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Epicurean Perceptual Content

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ABSTRACT: Epicurean epistemology is usually summarised in a controversial thesis according to which *all* perceptions are true. Although it seems very problematic and counterintuitive, careful investigation of the main sources shows us that Epicurus' claim for the truth of perceptions is not so hasty but is supported with some serious arguments. In the paper, I examine the thesis according to which "all perceptions are true", but my main focus is to analyse the content of Epicurean perception through the following questions: (i) what kind of content do Epicurean perceptions have; (ii) what are the proper objects of perception; (iii) can we ascribe to such content truth and falsity? In the first part, I say something general about the thesis and point out some basic characteristics of perceptions due to which they serve as a criterion of truth. Next I try to show that the proper objects of perceptions are *eidola* and not external objects because only in that case can Epicurus maintain the truth of all perceptions, including illusions, hallucinations, dreams and other misperceptions. In the third part, I argue that such Epicurean perceptual content can be explained by the modern notion of non-conceptual content, which helps us to understand the special feature of Epicurean perceptions and also the important difference between perception and belief in Epicurean epistemology. In the final part, I discuss the notion of *alethes* which I suggest implies that perception is "factive".

KEYWORDS: Epicurus, factive, non-conceptual content, perception, truth.

Epicurean epistemological theory, as well as other theories from the Hellenistic period, is motivated by two important questions: (i) whether knowledge is attainable at all; and (ii) if it is attainable, what are its foundations. Epicurus' answers to these questions show that he wants to defend the possibility of knowledge and to claim that the foundation of knowledge is our sensory experience. By claiming that knowledge is attained through the senses, Epicurus is placing himself on the side of empiricist tradition. However, his radical epistemological empiricism is combined with and even defended through atomistic theory, according to which the knowledge of the real structure of

the world goes beyond the scope of our experience and reveal the real atomistic nature of things. Since atomism reveals that the true nature of things lies only on atomistic level, it opens a serious epistemological problem: a gap between the appearances, which are mere subjective experiences, and the objective reality explained in terms of different atomical configurations. Namely, appearances are not considered as genuine pieces of knowledge since they do not reveal the truth, but just the contrary, they misrepresent the real atomistic nature of things.

Epicurus and his followers wanted to save both kinds of knowledge and commit themselves to an epistemology that is strongly empiricist, claiming that knowledge and related concepts are grounded in experience. The overall epistemological project attempts to block possible skeptical inclinations and secure knowledge about the world by providing a standard or the criterion by which we can firmly determine the truth necessary for acquiring knowledge of reality. In fulfilling this task Epicurus aims to show that there is an ultimate and exclusive connection between perceptions and knowledge, where *all* perceptions necessarily need to be taken as infallible criterion of truth. In other words, Epicurus proposes a specific epistemological framework in which he maintains that the possibility of *any* knowledge is guaranteed exclusively on the assumption of the incorrigibility of all perceptions.

In the paper, I shall examine the thesis according to which “all perceptions are true”, but my main focus is to analyze the content of Epicurean perception through the following questions: (i) what kind of content Epicurean perceptions have; (ii) what are the proper objects of perception; (iii) can we ascribe to such content truth and falsity? In the first part I will say something general about the thesis and point out some basic characteristics of perceptions because of which they serve as the criterion of truth. Next I will try to show that the proper objects of perceptions are *eidola* and not external objects because only in this way Epicurus can maintain the truth of all perceptions, including illusions, hallucinations, dreams and other misperceptions.

In the third part I will argue that such Epicurean perceptual content can be explained by the modern notion of non-conceptual content, which help us to understand special feature of Epicurean perceptions and also important difference between perception and belief in Epicurean epistemology. In this part I will try to argue that the modern notion of nonconceptual content can be helpful for the clarification of the following issues in Epicurean epistemology: (i) for the specification of the Epicurean content and its objects; (ii) for the explanation of the difference between perception and belief; (iii) for the understanding of the truthfulness that is ascribed to the content. In the final part, I will discuss the notion of *alethes*, which I suggest imply that perception is “factive”.

I.

Tradition before Epicurus recognizes two main sources for knowledge about the world: sense perception and reason¹. Epicurus puts himself on the side of empiricist, insisting that all knowledge must proceed from sense experience, since perceptions provide primal cognitive contact with the external world. The thesis about perceptual incorrigibility becomes the cornerstone of his epistemology. The crucial question concerns the problem of the way Epicurus develop his central thesis. We may begin the analysis of his position with the following argument, usually taken by scholars to be the major argument to indicate the supremacy of perception:

If you fight against all of your perceptions (*aisthesein*) you will not have a stand-
ard against which to refer even those judgments which you pronounce false.
(*KD XXIII*, transl. Hicks)

This quote, although very short and concise, summarizes the core idea of Epicurean epistemology based on sense-perception as the criterion of truth, but more importantly, it also guides us towards specific arguments that reveal why Epicurus adopts very specific epistemological position. The quote undoubtedly shows that Epicurus firmly takes sense perceptions to be the origin of any judging and discrimination between truth and falsehood and also indirectly implies that we have to take all of them as true. However, our main task is here to explain the reasons Epicurus has for the claim that sense perceptions are the criterion of truth and furthermore, why he believes in the absolute veridicality of perception.

The second part of the quoted sentence indicates the possible answers to the posed questions. Epicurus straightforwardly asserts that unless we take all perceptions to be true, we are left without the possibility of judging or of distinguishing truth from falsehood. In other words, the conclusion of the argument Epicurus desires to defend is that knowledge is not possible unless *all* perceptions are true. The versions of this argument we find in several other sources, predominantly in the work of Cicero who in several different places reports that according to Epicurus unless all perceptions are true, knowledge is not attainable (Cicero, *Luc.* 25, 79). It follows from this quite obviously that Epicurus' aim is to show that there is an ultimate and exclusive connection between perceptions as the criterion and knowledge, such as that falsity of perceptions threatens the possibility of knowledge.

