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## The notion of *enargeia* in Hellenistic philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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The notion of *enargeia*<sup>2</sup> is used and discussed extensively in Hellenistic philosophy in connection with the problem of the ‘criterion of truth’ (*kritêrion tês alêtheias*); that is to say, the question of how we specify the basic truths upon which the rest of our knowledge can securely rest. The Epicureans and the Stoics are foundationalists in the sense that all knowledge, according to them, has its origin in our grasp of such basic truths. They believe that there are certain states of a person—for instance, impressions of a certain kind—which by their nature are reliably, indeed infallibly, indicative of a fact about the world. They call a state of this kind a ‘criterion of truth’—literally a means or instrument which enables us to judge the truth; and they suggest different criteria which are supposed to safeguard the possibility of certain knowledge. Needless to say, the ancient Sceptics question whether there are such criteria.

Modern scholars have been interested in examining the merits of the Epicurean and Stoic proposals, as well as the relevant criticisms presented by the Sceptics.<sup>3</sup> However, comparatively little attention has been given to the justification of these criteria in terms of the notion of *enargeia*, or *perspicuitas* and *evidentia* in Latin. It still remains to be understood what the Epicureans and the Stoics mean when they make the reliability of

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan commented on a version of this paper fifteen years ago, before I delivered it at the 1995 meeting of the Northern Association for Ancient Philosophy in Edinburgh. I have not meanwhile managed to follow his suggestion and do the work required in order to turn it into a monograph. In this paper I try at least to meet some of his critical remarks, for which I thank him once again, as well as all the other colleagues who at the time sent me their comments: Gail Fine, Tony Long, Carlo Natali, Malcolm Schofield, and David Sedley.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper I use the transliteration of the Greek term *ἐνάργεια*, because no translation seems to capture exactly its meaning. In general, though, I prefer to translate *ἐνάργεια* as ‘evidence’ or ‘evidentness’, and *ἐναργής* as ‘evident’. The discussion that follows on the Hellenistic use of the term shows, I hope, that it would not be desirable to translate these terms respectively as ‘self-evidence’ and ‘self-evident’, for these would not make sense in the context of the subjective notion of *enargeia*. I also avoid translating *ἐνάργεια* as ‘clarity’ or ‘clearness’—not only because I reserve ‘clear’ for the term *τρανής*, but mainly because it is crucial to keep in mind that a criterion of truth is *enargês* both in the sense that it is evident and in the sense that it functions as evidence for the truth or falsity of something else.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Striker (1974) and (1990).

their criteria of truth dependent on the fact that they are evident. And it still needs to be explained how the Sceptics argue against them, when they claim that for the reliability of the suggested criteria of truth it is probably necessary that they be evident, but that this is not sufficient to make them criteria of truth.

The task I have set myself in this paper is to briefly sketch the development of the notion of *enargeia* from a term of ordinary language to a technical term in ancient epistemology, and the shift that takes place in the understanding of this notion in the course of the epistemological debate in the Hellenistic schools.

To start with, some brief remarks about the use of the notion of *enargeia* before the Hellenistic age: namely, its different senses first in ordinary Greek, and then in Plato, Aristotle, and their immediate followers.

In ordinary Greek, the term is used to refer to something *x* as being obvious, but without excluding the possibility that this obviousness may be deceptive. For example, in Herodotus it is used to describe dream visions (5.55; 7.47), but also to characterize oracular sayings that are considered as unequivocal (8.77). Thus it seems that the common use of the term *enargeia* is broad enough to suggest truth, but not necessarily to guarantee truth.

The same applies in the use of the term in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Both of them use it not in a particularly technical way, and even when they use it in an epistemological context it does not necessarily seem to be a warrant of truth (for example, *Theaet.* 179c6; 206b7; *A Pr.* 68b36). It is plausible to suggest that Plato and Aristotle simply followed the ordinary use of the term *enargeia*, because they did not focus on the question of the possibility of knowledge; for they took it for granted that knowledge is possible, and did not argue about the credibility of what they took to be its foundations. They both were primarily concerned with the question of the general conditions under which we know something, rather than whether these conditions are ever unquestionably satisfied and how we can tell in a particular case that they are satisfied. That is to say, they were interested mainly in showing what knowledge is, and not that it is possible.

