

## The Sublimity of Appearances in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*

In Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius defends the notorious Epicurean position that all sense perceptions are true. The reasoning mind cannot refute the testimony of the senses, the different senses cannot refute each others' testimony, and one sense cannot refute its own testimony later (4.478-499). The poet defends this position against an imagined skeptic through recourse to an analogy that reveals the fundamentality of his claim to the Epicurean scientific system: if one's measuring rule (*regula*) is warped, then then a building will be constructed in a faulty fashion, and will collapse, so too with scientific inquiry (4.513-8). As *regula* indicates, the poet is reformulating Epicurus' *kanōn*, his investigative principle that serves as a preface to conducting scientific inquiry (Diog. 10.30). Nevertheless, ordinary, everyday experience seems to indicate that sensual perceptions in themselves can be deceiving. This paper takes a different approach to this problem than previous scholarship, which usually seeks to contextualize and defend the Epicurean position (e.g. Vogt 2016): it establishes the role Lucretius' *regula* plays in his poetic project, in particular, to his aesthetics of everyday experience. I argue that Lucretius' reformulation of Epicurus' *kanōn* differs such that it allows him a unique response to his imagined skeptic, one that is particularly suited to poetry.

Lucretius' omission of the usual canonic method of resolving discrepancies between sensory perceptions, the reliance on reason to test sensory data against each other, allows him to center a different facet of Epicurean sensory experience, suspension of judgement. If the reasoning mind cannot explain away the contradiction between the round appearance of a tower at a distance, and its square appearance up close, it is better to find no reason (*rationis egentum reddere*) to characterize either faulty (*mendose*), rather than to collapse the foundations of life

and sanity (*convellere tota fundamenta quibus nixatur vita salusque*, 4.500-506). In this, both Lucretius and the skeptic agree that we must suspend judgement of appearances, since they show nothing about external reality. But Lucretius bridges the gap between appearance and reality through arguments by analogy, which, according to Philodemus, were the only kind of inference allowed to Epicureans, (*Sign.* 32.8-10). Building on recent analyses of Lucretius' use of analogy, and its poetic forms, simile and metaphor, as a way of seeing what is invisible (Schrijvers 2007; Markovic 2008), I argue that operative in Lucretius' analogies is the same kind of suspension of judgement that he endorses against the skeptic. The Epicurean must suspend judgement between two conflicting images: appearances as they are in ordinary experience, and the hidden atomic world.

Lucretius' use of analogies constitutes a response to the skeptic through the vividness of their images, which endorse the reliability of ordinary experience throughout the poem. Converse to how they normally work, against the skeptic, analogies are persuasive only if they can explain the reality of certain clear, distinct, and dependable images. Cataloguing moments in *DRN* where Lucretius employs images taken from everyday life and showing that they appear most frequently in books 2 and 4, where he is laying out the atomic universe, I argue that ultimately, Lucretius showcases an important new aspect of sublimity, the sublimity of all appearances as such. As best shown in his catalogue of marvels (4.379-461), he unites in his poetic worldbuilding project spectacular images, like stars gliding behind clouds at night, with catalogues of plain things (*res apertas*, 4.467). Lucretius' project, then, relies on the total belief in the vividness of experience as it normally appears to our senses. Often, this belief manifests itself in extraordinary images, which previous scholarship has named as examples of the sublime, like the sight in a puddle of the entirety of the heavens (Porter 2010). But just as often,

Lucretius seeks to highlight the marvellousness of images like sheep bounding on a hilly meadow, poppy seeds falling through your fingers, or the sounds of colored awnings flapping in the wind. In this way, Lucretius champions the vividness of ordinary, everyday experience, illuminating aspects normally neglected because extraordinary aesthetic experience eclipses them, both as a defense against the skeptic, and as a fundamental principle in his Epicurean worldview.

#### Works Cited

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