their persistence is not their own nature but the empty opinion of the person.²¹

It is not the stomach that is unsatiable, as the majority of people claim, but the false opinion that the stomach requires an unlimited amount to satisfy it.²²

What both these texts show is that the gourmet's desires stem not from bodily feelings but from opinions of the mind. To put it another way, underlying a distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires is a distinction between desires which derive from the feelings and those that derive from opinion. What these two texts also show is Epicurus' anxiety lest all desires, both necessary and unnecessary, be treated on a par: unnecessary desires will be treated as necessary on the grounds

²⁰ S.V. 33.

²² S.V. 59.

²¹ K.Δ. 30 (trans. Long & Sedley).

that all have their origin in the cry of the flesh. Epicurus' response is to remove the blame from the flesh and put it squarely on the intrusion of opinion.

So Epicurus' opponents, the victims of illusory desires, fail to distinguish necessary from unnecessary desires, thinking, in effect, that unnecessary desires originate from the feelings themselves, and so they confuse feelings with opinion. Notice the close parallel between this diagnosis of hedonic illusion and that of the theological in *Ep. Men.* 123–4: the criterion there was prolepsis, here it is feeling, but in both passages Epicurus relies on the claim that the criterion, as opposed to our beliefs about it, is not necessarily clear to us. In hedonic illusions this means that it is possible to make a mistake about what we are really feeling.

Another text to take into account is a passage of Lucretius' Bk. 5. In his account of the growth of civilization he describes the rise of wealth and political power,²³ and then portrays those people to whom ambitions for such things matter. He prefaces his description with a statement of standard Epicurean doctrine:

quod si quis vera vitam ratione gubernet,
divitiae grandes homini sunt vivere parce
aequo animo; neque enim est umquam penuria parvi.

But if one runs one's life according to correct reasoning, a man's greatest wealth is to live sparingly and contentedly: for a little is never lacking.²⁴

He goes on to describe the folly of people who think that happiness can only be secure if supported by power, and then urges us to pursue the simple life and to leave them to their pointless struggle. Then in lines 1131–5 he makes a final attack on his opponents: leave them to sweat and toil in the narrow path of ambition, because 'they derive their wisdom from the mouths of others, and pursue things on the basis of what they hear rather than what their senses tell them'.²⁵

The point made here is similar to that of *Principal Doctrine* 30 and *Vatican Saying* 59. Those who desire wealth and power do so because they desire expensive pleasures. But they labour under the misapprehension that expensive pleasures will make them happier than inexpensive ones. Both Epicurus and Lucretius agree that this misapprehension arises from opinion, not from the bodily feelings. Thus what is wrong with such people is that their desires do not originate from their own senses, but from listening to the opinions of others. The senses in question are their feelings indicating pleasure even when only a little is available; the *auditis* mentioned in line 1134 are the false opinions that are handed down to the effect that modest pleasures are not enough, and a happy life depends on the pursuit of pleasures that only the powerful can attain.²⁶

²³ Lucretius 5.1113–16.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1117–19.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1133–4:

quandoquidem sapiunt alieno ex ore petuntque
res ex auditis potius quam sensibus ipsis.

²⁶ What Lucretius implies in 5.1133–4 is that the feelings are giving their message, but are ignored or overridden. Indeed, there is a constant stream of (potentially) satisfying pleasurable objects impinging on us which is at best ignored, and may even be considered as irksome. This same theme occurs in an even more prominent place later on in the poem, the beginning of Bk. 6. Here we are told that Epicurus' great achievement consisted in pointing out that men's troubles stemmed not from a lack of pleasures but from an internal flaw. Comparing men to leaking and dirty jars, he says the problem is not with what is being poured in, this is all perfectly good in itself (*commoda*, 19), but with the leaks which prevent the jars ever being filled up (20–1) and the dirt which spoils everything which comes in (22–3).