Possible reconstruction of the argument might be the following: if you want to claim that all perceptions are false, you need to have some criterion

¹ "Reason" is taken here in a very wide sense as a term that generally covers all sources of cognitive operations that basically excludes involvement of sense experience.

on the basis of which you will reject all perceptions as false. But that criterion must be perception itself given the widely accepted thesis among Hellenistic schools that all knowledge proceeds from perception (Striker 1996: 86). And if they are all false you are left without criterion and cannot consistently maintain falsehood of all perceptions. The rejection of the claim that all perceptions are false leaves open more plausible thesis that some perceptions are false and some are true, so that senses are sometimes mistaken but usually reliable. But this must be also rejected because we cannot ever rely on our senses if they deceive us only once. More importantly, we cannot claim that some perceptions are false and some true unless we have some certain criterion and we have already seen that there is no other criterion than the perceptions. Therefore, the option that remains is to claim that all perceptions are true or otherwise knowledge is unattainable.²

However, the acceptance of the thesis that all perceptions are true requires deeper analysis of the perceptual mechanism and the way our senses are connected with the world. Here Epicurus' epistemology becomes tightly connected with his physical explanation of the nature of the external world and its basic constituents, claiming that the physical process of perceiving must be grounded in the atomistic theory. Namely, given the fact that atoms are in constant motion Epicurus infers that macroscopic bodies are constantly emitting atoms and next he asserts that specific sorts of emanations are responsible for the perceiving of objects. The process of perceiving occurs because appropriate emanations, i.e. streams of atoms, are impinging upon our sense organs producing in that way appearances of objects. These atomic outflows are specific to each sense organ so that every sense organ is receiving the appropriate sort of emanation. Those sorts of emanation then cause five types of sensory sensations.

Another important characteristic of Epicurean perceptions is given by Diogenes in the following passage:

All sensation, he [Epicurus] says is irrational (*alogos*) and does not accommodate memory. For neither it is moved by itself, nor when moved by something else is it able to add or subtract anything. (DL X.31, transl. LS)

Perceptions are *alogoi* because they are, as Diogenes reports, not self-generated, they are always caused by something from the outside. Given this, we can say that perceptions are passive, since they originate only when stimulated by external causes. Furthermore, Diogenes says that perceptions do not accommodate memory, which in fact probably means that perceptions are not capable of storing their reports somewhere since they are just passive

² For the similar versions of the argument see Striker (1996: 86–87), Long and Sedley (LS) (1987: 83).

responses to the external causes and therefore they do not involve memory, which would require some sort of judgment, comparison or other cognitive processing of the original reports. From this it follows that perceptions in general are not capable of exercising any higher order cognitive process about what is presented to us, or as Diogenes reports, perceptions are not capable of adding or subtracting anything to the given report.

Passivity is an important characteristic because it is the basis for further conclusion that perceptions cannot add or subtract anything in the report they present since they just passively present the things acting upon our sense-organs. From this follows another crucial characteristic of perception, namely, that given its passivity, perception thus “constantly reports truly and grasps the existing object as it really is by nature”, as it is reported by Sextus (*M* VIII.9). In other words, perceptions are always true, since they passively register the things which act upon our sense organs and therefore accurately depict them as they are. Therefore, this model of perception excludes the possibility of assessment or processing by perception itself, thus leaving no room for any error. This in the end guarantees their infallibility. According to Epicurus “falsehood and error are always located in the belief which we add” (*DL* X.50) since belief is the process in which one starts to interpret, infer or classify perceptual reports and exactly that process is not error-free, opening thus a possibility for the falsity of beliefs.

This is the general framework of Epicurus’ well-known theory of effluences according to which the activity of the senses is explained through a contact of the sense organ and an external stimulus impinging on it (*DL* X.46–7). Epicurus also takes it that the mind functions as the sixth sense organ on the basis of organ-stimulus pattern, besides its other functions, namely, reasoning and inferential processes (Lucretius, *DRN* IV.722–822). Therefore, Epicurus applies the same explanation of the mechanism of perceiving for all sorts of perceptions: sensory perceptions and all cases of “mental perceptions” such as dreams, hallucinations, illusions, etc.³ The cases of mental perception are particularly important for Epicurus and his methodology since the truthfulness of *all* perceptions, including mental ones, is *condicio sine qua non* for the possibility of knowledge.

Epicurus’ account of the mechanism of vision, according to which perception is a result of the impact of *eidola* on the sense organ and the internal,

³ Epicurus starts from the assumption that the cases of mental perception share an important similarity with the usual cases of seeing external objects, namely that there is something, some outside object that is seen. Lucretius says that insofar as “what we see with the mind is like what we see with the eye – it must come about in a like way” (Lucretius, *DRN* IV.750–51, transl. LS). In other words, the similarity implies that it is not possible to have a vision without having a vision of *something* since in each case we encounter something.

passive response of the sense organ, is supposed to grant that the content of perception is entirely determined by the external cause. Since all external objects are emanating *eidola* which preserve the same atomic configuration as the solid from which they are released they are exact replicas of the solid and thus are truly reporting the nature of the solid. Two things are important to emphasize: first, given such mechanism of perceiving, it is obvious that the solid does not affect the sense organ directly, but via *eidola*, and second, it is important that *eidola* in an ideal situation preserve all the properties of the solid on the basis of which it is possible to maintain that perceptions correctly report the solid as it is. Epicurus writes:

And whatever impression (*phantasian*) we get by focusing (*epibletikos*)⁴ our thought or senses, whether of shape or of properties, that is the shape of the solid body, produced through the image's concentrated succession or after-effect. (DL X.50, transl. LS)

Within the internal mechanism of obtaining perceptions Epicurus recognizes two methods by which perception is produced after an external object affect the organ, namely concentrated succession and remaining.⁵ The first one, concentrated succession (*pyknoma tou eidolou*) clearly indicates the continuous stream of *eidola* released from the surface of the solid and when the contact with the sense organ is made, perception is produced. As already emphasized, Epicurus maintains that no single *eidolon* can ever produce a perception but only a constant stream coming from the solid's surface.

The common understanding of the second method is that it applies strictly to mental perceptions, obtained by the impact of the very fine *eidola* which, instead of impacting on the eye, penetrate straight through to the mind. (Bailey 1928: 414) What happens when such an *eidolon* impacts on the mind is elucidated by Furley who claims that such *eidola* passes through the mind, but leave some mark on the soul and that the "remaining effect" (*egkatalaimma*) is "a pattern left behind as a memory of a previous sense-experience" (Furley 1971: 661). The function of the remaining effect is probably to secure an explanation of the way memory works since Epicurus, to emphasize again, claims that not any perception is self-moved.