From our limited textual evidence, however, it seems probable that immediately after Plato and Aristotle the notion of *enargeia* entered the epistemological discussions as a technical term (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.217–26).<sup>4</sup> Theophrastus is said to have been the first to suggest that the two cognitive faculties—sense-perception (*aisthêsis*) and reason (*nous*)—both depend on the *enarges* for our ability to recognize the truth of their impressions and judgements; for he claims that our grasp of the intelligibles through reason depends on the *enargeia* of our experience of the sensibles. Thus, according to Theophrastus, *enargeia* becomes a necessary condition for the truth of our sense-perceptions, which then is taken to guarantee the possibility of knowledge. However, there is no evidence on Theophrastus' actual use of the term *enargeia*, and we cannot

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Sextus' sources, cf. Sedley (1992).

specify its exact meaning. It is not clear how we are supposed to understand what it means for him that our sense-perceptions are evident and for that reason affect our intellect in a special way, so that they become the criteria for discriminating truth from falsehood.

On the other hand, our sources often suggest that in the epistemological debates of the Hellenistic schools the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Sceptics all focus on and further elaborate the notion of *enargeia*. As to the general setting of these discussions, it is presented by Carneades in the following way (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.166–9; transl. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley):<sup>5</sup>

These were the arguments which Carneades set out in full as a strategy against the other philosophers, to prove the non-existence of the criterion. But since he himself too has some criterion demanded of him for the conduct of life and the attainment of happiness, he is virtually compelled, as far as he himself is concerned, to adopt a position on this by taking as his criterion both the ‘convincing’ impression and the one which is simultaneously convincing, undiverted and thoroughly explored. What the difference is between these must be briefly indicated. The impression is an impression of something, i.e., both of that from which it arises and of that in which it arises: the former is, for instance, the external object of sensation, and the latter, say, a man. Being of this kind, it would have two dispositions, one relative to the impressor, the other relative to the person experiencing the impression. Now in regard to its disposition relative to the impressor, it is either true or false—true when it is in agreement with the impressor, and false when it is not in agreement. But in regard to its disposition relative to the person experiencing the impression, one impression is apparently true and the other not apparently true; of these, the apparently true is called ‘manifestation’ by the Academics, and ‘convincingness’ and ‘convincing impression’, while the not apparently true is called ‘non-manifestation’ and ‘unconvincing impression’.

So, Carneades first stresses that we have to distinguish two aspects of any impression (*phantasia*) we may have about something: (i) the relation in which it stands to the external object (*pros to phantaston*); and (ii) the relation in which it stands to the perceiving subject (*pros ton phantasoumenon*). He then goes on to argue that it is only the apparently true impressions that we can rely on as a criterion for the conduct of life, and in particular only those which are intense and manifest themselves fully. Carneades thus seems to understand *enargeia* as a feature which an impression has

<sup>5</sup> Ταῦτα μὲν ἀντιπαρεξάγων τοῖς ἄλλοις φιλοσόφοις ὁ Καρνεάδης εἰς τὴν ἀνπαρξίαν τοῦ κριτηρίου διεξήρχειτο· ἀπαιτούμενος δὲ καὶ αὐτός τι κριτήριον πρὸς τε τὴν τοῦ βίου διεξαγωγὴν καὶ πρὸς τὴν τῆς εὐδαιμονίας περίκτησιν, δυνάμει ἐπιαναγκάζεται καὶ καθ’ αὐτὸν περὶ τούτου διατάττεσθαι, προσλαμβάνων τὴν τε πιθανὴν φαντασίαν καὶ τὴν πιθανὴν ἄμα καὶ ἀπερίσπαστον καὶ διεξωδευμένην. τίς δὲ ἔστιν ἡ τούτων διαφορά, συντόμως ὑποδεικτέον. ἡ τοίνυν φαντασία τινὸς φαντασία ἔστιν, οἶον τοῦ τε ἀφ’ οὗ γίνεται καὶ τοῦ ἐν ᾧ γίνεται, καὶ ἀφ’ οὗ μὲν γίνεται ὡς τοῦ ἐκτὸς ὑποκειμένου αἰσθητοῦ, τοῦ ἐν ᾧ δὲ γίνεται καθάπερ ἀνθρώπου. τοιαύτη δὲ οὖσα δύο ἂν ἔχοι σχέσεις, μίαν μὲν ὡς πρὸς τὸ φανταστόν, δευτέραν δὲ ὡς πρὸς τὸν φαντασιούμενον. κατὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν πρὸς τὸ φανταστόν σχέσιν ἢ ἀληθῆς γίνεται ἢ ψευδῆς, καὶ ἀληθῆς μὲν ὅταν σύμφωνος ἦ τῷ φανταστῷ, ψευδῆς δὲ ὅταν διάφωρος. κατὰ δὲ τὴν πρὸς τὸν φαντασιούμενον σχέσιν ἡ μὲν ἔστι φαινομένη ἀληθῆς ἡ δὲ οὐ φαινομένη ἀληθῆς, ὅν ἡ μὲν φαινομένη ἀληθῆς ἐμφασίς καλεῖται παρὰ τοῖς Ἀκαδημαϊκοῖς καὶ πιθανότης καὶ πιθανὴ φαντασία, ἡ δ’ οὐ φαινομένη ἀληθῆς ἀπέμφασίς τε προσαγορεύεται καὶ ἀπειθῆς καὶ ἀπίθανος φαντασία.