The fact that people can so easily downgrade potentially satisfying pleasures by comparison with others that are not greater but merely different shows how illusions about bodily pleasures

What is emerging from both Epicurus' and Lucretius' treatment of unnecessary desires is that our actual feelings are so similar to our interpretations of them that it is all too easy for people to confuse the two; and Epicurus sees it as his task to underline the difference between criterion and opinion. Thus, in this sense, there is a striking similarity between the hedonic illusions that accompany unnecessary desires and illusions of the optical and conceptual varieties. But the parallel between optical and hedonic illusions is closer still. There is evidence from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* that the cognitive limitations applied to perception also apply to the criterion of feeling. In 5.95–6, having stated that for Epicurus the wise man will balance his pleasures and pains against their outcomes, Cicero reports on what for Epicurus were the cognitive differences between reason and the feelings: the body only delights so long as it is actually perceiving a present pleasure; the mind, on the other hand, can experience a present pleasure as well as anticipating future pleasures and savouring the memory of past ones.

There is, of course, the limitation that the feelings themselves cannot tell us whether a pleasure is choiceworthy, only whether it is a pleasure.²⁷ But Cicero's evidence implies a greater limitation on the senses than this. We are told that our feelings feel pleasure only as long as the pleasure is present; the mind on the other hand can contemplate past, present and future pleasures together. That the feelings can only report on what is present is of obvious importance to us because of the strong parallel with perception. We saw from Sextus' evidence in *M* 7.209–10 how perception is limited to reporting what is present (the *παρόν*) and that opinion (hence the mind) is required to relate perceptions to each other. Cicero implies much the same about feeling.²⁸ The inference that I want to draw from all this is that if feelings can only report on what is present they cannot perform acts of comparison and so cannot tell us that one pleasure is greater than another. Like the five senses themselves, they are

in turn lead to mental pain. Thus although the *tournedos* produces no more physical pleasure for the gourmet than it does for Epicurus, we should note that in the gourmet's case it does remove more mental pain, as there is more to be removed. This does not imply, however, that the gourmet is consequently in a greater overall state of mental pleasure; indeed the continued presence of his misconceptions about pleasure will sooner or later lead to the recurrence of mental pain.

²⁷ In fact the illusion that the gourmet labours under is not the only hedonic illusion with which Epicurus had to contend. Another one has been accurately described by J. C. B. Gosling & C. C. W. Taylor (*The Greeks on Pleasure* [Oxford, 1982], ch. 20, esp. p. 405). Feelings are a criterion of choice and avoidance, but that does not mean that they tell us to choose or avoid something – that is the job of the hedonistic calculus. All the feelings tell us is whether something is pleasant. So we should distinguish carefully between the report of our feelings about pleasure and the interpretation of that pleasure as being choiceworthy or not. If we do not, we fall victim to an illusion that confuses between the claims that something is immediately pleasant and that it is choiceworthy, i.e. will lead to long-term pleasure.

Now this is an accurate analysis of one type of hedonic illusion with which Epicurus was concerned. But the illusion under which our gourmet is labouring is rather different, the difference lying in the message that the senses are supposed to be giving in each case. In Gosling & Taylor's illusion the senses say 'x is choiceworthy', in the gourmet's case, 'x gives more bodily pleasure than y'. The gourmet does not say that his feelings are telling him to *pursue* x: he can readily admit that his mind has a large part to play in choosing or avoiding it. It would, after all, be possible for him, under certain circumstances (e.g. penury), to think that the *tournedos* was more pleasant than the roll but still think the roll was more choiceworthy. For him at least, there is no confusion between a feeling of pleasure and an opinion about choice.

²⁸ Notice the parallel between Cicero's comment about *memoria* at the end of the passage and Diogenes' restriction upon perception as *μνήμης οὐδεμιᾶς δεκτικῆς* (10.31). We should remember that in *K.Δ.* 24 the importance of distinguishing judgements which await confirmation from the criterion – the *παρόν* – was said to apply as much to the feelings as to perception.

non-rational (*ἄλογος*) and depend heavily upon the mind for interpretation (and not just for whether a pleasure is choiceworthy). Hence the judgement that this pleasure is greater than that, or is the same or different, is not a direct report of the feelings, but an interpretation of them.