⁴ Focusing (*epibole*) of the sense organ and the mind when functioning as the sense organ is a response that is not volitional but an automatic, passive response and receiving of external stimuli that results in obtaining a perception (*phantasia*). This idea can be traced in Furley who gives a definition of *epibletikos* as the "process by which the mind or the sense 'get hold of' something" (Furley 1971: 661).

⁵ Although I take here that *pyknoma* and *egkatalaimma* are two methods, it seems to me that this is perfectly compatible with further claim that as such they serve as justification of the existence of solids and the way memory works in terms of *eidola* residue. I owe this further clarification to a blind referee.

What is more important about the sentence in which Epicurus introduces two methods of obtaining of perception is that it brings the condition of the truthfulness and explanation of the perception as the criterion of truth. Namely, Epicurus maintains that every perception produced by the two methods is true because it accurately corresponds to its cause and truly represents the shape and other properties of an object. Accuracy of the perception is thus grounded in the two methods. This is so because Epicurus maintains that the *eidola* are identical replicas of the solid released from its surface and retains the same atomic arrangement as in the solid.

In order to stress the perfect correspondence between *eidola* and the solid Epicurus says about *eidola* that “their unity and continuity then results in the impression, and preserves their co-affection (*sumpatheia*) all the way from the object because of their uniform bombardment from it” (DL X.50, transl. LS). The co-affection or sympathy is a relation between the *eidola* themselves and the external object from which they are emitted and it plays a crucial role in securing the truthfulness of perceptions.⁶

To conclude, the main conditions for the truthfulness of perception are: (i) the direct response of the organ (*epibole*), (ii) external cause (*eidola*), to which we should add the third crucial thing, (iii) sympathy (*sumpatheia*), that is, the correspondence between *eidola* and the source from which the unity of perception arises, as we are told in DL X.50. It seems rather clear now that Epicurus aims to deny the distinction between true and false perception on the basis of identifying the content of perception with the external cause, since in that case perception is true because simply the truthfulness of perception consists in the exact correspondence between perception and its cause.

But now the question of the proper objects of perception comes at issue. Namely, when I see a tower, is it the object of my perception the tower itself or *eidola* released from it? For the normal cases of vision this question seems to be a nit picking, but it becomes important when cases of misperceptions are introduced. Namely, what about the cases when perceptions do not represent an actual state of affair, as in the case of seeing a tower as round or an oar in the water as bent, or even worse in the cases of “seeing” Centaurs or Scylla, and of dreams. If the truth of all perceptions should be understood in the sense of the “truth” as an exact correspondence between the content of

⁶ This is the reason why we have a perception of “the single and continuous object”, because sympathy works as the condition that secures perceptual unity and immediate awareness of an external object. The fact that in perception we are immediately aware of an external object is emphasized by Epicurus who claims that perception is “of the solid body” or even clearly in Lucretius who maintains that “one thing in this matter which should not be thought puzzling is why, although the images which strike the eyes cannot be seen individually, the objects themselves are perceived”. (Lucretius, *DRN* IV.256–8, transl. LS)

perception and the external solids as the objects of perception, the examples set forth show that this is simply false and easily refute that interpretation of the truthfulness of perceptions.

What is clear from Epicurus' theory is that he wants to preserve the intuitive idea that our perception is always perception of external objects, such as towers or honey, and that such a perception is the one that is always true. In the ideal cases of perceiving the intuitive idea that the proper object of perception is an external solid, i.e. a tower, seems to be perfectly plausible and clearly emphasized by Lucretius (*DRN* IV.258) that in the process of perceiving we never perceive the *eidola* but always an external solid. This aim clearly follows from Epicurus' overall epistemological project that attempts to secure knowledge about the world by providing a standard by which knowledge can be gained. Thus, in order for perceptions to play the role of the epistemic standard of that kind, it is necessary for them to reveal the truth about the external objects, e.g. towers, oars and the like, and to objectively represent their nature. However, perceptual content in order to be true in the cases of misperceptions must also correspond to its external cause. So the question then is: if perceptions are true of external objects in the sense that they correspond to the external solid representing its properties, what are misperceptions true of? What are, then, the proper objects of perception?

II.

Plutarch's report offers some elucidation, although we have to bear in mind that the following text is rather hostile criticism of Epicurean epistemology in which Plutarch tends to equate Epicurean position with the position of the Cyrenaic subjectivism. Plutarch writes the following:

For the school that asserts that when a round film (*eidolon*) impinges on us, or in another case a bent one, the imprint is truly received by the sense, but refuses to allow us to go further and affirm that the tower is round or that oar is bent, maintains the truth of its experiences and sense impressions, but will not admit that external objects correspond; and as surely as that other school must speak of "being horsed" and "walled", but not of horse or wall, so this school of theirs is under the necessity of saying that the eye is rounded or be-angled, and not that the oar is bent or the tower round, for it is the film (*eidolon*) producing the effect in the eye that is bent, whereas the oar is not bent from which the film proceeded. (Plutarch, *Adv. Col.* 1121 AB, transl. De Lacy)

Here Plutarch refers to the fact that Epicureans are cautious when it comes to making judgments about external objects in circumstances where the judgment might turn out to be false. The two most usual examples of this are an oar appearing bent when half-submerged in water and a square

tower appearing round from a distance. In such circumstances the Epicureans according to Plutarch restrict themselves to judgments about the way *eidola* impact the eye so as to bring about the perception, which is the foundation of Plutarch's criticism of Epicurean epistemology as being committed to a form of subjectivism, just as Cyrenaics are. Leaving aside for a moment Plutarch's criticism, let us concentrate on his interpretation of the Epicurean position. From Plutarch's report it follows that the truthfulness of perceptions is guaranteed by the way perceptions are produced and therefore they can be true in regards to their objects only if the proper objects of perceptions are *eidola*.

