This book represents an attempt to give a positive account of Gassendi’s contribution to philosophy and science, in contrast to those accounts of his work that tend to see him either as a critic, especially of Aristotle and Descartes, or as a historian of philosophy noted for his expositions of Epicurean atomism. Fisher argues that Gassendi gave a novel articulation of an empiricist theory of knowledge and also defended atomism, and did so in a way that aspired to fashion these two sets of claims into a coherent whole in spite of the difficulty of giving an empirical justification of knowledge of unobservable atoms. On this interpretation, Gassendi made a profound contribution to philosophy in the early modern period that was of lasting value and is even of contemporary relevance. The author documents his account of Gassendi’s views, drawing on a broad sweep of source materials including manuscript materials and lesser-known texts.

In Part 1, the first of the book’s four parts, the author gives a detailed account of Gassendi’s empiricism, which takes Epicurus’s position as its starting point and attempts to improve on it. Epicurus had recognised that the senses can mislead, as in the case of a distant square tower appearing round. Epicurus took refuge in the appearances themselves, insisting that, for instance, the brute fact of the apprehension of a round tower by an observer cannot be denied. The key problem with this position is how one gets from the having of a perceptual experience to vindicating some propositional truth about the world. Fisher explores various ways in which Gassendi grappled with the issue. One strategy involved adopting a reliabilist account of the senses that gave up on the idea that the
The senses provide certain knowledge. The senses provide warranted knowledge when they are used in optimum conditions and are not in conflict with other sensory evidence. A second element of Gassendi’s position is his recourse to a theory of how the senses work to bolster the claim that they do in fact deliver reliable information and to help spell out what counts as optimum conditions. So, for instance, Gassendi’s account of vision can be appealed to in order to argue that the close-up view of a tower is to be accepted rather than the distant view. A key problem with the appeal by Gassendi to his account of vision is that it is an atomistic account and so of dubious status for an empiricist until it can be empirically grounded. Gassendi did not achieve a satisfactory way of resolving the threatening circularity.

Given some account of access to truths, or probable truths, about the world via the senses, the further problem, at least for an empiricist such as Gassendi who seeks to defend atomism, is to identify a mode of reasoning that takes us beyond the observable to the unobservable. Here Gassendi proposed a theory of signs, according to which sensory evidence can – under appropriate circumstances – be appropriately interpreted as reliable indicators of the unobservable. For instance, smoke can be taken as an indication of the existence of otherwise unobserved fire, whilst the emergence of sweat from the body is indicative of the skin having invisible pores. The author notes the two kinds of problem with Gassendi’s position: the question of whether the inferences are indeed valid, and the issue of whether, even if they are, they provide data rich enough to make possible the atomistic physical theories that Gassendi sought to defend.

Part II of the book is devoted to Gassendi’s attempt to articulate a scientific method. Especially in his earlier writings, Gassendi advocated the *regressus demonstrativus* method developed in the late Renaissance and having its roots in Aristotle. It was based on the syllogism and involved identifying suitable middle terms in syllogisms designed to reconstruct particular instances of discovery and justification in the sciences. The relation between this reconstruction of scientific reasoning and empiricism is problematic. In any case, it was not in fact employed by Gassendi in his science. More promising is Gassendi’s attempt to develop what is in effect a version of hypothetical reasoning that is an extension of his theory of signs. However, Gassendi does not give an account of how