

CONCEIVABILITY AND EXPERT INFERENCE: TWO HELLENISTIC PERSPECTIVES

MÁTÉ VERES

ABSTRACT · In Hellenistic philosophy, one can find contrasting evaluations of the argumentative use of merely conceivable states of affairs. On the one hand, Epicureans discard any proposal that has no plausibility from the point of view of someone in possession of the relevant expertise. On the other hand, Sceptics regularly invoke views which one might conceivably hold, irrespective of the view's epistemic credentials or whether or not it has or has ever had actual proponents. Since thought experiments often introduce scenarios involving merely conceivable but non-actual states of affairs, the positions of Epicureans and Sceptics regarding conceivability can be transposed into different attitudes towards the method of thought experiments.

KEYWORDS · Epicurus, Philodemus, Sextus Empiricus, Induction, Conceivability.

1.

PHILOSOPHERS of Graeco-Roman antiquity formulated memorable thought experiments *avant la lettre* both in order to support their favoured views and to undermine the positions of their rivals.¹ At the same time, one can find in the ancient material little in the way of reflection on the methodology and justifiability of using thought experiments. This is unsurprising: if Greek and Roman authors formed no notion of thought experiments as a distinct class of argumentative considerations,² they must have felt no need to plead on their behalf.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify reasons inherent in ancient philosophical positions which, if made explicit, would speak in favour of one or another stance concerning thought experiments. For one thing, philosophers may hold a view on the legitimacy of appealing to intuitions concerning states of affairs that are never observed to occur but are nevertheless conceivable. Since a significant number of arguments that we tend to classify as thought experiments can be described as 'mental constructions which [...] introduce situations that are not part of our human experience',³ a position on the argumentative use of what is merely conceivable implies a view on the legitimacy of using such thought experiments, too.

In what follows, I shall focus on the Hellenistic era and examine the contrasting attitudes of Epicureans and Sceptics on the question of conceivability. According to Epicurus and his follower Philodemus, only those views deserve our consideration that are conceivable for someone who is sufficiently familiar with the deliverances of veridical sense-perception (Section 2). On the opposing view, championed especially by the Pyr-

mate.veres@unige.ch, Université de Genève, Suisse.

¹ On the uses of thought experiments in ancient philosophy, see IERODIAKONOU 2005. The literature on individual thought experiments is immense. For a contribution which is especially successful in showing the role of thought experiments in supporting a set of philosophical views (namely, those of Aristotle), see CORCILIOUS 2017.

² See IERODIAKONOU 2005, pp. 133-137, IERODIAKONOU 2017, pp. 32-34.

³ IERODIAKONOU 2017, pp. 40.

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.19272/202330201003](https://doi.org/10.19272/202330201003) · «ANTIQUORVM PHILOSOPHIA», 17, 2023

[HTTP://ANTIQUORVMPHILOSOPHIA.LIBRAWEB.NET](http://antiquorumphilosophia.libraweb.net)

SUBMITTED: 30.10.2023 · REVIEWED: 29.11.2023 · ACCEPTED: 6.1.2024