In the case of a tower appearing round from a distance, *eidolon* that stimulate sense organ is in fact round and thus perceptions accurately report the cause in the moment it impinges on the eyes. That is to say they are not accurate of the tower itself, as an external solid, but accurate in respect of its immediate physical stimulus, the *eidolon*, which we can describe as "the *eidolon* of a far-off tower". On the other hand, belief that tower is round as its object has a tower itself, and therefore is false, because it does not capture the real property of the object in question. In other words, it seems that in the case of perception the content is not expressed only by saying that it includes just the external solid and specific property, but also the distance and perspective at which perception is produced. As Long and Sedley maintains:

So too, since the vision's province is to report not actual bodily shape, but "shape at a distance", we feel no conflict between the far-off and close-up views of the same square tower: naturally we expect a far-off tower to look different from a near-by tower, since they constitute different objects of sensation. (LS 1987: 85)

Therefore, according to Epicurus, the conflict in perceptions is just apparent one, because perceptions in those cases have different objects, "a far-off *eidolon*" and "close-up *eidolon*". Their contents thus truly report "no more nor less than it is given in perception" because perceptions are *alogoi*, that is, not capable of interpretation or inference and thus equally trustworthy in representing their objects. Everson (1990: 177) similarly argues that:

The objects of perception, then, to which the perceptions must accord if they are to be true, are not solid objects but the film of atoms which strikes the senses. Therefore, it is only if the objects of perceptions are *eidola* rather than the solid object themselves that the claim that all perceptions are true could stand a chance of being plausible.

Plutarch's report is often cited together with Sextus' outline of Epicurus' error-theory where Sextus presents the Epicurean position as follows:

Some people are deceived by the difference among impressions seeming to reach us from the same sense-object, for example a visible object, such that the

object appears to be of a different colour or shape, or altered in some other way. For they have supposed that, when impressions differ and conflict in this way, one of them must be true and the opposing false. This is simple-minded, and characteristic of those who are blind to the real nature of things. For it is not the whole solid body that is seen – to take the example of visible things – but the colour of the solid body. And of colour, some is right on the solid body, as in the case of things seen from close up or from a moderate distance, but some is outside the solid body and is objectively located in the space adjacent to it, as in the case of things seen from a great distance. This colour is altered in the intervening space, and takes on a peculiar shape. But the impression which it imparts corresponds to what is its own true objective state. (SE *M* VII.205–7, transl. LS)

Sextus' report follows very closely Plutarch's interpretation and support the reading according to which the proper objects of perceptions are *eidola*, and not external objects. As Sextus states, the difference between perceptions can be explained only if we take that in perception "it is not the whole solid body that is seen – to take the example of visible things – but the colour of the solid body". In other words, this reading suggests that since every perception has a different immediate cause, every perception in fact presents a different state of affairs. This means that the state of affairs does not refer exclusively to the external object as such and its real nature, but directly to *eidola*, which capture a richer, contextual presentation of a different state of affairs.⁷ In Everson's view, Sextus' report explains another important feature of perceptions, namely the fact that perceptions are mutually irrefutable (Everson 1990: 176).

It becomes clear that Epicurus can successfully reply and block the argument from conflicting appearances only if an explanation of the conflict between perceptions of different senses concerning the same property is provided, as in the case of an oar half-emerged in the water when perceived by sight and touch. In order to argue that such a conflict is apparent, as Everson maintains, "Epicurus' point must be not merely that there are some objects which cannot be perceived by more than one sense but that there are no objects which more than one sense can perceive" (1990: 177). Therefore, by taking the *eidola* as the objects of perceptions, Epicurus secures a justification for the general claim that each sense discriminates its specific objects, because only specific type of atomic effluences is commensurable with each sense organ. In addition, in the case of the one and the same perceptual modality,

⁷ This does not contradict with Sextus (*M* VII.207) where he says that "of color, some is on the solid body itself", since he continues saying that "in the case of things looked at close up or from a moderate distance, while some is outside the solid body, and exists in the neighboring locations".

as in the case of seeing a tower from different distances, perceptions cannot refute each other simply because those two perceptions are not perceptions of the same state of affairs being produced by different physical stimuli.

This interpretation is also promising in explanation of the truthfulness of vision of non-existing objects, as in the example of Orestes' seeing the Furies, and other cases of hallucinations and dreams, namely the cases in which there is no external solid from which *eidola* are released. Sextus reports the following account of the truthfulness of Orestes' perception:

At any rate, in the case of Orestes, when he seemed to see the Furies, his sensation, being affected by the *eidola*, was true, in that the *eidola* objectively existed; but his mind, in thinking that the Furies were solid bodies, held false opinions. (SE *M* VIII.63, transl. LS)

According to Sextus' report, Epicurus in the case of all perceptions, including hallucinations and dreams, appeals to the same explanation: the truthfulness of sense-perceptions is related to their immediate cause, i.e. the *eidola*. That is, in all cases the equal trustworthiness of perceptions is established on the fact that perceptions always accurately report the state of the impacting *eidola*. Even in the cases where *eidola* are in fact emitted from an underlying external solid, the proper object of perception is not a solid but *eidola*.

However, this reading is not without difficulties. One of the major objections is raised by Plutarch in the previously quoted passage where he accuses Epicureans of holding a form of subjectivism that leads to a skepticism regarding the knowledge of external world. According to Plutarch, the explanation of the trustworthiness of perceptions by the *eidola* as their objects directly opens the problem of the way in which the representational content of perceptions can ever secure us with objective information about the external world. Namely, perceptions in that case do not provide an epistemic link with the objective reality because their truthfulness refers only to themselves. In other words, just as in the Cyrenaic position, knowledge becomes limited only to knowledge of one's internal and subjective awareness of being in a certain perceptual state. Therefore, as Striker (1996: 90) points out, although the suggested reading of the *eidola* as the objects of perception is appealing because it smoothly solves the problem of perceptual conflict, the cost is too high – it leads to a total inconsistency of Epicurean position and the loss of knowledge of the external world.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of Plutarch's argument shows that the identification of the Epicurean position with the form of subjectivism and skepticism seems rather unfair and not textually supported, which opens thus a possibility for a reply to Striker's worry. So before we finally conclude

that the proper objects of perception are *eidola*, it is necessary to give an account of the way in which representational content of perception relates us to the external world. The commentators take that the main argument against Plutarch's interpretation relies on the fact that Epicurean perceptions are not reports of internal mental awareness of a subject, but of external reality. Taylor (1980: 118) explains it in the following way:

For the sceptic's starting point (and his finishing-point too, for that matter) is knowledge of one's own perceptual states, "perceptual sweetening" etc., whereas the Epicurean starts from direct acquaintance with the physical objects impinging on the senses. The sceptics declare insoluble the problem of justifying the inference from descriptions of perceptual states to statements about external objects. For the Epicurean, on the other hand, descriptions of perceptual states are already descriptions of a percipient in contact with the physical world.