relative to the subject; and this corresponds to what we nowadays mean when we say that something is evident. But in taking this, as we might call it, subjective view of *enargeia*, Carneades is opposing a view according to which *enargeia* is objective—a feature which an impression has relative to the object. This objective notion of something's being evident seems to me to be an interesting conception which has not been sufficiently explored, especially in the form in which both Epicureans and Stoics try to develop it.

Epicurus, who seems to be the first to have discussed in some detail the notion of something's being evident in connection with the problem of the criteria of truth, argues that the foundations upon which the whole of our knowledge has to rest are threefold (for example, Diogenes Laertius, 10.31): (i) our perceptual and non-perceptual impressions (*aisthêseis/phantasai*); (ii) our preconceptions or anticipatory notions (*prolēpseis*)—that is to say, roughly our ordinary notions of things, such as our notion of an animal or a plant; and (iii) our feelings or affections (*pathê*), such as pleasure or pain, which are supposed to be the canon by which we decide what is to be chosen or avoided. But what is the common characteristic of these states of a person which could justify their status as criteria of truth? According to our sources, Epicurus assumes that they all have in common that they are evident (*enargeis*), and it seems to be exactly for this reason that they are considered as the standards by reference to which at least some of our judgements can infallibly be assessed as true (Diogenes Laertius, 10.33; 52; 82; cf. Lucretius, 4.500–6).<sup>6</sup>

But what does Epicurus mean when he says that his criteria of truth are evident? It seems that his notion of *enargeia* does not substantially differ from the—at least in Hellenistic times—generally accepted understanding of something's being evident: namely, that if a state of a person, like a sense-impression, is evident, then what it is indicative of can be relied upon to be true without further scrutiny or proof (for example, Cicero, *Acad.* 2.45). Thus, when Epicurus claims that his criteria are evident he implies that our impressions, our preconceptions, and our feelings all reliably indicate that something is the case, and that because they are evident, what they indicate should be accepted without further proof as the ultimate basis on which we discriminate between the truth and falsehood of all beliefs. In other words, the fact that the criteria of truth are evident seems to mean for Epicurus both that they do not need to be backed up by demonstration, and also that they serve as the evidence in terms of which any truth is to be judged.

In order to better understand Epicurus' notion of *enargeia*, let us focus on just one class of his evident criteria of truth: namely, impressions. For at times, Epicurus even identifies *aisthêsis* or *phantasia* with *enargeia* (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.203), and moreover, one of the best known Epicurean theses is the seemingly naive thesis that 'All impressions are true' (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.204; 8.9; 63). Obviously, Epicurus is claiming

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Epicurus' epistemology, cf. Asmis (1999) and O'Keefe (2009).

infallibility for impressions, and this has understandably given rise to great controversy—not only among the ancients, but also among modern scholars.<sup>7</sup> What should be rather uncontroversial is: (i) that in the case of sense-impressions they are meant to be understood not as mere sensations in the sense of some sensory affection or stimulation by a sensible object, but to perceptions with an informational, perhaps propositional, content, which means that they are impressions of something's being a certain way; and (ii) that this thesis should be understood as stating that our impressions are true (*alêtheis*) in the substantial sense that they faithfully represent what they are sense-impressions of, and not simply in the sense that they are real impressions.