If we now put this point together with the point about the ease with which a feeling may be confused with an opinion or an interpretation of a feeling, we can see how Epicurus would have tackled the illusion about the magnitude of a present pleasure. As was the case with perception, it may be very difficult to isolate the feeling itself from its interpretation; hence what is in fact the result of the mind's automatic and spontaneous pronouncing upon a feeling may be confused with the feeling itself.

Now return to the indignant gourmet who protests that his feelings themselves tell him that the *tournedos* Rossini offers more bodily pleasure than the bread roll. Epicurus has an answer: the gourmet does indeed feel pleasure when eating both – his senses are reliably reporting an actual bodily state. When this report comes before the mind for interpretation, however, things begin to go wrong. In comparing the two pleasures the mind has brought its own false presuppositions about fine food which make a different pleasure seem a greater one. The gourmet feels pleasure when he eats the *tournedos*, but he does not feel the relative greatness of that pleasure compared to that of eating the roll: this is not a feeling (i.e. a report of sensory apparatus) but a misinterpretation of a feeling. And this is the crux of the matter: this misinterpretation is imposed with such immediacy and spontaneity (cf. Lucretius' *protinus* in 4.468) that there was never a moment in the gourmet's consciousness when the two were distinct. Hence the confusion: he has taken the misinterpreted feeling as if it were the feeling itself.

What has happened is closely parallel with optical and conceptual illusions.²⁹ These originated from the conflation of the 'clear' evidence of the criterion, the *res aperta*, with a *dubium*, its false interpretation. In the gourmet's case, the *res aperta* is the feeling of pleasure, the *dubium* is the belief that it is greater than another pleasure: this is just what his feelings are not telling him. The source of the illusion in both cases is the misinterpretation of reliable testimony, the misidentification of the datum with its interpretation such that a certain interpretation of one's own feelings has been confused with the feelings proper. Thus we believe that certain pleasures are greater than others, and we ignore pleasures that are constantly at hand or consider them inferior to others which may be attained only at greater expense.

IV. CONCLUSION

Epicurus can, after all, be defended against the charge of incoherence that threatened to undermine a central thesis of his philosophy. In conclusion, I wish to make three points that emerge from this defence, the first about psychology, the second about ethics and the third about Epicurean teaching and learning.

It turns out that for Epicurus there is a strong cognitive component in what many people would regard as their 'raw' feelings. Epicurus was an advocate of the notion

²⁹ Lucretius brings out another point of contact between hedonic and theological illusions. When chiding those who succumb to hedonic illusions, he talks of them deriving their wisdom not from their own senses but 'alieno ex ore'. Thus the *dubium* does not come from a trustworthy criterial source but from what other people say. Similarly, all the errors that men make about the gods stem merely from a specious cultural tradition which can never rival the purely natural origin of our prolepses (5.1197):

quantos tum gemitus ipsi sibi, quantaque nobis
volnera, quas lacrimas pepere minoribu' nostris

of the 'intelligent eye' (as it has been called recently)³⁰ – the idea that what we consider simple acts of perception involve a considerable amount of tacit mental reasoning, however immediate and automatic perceptual recognition may seem. We can now see that he was also a keen advocate of the 'intelligent feeling' according to which much of what we take to be raw feeling is really the result of tacit interpretation of feelings involving beliefs of some sophistication. Perhaps the word 'intelligent' is slightly inappropriate where Epicurus is concerned because, of course, the sort of sophistication involved is not necessarily a good thing – it could be a considerable nuisance. At any rate, if Epicurus were to allow us to use the term 'intelligent' it would be on the understanding that we try to make our eyes and feelings a good deal more intelligent, as it were.