Similarly, Glidden (1979: 305) argues that

by restricting one's sensory self-awareness to the feelings of pleasure and pain, Epicurus made his materialism compatible with his foundationalist theory of knowledge, since the evidence of perceptual appearances (*phantasiai*) was not to be identified with the subject's inner sensory states.

What follows from this is the fact that such an epistemology and the justification of the thesis that "all perceptions are true" is inseparable from materialism or, in the Epicurean case, from the atomistic theory. Therefore, the crucial difference between Cyrenaics and Epicureans, as Tsouna (1998: 118–9) points out, is "that the knowledge of *aisthesis* is already knowledge of something physical with which perceiver is in contact, whereas in knowing *pathe* the perceiver is only in contact with himself".

I agree with Everson (1990: 180) who argues that it is mistaken to infer that perceptual reports will not be about external solids if their objects are *eidola*, since *eidola* "are as external as anything else". Therefore, when *eidola* are coming from an external solid they do represent their cause, before all because they secure the same atomic arrangement as in the solid from which they are released. As we are already told in DL X.50, this correspondence is secured because of sympathy (*sumpatheia*) between *eidola* and the source from which they are released. Nevertheless, perceptions do differ in the amount of information they carry about the object and the role of the opining is to determine and interpret the relevant information about certain object. In the case of perceptions of a tower seen from a distant and close-up view, perceptions are causally related to a tower but they are not informative in the same way about it. This does not mean that they are not telling the truth about it, but again, the truthfulness of those perceptions refers to two

different contents: a) “perceiving of a round tower from this position” and b) “perceiving of a square tower from this position”. Again, it is not a job of perception to infer that the real nature of a tower, because perceptions, just like photographs give us evidence of external reality⁸.

Perception thus does bear a relation to the external world and it has content that is factive and informative about the world. In that way perception of the tower, although having *eidola* as its object, nevertheless is about the tower, just like belief. However, I want to argue that the difference between perception and beliefs consists in the fact that their specific contents are different. So in the case of a tower seen from a far, it seems that the content of perception have to be different since it captures the distance, the place from which a tower is observed, namely, the pure fact that *it is seen from a distance*. Exactly this is missing in the belief that the tower is round. In order to elucidate the difference between the contents, I will introduce the notion of nonconceptual content in order to specify the special feature of perceptual content in contrast to content of belief which is conceptual.

III.

I believe that that Epicurean perceptual content might be interpreted as a part of a larger framework fixed around the debate about the notion of “non-conceptual content”. Namely, the biggest problem I find in understanding Epicurean texts is the difference between the contents of perception and belief and no satisfactory explanation is offered so far. Therefore, the motivation for introducing the idea of nonconceptual perceptual content in modern epistemology lies in an aspiration to explain the intuition that there is something intrinsically different between perceptual content on the one side and perceptual beliefs on the other, and that that difference follows from the fact that perception is in some sense independent from belief.

Namely, one thing about perception that seems to be uncontroversial is that perception, just like belief, represents the world to be a certain way which is enough to consider it as having a content. However, the question of dispute is whether the content of perception is of the same kind or structure as that of belief. Usually it is taken that “the representational content of perceptual experience has to be given by a proposition, or set of propositions, which specifies the way the experience represents the world to be” (Peacocke 1983: 5). This could mean that perception of some thing *x*, as *F* (for example, perceiving an apple as red) has to be given in the propositional form “that *x*

⁸ Photography analogy serves only to illustrate the point that perception faithfully records external reality. Further interpretation of the “recorded material” belongs to the higher operations of mind, namely *epilogismos* together with the usage preconceptions.

is F”, because of which perception becomes dependent upon the perceiver’s ability to employ conceptual capacities. From this it follows that the content of perception understood in that way is then determined by the concepts “x” and “F”, that is, we could not see that an apple is red unless we have the concepts “apple” and “red”. However, advocates of nonconceptualist content argue that although perceptions inform us about the world and thus certainly have representational content just like beliefs, the content of perception differ from the content of belief and need not be characterized as conceptual. They claim that we should be cautious in specifying the content of such representations as purely propositional and conceptual because it will appear to be too restrictive for the content of perception. To put it simply, the question to be answered is whether perceptual representation of the world is conceptualized, that is, whether seeing a certain thing as having a triangular shape requires that one has the concept of triangularity.

In the literature various arguments are offered to express the difference between the representational content of perception and belief and some aim to show that perception is independent from being conceptualized. For the purposes of this work let us focus on what seem to be the two main arguments: the richness argument and the fine-grained argument.⁹ According to the richness argument the content of perceptual experience carries much more information about the objects in the external world, the properties they have and the relations between them than does the content of belief. My present perception of the view from a window carries so much information about different objects (such as the trees, the leaves, the tree bark, their shapes, colours, relations between them, between me and each object) and as such is full of information. It seems impossible that in order to have that representation it is needed to have all those concepts for each thing represented (objects, properties, relations and so on).

The fine-grained argument is usually explained through the example that we can perceive and distinguish many more colour shades than we have concepts for. For example, I can experience many different shades of red, without having a specific concept of each shade and therefore, this implies that the content of perception has a specific feature, namely fineness of grain, in contrast to beliefs, and thus implies a resistance to calling it conceptual.

⁹ Usually the fine-grain argument and the richness argument are not recognized as two different arguments. I follow the suggestion of Siegel (2010) because it seems that by distinguishing them two different features of perception are better illustrated. Other authors add some other arguments, such as the continuity argument according to which the fact that humans share the same representational content with lower animals indicates that the shared content must be non-conceptual since lower animals do not have concepts and yet have representational content. I did not particularly concentrate on that one because it is not so relevant for understanding Epicurean content.

So, both arguments show that although there is something similar between perception and belief, namely that they represent the world and thus have content, in some respect their contents are rather different. The difference indicated in both of them is nicely illustrated by Dretske (203: 26) who says:

Suppose a cup has coffee in it, and we want to communicate this piece of information. If I simply *tell* you, “The cup has coffee in it”, this (acoustic) signal carries the information that the cup has coffee in digital form. No more specific information is supplied about the cup (or the coffee) than that there is some coffee in the cup. You are not told *how much* coffee there is in the cup, how large the cup *is*, *how dark* the coffee is, what the shape and orientation of the cup are, and so on. If, on the other hand, I photograph the scene and show you the picture, the information that the cup has coffee in it is conveyed in analog form. The picture tells you that there is some coffee in the cup by telling you, roughly, how much coffee is in the cup, the shape, size, and color of the cup, and so on.

This passage presents Dretske’s famous distinction between two sorts of information, digital and analog. The main difference is that information that x is F in analog form has richer and finer content, whereas information in digital form carries just some of the information that is already present in analog form and sorted out from it. From this Dretske concludes that perceptual experience, i.e. sensory presentation, always comes in analog form, and “until information has been *extracted from* this sensory structure (digitalization), nothing corresponding to recognition, classification, identification, or judgment has occurred – nothing, that is, of any *conceptual* or *cognitive* significance” (2003: 38). The process of perceiving, such as seeing, hearing or smelling, is the process in which we simply receive sensory information about x as F without being able to conceptually understand that x is F . The sensory system, says Dretske is like the postal system: it delivers information by means of a causal mechanism, just like a thermometer or camera.

Similarly to Dretske, Evans grounds his explanation of non-conceptual content and its distinctive informational character on the analogy with photography. On the grounds of the analogy, Evans (1982: 125) emphasizes as a relevant characteristic of such content that it is causally dependent upon the objects it represents, in the sense that “the properties that figure in the content of its output are (to a degree determined by the accuracy of the mechanism) the properties possessed by the objects which are the input to it”. In other words, the content of perception understood as an informational state is fixed by the objects that information is about in such a way that informational content that x is F would not occur if x were not F .

From this, rather oversimplified explanation of the representational character of perception for the present purposes, we can extract three main features on the grounds of which such content can be characterized as non-

conceptual: (i) the content of perception is replete and has fineness of grain in the sense that perceptual representation carries information about properties, but also about position, relations of objects presented to other objects and to the perceiver; (ii) the representational content of perception causally depends upon the objects it represents; (iii) due to the fact that perception cannot carry information that x is F unless x is F , perceptual content has specific primitive certainty and is veridical by definition (Stalnaker 2003). The veridicality condition requires special attention.

What lies behind the third condition is the naturalistic and common-sense intuition according to which it seems natural to say that the content of perception usually accurately represents how things are in the world because it is determined by its external cause. Explained in such a way perception is characterized primarily as the matter of a relation between the perceiver and the object perceived. However, this does not imply that in modern discussion all representational contents are veridical. Perceptual error is usually understood as the case in which the content of representation does not correspond with the way things actually are in the world, as in the case of illusions and hallucinations. Since in those cases representational content fails to correspond with the way things really are, the modern discussion is concerned with securing the so-called “accuracy conditions” under which perceptual content is veridical. So in what sense is the nonconceptual content veridical?

This question is largely debatable but I want to concentrate on the formulation of veridicality of the non-conceptual content that seems to be useful for elucidating the Epicurean content of perception. What appears to be crucial for the explanation of the primitive certainty of informational content is the fact that in order to properly grasp it, it is necessary to take into consideration the relevant features of information, namely its repleteness and fineness of grain. Given this, the notion of veridicality thus will include an extensive understanding of the counterfactual supporting evidence (namely, that the informational content would have been different if the information were different) in the way that will make perceptual content more sensitive to the possible different states of the environment. Tye (2003: 79) illustrates this point with the following example:

The coin looks round. It also looks tilted – some parts of its facing surface look nearer than other parts of that surface. The experience thus represents the coin as round, as tilted, and so forth. The coin held perpendicular to the line of sight does not look tilted, however. Therefore, an immediate representational difference exists between the two cases. Furthermore, the tilted coin also looks elliptical from the given viewing position. Here the represented feature is that of having a shape that would be occluded by an ellipse placed in a plane perpendicular to the line of sight. Again the representational is nonconceptual. And

again, no illusion is present. The experience is veridical on all levels: the facing surface of the coin really is elliptical from here; the coin really is circular.

If we go back to the initial characterization of the veridicality condition which says that perception cannot carry information that x is F unless x is F , in the case of perceiving the coin as elliptical veridicality is guaranteed only if the main features of the information are considered: the causal trace and the proper relation between perceiver and the object perceived. To put it differently, we intuitively take that the most plausible way to explain the fact that I perceive something red is that there must be something red that is perceived. The commonsensical way to explain the nature of perceptual content is to say that it is determined by its cause because there is a causal connection between the perceiver and the perceived object. So veridical perception is the one in which there is always an object that matches the content of perception and falsidical if there is not.

After the veridicality feature is explained in more details, we can conclude by saying that since (i), (ii) and (iii) features of perception cannot be accommodated by conceptual content of judgment it follows that they are two distinct sorts of contents: non-conceptual content of perception in the judgment is interpreted, identified and structured under the concepts, however with an inevitable loss of information. So how does this help us to understand Epicurean content and truthfulness of perceptions? In what follows I will try to show that Epicurean perceptual content meets all of the three features sketched above.

We can start with the fact that in explanation of Epicurus' account of the truthfulness of perception commentators often employ the strategy of illustrating the perceptual system as a recording device or a camera or by the analogy of photography, as in the case of the information delivery systems. So Taylor (1980: 119–120) writes:

The analogy of the camera is, though anachronistic, quite an apt expression of the Epicurean view. Their thought seems to have been that, like the camera, *aisthesis* cannot lie, since *aisthesis* puts no construction on what it “sees” nor compares it with what it remembers (DL, loc. cit. *mnēmēs oudemias dektikē*), but, like the camera, merely records what is before it. But it is precisely this passivity in the face of stimulation which gives *aisthesis* its evidential value.

What does this tell us about the content of perception and the way it should be specified? One crucial part of the analogy with the camera is the fact that perception “is irrational and does not accommodate memory” because “neither is it moved by itself, nor when moved by something else is it able to add or subtract anything” (DL X.32, transl. LS). In other words, perceptual content originates as a totally passive response to external stimuli that is not

capable of making any intervention on the stimuli. So perception gathers information in the same way as the informational systems described by Dretske and Evans, being causally dependent upon the objects it presents. In the case of Epicurean perceptions those objects, as we have seen, are *eidola* and therefore for a perceptual content to be veridical in the Epicurean case means that the representational content has to accord with the information carried by the *eidola*. That is, in the case of seeing the tower as round, the content of perception is trustworthy in spite of the fact that the tower itself is square because it accurately represents state of affairs, that is, the information about objects in the world carried by the *eidola*. But what is in fact the information carried by the *eidola*? Does the content of perception refer to the state of affairs that can be captured and exhausted by saying only that the tower is round? Obviously not.