On the ethical side, there is a question to be raised as to whether our gourmet should actually be worried that he is the dupe of hedonic illusions. Why should it matter if he only *thinks* that he feels more pleasure when eating the *tournedos* than the bread roll? He will be just as happy as an Epicurean content with lesser fare. From the purely hedonistic point of view Epicurus' concern with objectivity seems scarcely relevant. What matters is the gourmet's overall state of happiness, and whether or not this is helped along by a few hedonic illusions makes no difference. Epicurus' reply seems to rest on contingent grounds: we cannot get away with it. Living life by illusions is playing with fire. Our world is too unstable for us to cultivate the life of a gourmet; and if we can be just as happy by living on the cheap, thereby ensuring maximum independence from fortune we are more likely to achieve happiness in the long term.

Lurking in the background is also Epicurus' naturalism. An essential ingredient of the Epicurean brand of hedonism is the belief that the pursuit of pleasure is primarily natural, hence the use of so-called 'cradle' arguments, arguments that appeal to the behaviour of babies or animals in order to help identify the good for man. The exact nature of the relationship between naturalism and hedonism is too large a topic to be pursued here,³¹ but it is worth pointing out that, if hedonism is motivated only by naturalism, pleasures and desires that stem from false opinion and sophistication rather than from the feelings themselves have to be excluded, there being no proper natural foundation for them.

The mention of cradle arguments brings me to my final point. In the first book of Cicero's *De Finibus*, the Epicurean spokesman claims that, for Epicurus, the fact that pleasure was good was as evident as the sweetness of honey or the coldness of snow (1.30). For Epicurus no argument was needed to demonstrate this evident fact: all he needed to do as a teacher was to draw people's attention to it. Cicero then explains that for Epicurus there was a difference between proving something demonstratively ('argumentum conclusionemque rationis') and merely bringing something to our notice ('mediocrem animadversionem atque admonitionem'): the former is for uncovering the abstruse, the latter for indicating what is manifest and evident ('prompta et aperta').

This seems to me also to be an apt description of what the Epicurean teacher must do when confronted with illusions, whether optical, hedonic or theological. His essential task is to bring the person to see the *apertum*, the clear evidence of the

³⁰ See R. L. Gregory, *The Intelligent Eye* (London, 1970).

³¹ For an excellent discussion of the way in which Epicurus invoked naturalistic arguments in the service of hedonism see J. Brunschwig, 'The Cradle Argument in Epicureanism and Stoicism', in M. Schofield & G. Striker (eds.), *The Norms of Nature* (Cambridge, 1986) esp. pp. 115–28.

criterion separating it out from any superadded opinions. At the end of it all the learner realizes that the knowledge was always right under his own nose. He did not have to go out in search of obscure or recondite truths; he had to become aware of what, in a sense, he already knew – the *res apertae* that were constantly to hand.

The suggestion that Epicurus is really bringing us back to what we already know has certain Platonic resonances. It is not often that you would expect an alliance between Epicurus the empiricist and Plato the innatist but here there is a clear parallel. In the *Meno* (82ff.) Socrates demonstrates the newly born theory of recollection by questioning a slave boy ignorant of mathematics and showing how, by the end of the session, he has come to know something he did not at the beginning. Socrates is adamant that he is not teaching the boy, i.e. he is not instilling opinions into him. All the answers that the slave has given depend upon what he already knew. He answers by drawing on his own resources. He does not learn by listening to another's wisdom, but by drawing upon his own reserves – his memories of a pre-natal existence. Such metaphysical extravagance would no doubt have seemed unnecessary, if not unnatural, to Epicurus, but he would have agreed on the essential point that learning to be truly happy is a question of making the most of your own resources. Whereas Plato identified these with knowledge of definitions, Epicurus made do with perceptions, feelings and the indefinable prolepses. If Plato had complained these were not enough Epicurus would of course have replied that in epistemology as in ethics frugality is a man's greatest riches. *Neque enim est umquam penuria parvi*.³²

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³² I should like to thank the editors for their help in preparing this paper for publication. An earlier version was read to the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy in September 1988.