In explaining the accuracy and the reliability of perception the content of perception refers to the state of affairs that includes roundness as a property, and the tower to which the property is ascribed, but also the relation between the perceiver and the object perceived, that is, the point of view from which the tower is observed. Having that in mind, the content of perception in the case of perceiving the tower as round has different content from the one that represents the tower as square, but the crucial point is that the contents are not conflicted. They are not in conflict simply because they are about different states of affairs although are causally connected with the same object, the tower. However, the causal history of information includes much more than the object and the relevant property of the object in question as expressed in a proposition “that the tower is round”. We can say that both perceptions of the tower are truthful representations of states of affairs but only because the content of perception is expanded in order to include *all* information carried by *eidola*. Thus the content of Epicurean perception necessarily includes objects, properties and relations, just as a photograph does, as Dretske claims, which indicates that the representational content of Epicurean perception is rich and replete in a different way than beliefs are, as pointed out in the first feature of nonconceptual content. So, let us see how the Epicurean content meets the veridicality condition.

Specific feature of Epicurean epistemology is that it provides objects of perception, i.e. *eidola*, that always matches perceptual content and therefore make perceptions always veridical. In that sense perception always correctly inform us about the way things are in the world, but it is up to perceiver to cautiously form beliefs from perceptual report. Exactly because of this condition, namely because *eidola* and not the external solids are proper objects of perception, it is possible to explain the truthfulness of all perceptions. Similarly, in the case of hallucinations and all other cases which are normally un-

derstood as misperceptions, the content of perception will be veridical since all cases of perception have to match with *eidola* as their objects. This reflects the way Epicurus' epistemology is totally intertwined with his physics: the *eidolic* theory guarantees that perception cannot but accord with its objects and therefore perceptions are always true.

What particularly allows proposed interpretation of the content of perception in Epicurean epistemology is the fact that perception totally passively receives and delivers information, making no room for any intervention or interpretation of the information received. This point allows an explanation of the difference between perception and belief and their contents in the way that perceptual is nonconceptual. Perception is, says Epicurus, *alogos* and does not accommodate memory, which I take to rather strongly indicate that perception is a cognitive ability that does not consist in exercising any conceptualization. This means that perception cannot recognize or interpret or structure information in the form of "that tower is round" because being able to do that necessarily involves sorting out of the input and employing concepts of "tower" and "roundness".¹⁰ That goes beyond perceptual ability because it includes at least the ability to recognize an object as such and such and to conjoin it with the right preconception stored in a memory. So, in line with Dretske's suggestion, the Epicurean representational content of perception can be characterized as analog, which in the process of judgment becomes structured and conceptualized or digital.

Finally, if we accept that Epicurean perceptual content should be understood as non-conceptual, can we ascribe truth to such content? So, the last question I want to pose is the following: what does it mean to say that such content of perception is true and how should we understand the term *alethes*?

IV.

Some scholars suggest that the solution for the problem of truthfulness is to be found in a different interpretation of "true" (*alethes*) in the thesis that "all perceptions are true", namely in the sense of "real". The main evidence for this reading are the passages from Sextus *M* VIII.9, where he says that for Epicurus there is no difference between saying that a thing is "true" and "real" and the passage DL X.32 where Diogenes reports the Epicurean position saying that "the reality of separate perceptions guarantees the truth of our senses. But seeing and hearing are just as real as feeling pain" (transl. Hicks). Also

¹⁰ It is important to stress again that perception never tells us that X is tower, but only that there is something external that stimulates our sense organ.

in the last sentence of Diogenes' passage "truthfulness" of perceptions in the case of madmen and in dreams is elucidated by the fact that in those cases some movement occurs, that is to say that misperceptions are just as real as normal perceptions in as much as they show that something appears to us. The "realistic" reading is here supported particularly by the fact that *alethes* of misperception is contrasted and opposed to "what does not exist" (*to me on*) implying that *alethes* is then synonymous to "exist" (*to on*).

The main motivation for this reading is to solve the difficulties and the absurdity that come out of the claim that *all* perceptions are equal in trustworthiness which seems to be simply false because of many cases of perceptual error. By taking *alethes* as "real" it becomes more plausible to claim first, that the illusory perceptions of a madman and dream visions are "true", that is, "real" events in one's perceptual sensory organs; second, the "realistic" reading fits better with the comparison of perceptions with pain and pleasure, as a kind of states which cannot be characterized as "true" having no content to which the truthfulness in a propositional sense can be ascribed; and finally the third, namely that the comparison with the bodily states accords with the characterization of perception as *alogos*, because of which perception, just like a headache, cannot be evaluated as true or false, having no propositional content (Long 1971, Rist 1972, O'Keefe 2010). Therefore, according to this reading only beliefs can be taken as true and false *simpliciter*, while perceptual "truthfulness" consist only in being a real event, i.e. the sense organ being stimulated by real, existing *eidola*.

The absurdity of the "realistic" view Everson (1990: 167) explains by saying that "the contrast between perceptions and beliefs will be that whereas all perceptions are real (or involve awareness of something real), some beliefs are real while others are not (or do not involve awareness of something real)". Also, the "realistic" reading, as Striker (1996: 81) points out,

goes against the entire tradition – not just hostile authors like Cicero and Plutarch, but also Lucretius, and Sextus, who seems to be rather impartial in this case, take Epicurus to be asserting something about the truth as opposed to falsity of our impressions, rather than about "truth" as opposed to nonexistence.

And it is not *ad hominem* to take very seriously the fact that the authors without exceptions ascribe to Epicurus this odd, absurd and almost indefensible epistemological thesis according to which he treats the figments of madmen, dreaming and all other cases of misperception as true. Therefore, the second, "propositional" reading consists in preserving the epistemological relevance of the thesis about perceptual incorrigibility, by establishing perceptions as the kind of things that have a content to which the notion of truth is applicable. Speaking in the language of contemporary epistemology, Epicurean perceptions can be characterized as having a content because they without doubt

concerns the external world and “to say that any state has content is just to say that it represents the world as being a certain way” (Crane 1992: 139).

Striker and Everson argue that there is in fact no difficulty in regarding sense-perceptions as “true” in the usual, propositional sense of the word, offering a different, propositional reading of *alethes* in the sense of true *simpliciter*. Everson (1990: 169) claims that “perceptions, like propositions, are concerned with states of affairs in the world” so we should accept that “the proper way to describe perceptions is by reference to their content propositionally expressed”. Striker (1990: 90) maintains that the incorrigibility of perceptions should be understood as the claim that “all propositions expressing no more nor less than the content of a given sense impressions are true”.

However, propositional reading is not without difficulties itself. First, given that Epicurean process of perceiving is based on atomistic theory, perception is reduced to atomical effluences passively received by a sense organ and as such it hardly leaves any room for ascribing propositional truthfulness to perception. Moreover, we have learned that perceptions are *alogoi*, that is, totally incapable of any intervention in the content of what they represent because of which perception, just like a headache, cannot be evaluated as true or false, having no propositional content. Next, Epicurus distinguishes between two kinds of movements that happens in the act of perceiving and judging (DL X.51) where perception is always *alethes* and irrefutable, unlike belief which can be true or false. It seems that this difference is captured only if perceptions and beliefs are characterized differently: perception as being always *alethes*, in contrast to beliefs which are eligible for evaluating as true or false. The claim that *alethes* is used in the same sense for both perceptions and beliefs simply disregard this important distinction and leads to an uncomfortable consequence that perception, just like beliefs, thus can be false.

Finally, the biggest worry for propositional reading is missing of the textual support. In Epicurean epistemology we cannot find any textual evidence for a clear distinction between perceptions (*aistheseis*) and something like perceptual propositions or *phantasiai* as it is later introduced in Stoic epistemology. Epistemologically the distinction between *aisthesis* and *phantasia* is important because strictly speaking only *phantasia*, having propositional content, can be evaluated as true or false. In the relevant passage where Epicurus is talking about veridicality of all perceptions, he claims that alleged misperceptions resemble to “the things we call *existent* (*ousi*) and *true* (*alethesi*)” (DL X.50), obviously referring to the *objects* in the external world as *alethesi* and not perceptual propositions. Similarly, Sextus reports Epicurus’ position saying that “Epicurus spoke of all perceptible things (*aistheta*) as true and as beings (*onta*)” (M VIII.9). It seems then, that textual evidence speaks against propositional reading, and as such it should be abandoned. Given that both

traditional interpretation of *alethes* face some serious problems, it is necessary to look for another option.

Recently, the third possible interpretation of *alethes* is offered by Katja Vogt (ms) which seems to be rather promising since it takes over those parts of the two offered readings which are at best supported by the evidence. Vogt builds her reading on a comparison between Epicurean perception and knowledge. Namely, knowledge is an epistemological state which is always true and simply cannot be false. As Vogt (ms) explains, “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”. Epicurean perception is analogous to knowledge exactly in this respect: there are pieces which cannot be false and as such, Vogt suggests, should be understood as factive in order to avoid confusion of ascribing truthfulness to something that is impossible to refute. Therefore, the thesis that perception is *alethes* should be understood as “all perceptions are factive”. Vogt (ms) explains her position in the following way:

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.

Although I do not share Vogt’s conclusion that the atomic image is perceived, I find her interpretation of *alethes* as factive to be compatible with my suggestion to take Epicurean perceptual content as nonconceptual. As I previously argued the main reason for this is because perceptual content is of a different kind than of beliefs. Therefore, it is illegitimate to treat truthfulness of perception in the same way as of beliefs, as it was the case in the propositional reading. However, this does not imply that perception do not have any epistemologically relevant content as the proponents of the realistic reading maintain.

To say that perception is factive, as I understand it, means that there is the constant and regular correlation between a perceptual report and the reality of what is reported. In other words, given the mechanism of perceiving, perception always perfectly accords with its cause and thus cannot be mistaken in representing it. Perceptions indeed have content, but it is a raw material which cannot be false since it is a mere response of a sense organ on the impact from the outside, namely *eidola*. Because *eidola* are true and secure reports of external objects, incorrigibility of all perceptions is guaranteed. In that sense perception is different from opinion, and Vogt is right in insisting that *alethes* cannot be applied in the same way to those intrinsically different cognitive states.

Therefore, the advantage of the “factive” reading is that it preserves the epistemological relevance of the claim that “all perceptions are true” by taking that the perceptual truth is the systematic correspondence between perception and the object it represents, which follows from the fact that every perception always has a real, external cause. And this is exactly the way Sextus reports Epicurean position saying that

the Epicureans say, an appearance is said to be true whenever it comes about from a real thing and in accordance with just *that* real thing, and every appearance is produced from a real thing that appears and in accordance with the very thing that appears, necessarily every appearance is true. (M VII.205, transl. Bett)

V.

To conclude, the difference between the contents of perception and beliefs in representation of the world consists in the fact that perception represents the world in a nonconceptual way, serving as a tribunal of the way things are passively given in perception without any intervention upon stimuli. I believe that taken this way the content of perception can be characterized as purely factual. Exactly the feature of passivity and givenness enables perception to serve as the foundation of cognition, to be self-evident and the criterion of truth. Namely in perceiving subject is not able to intervene in the process, but is passively stimulated from outside, which in the end guarantees validity of all perceptions. In Epicurean terms, the eidolic theory excludes a possibility of any intervention in perceptual content, for which I argued, is the starting point for reading that such content is nonconceptual.

Since perceptions are impossible to refute, they sharply differ from beliefs which can be false. Given that perceptions in Epicurean epistemology cannot be false it seems plausible to assume that truth and falsity cannot be ascribed to perceptions and beliefs in the same sense. Therefore, I accept a new proposal for the interpretation of *alethes* as factive.

From this we can infer that the beliefs will be true if they correctly extract and structure information delivered through the sensory organs by applying correct concepts in order to classify, structure and express the content of perception. The concepts that are applied are Epicurean preconceptions. This reading I believe serves as a good ground for understanding why preconceptions are necessary as the second criterion of truth. Namely, preconceptions originate from a memory of what is often perceived (DL X.33) and

enable us to articulate what we see in the form of judgment and as such are necessary epistemological tool for testing truth and falsehood together with perceptions.¹¹

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