It should be noted, though, that even if, according to Epicurus, one of the criteria of truth—impressions—is true in this substantial sense, it does not mean that truth needs to be a common characteristic of all the criteria of truth. It has rightly been pointed out that the mere fact that something is a criterion of F-ness does not imply that it itself must be F. For example, it is absurd to say that taste, just because it is our criterion to discriminate between what is sweet and what is sour, must itself be sweet or sour; or sight, just because it is our criterion to discriminate between what is black and what is white, must itself be black or white.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the fact that all impressions are true should rather be seen as the immediate corollary of what it is for a criterion of truth with an informational or even propositional content to be evident. If impressions are evident, this implies, on Epicurus' view, that they reliably indicate how things are; if they indicate this in virtue of containing some information, saying that they are evident in part amounts to saying that the informational content of impressions corresponds exactly to how things are. Hence, according to Epicurus, that sense-impressions are always true follows from the fact that they are evident.

Let us return now to impressions as one of Epicurus' evident criteria of truth, and examine how he and the Epicureans explain the fact that sense-impressions, in particular, are always true, by making use of a detailed analysis of the mechanism of our sense perception. A sense-impression on Epicurus' view is non-rational (*alogos*) in the sense that it is not caused by our mind, but is produced, as it were, mechanically, by an external object without the interference of our mind. That is to say, the informational content of the sense-impression is entirely determined by the object; the process which leads to the sense-impression cannot itself add or subtract anything from this content, as it might, if the mind with all its beliefs and inclinations contributed to the formation of the sense-impression (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 8.9; Diogenes Laertius, 10.31). Thus, given the total passivity or receptivity of the senses, there is a causally necessary relation between our sense-impressions, including their content, and the external reality, and this is supposed to guarantee the truth of sense-impressions. As to supposed false sense-impressions, Epicurus asserts that they are not really sense-impressions at all, but rather a mixture of sense-impressions and beliefs (*doxai*) produced by the mind. Our sources stress that according to Epicurus, falsehood arises because the mind adds or

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Striker (1977), Taylor (1980), and Everson (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Taylor (1980), p. 108.

subtracts from the content of the original sense-impression (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.210; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.45; Lucretius, 4.379–86; 462–8). And given that on Epicurus' view it is crucial that all sense-impressions without exception are true, the Epicureans develop an elaborate theory to account for what we normally and naturally regard as perceptual error.

On the basis of this theory, the Epicureans discuss seemingly conflicting perceptions—as when the same water feels warm to one person and cold to another—and the theory covers cases such as mistaking someone for Plato, equating the real size of the sun with its apparent size, or thinking that the distant large and square tower is small and round, as well as certain optical illusions such as the oar which, partly immersed in water, appears bent, or the one colour of the pigeon's neck and the peacock's tail which looks many coloured.<sup>9</sup> Epicurus and the Epicureans believe that we perceive the solid objects and their features, because their surface emits streams of very fast-moving and fine films or layers of atoms, which are called 'images' (*eidōla*) and which affect our senses (cf. Diogenes Laertius, 10.46–50; Lucretius, 4.26–523). Since the *eidōla* are extremely fine—they are so fine as to be themselves imperceptible—and since they move so rapidly, they generally preserve the relevant surface properties of the solid objects from which they emanate. However, they are sometimes obstructed during their passage from the solid object to the perceiver, and when this happens—as, for example, when something is seen from far away—we may have a sense-impression which does not fully capture the way the solid object is, as a sense-impression of the object as seen from close up would do. But that does not mean, according to Epicurus, that one of our sense-impressions—the sense-impression from afar—is false. For although it may not give us a completely faithful representation of the solid object, as it would when we see the object from close up, it nevertheless does faithfully represent whatever can be perceived from such distance.

To make sense of this paradoxical Epicurean theory, and at the same time to explain, in its terms, the usual cases of what we regard as perceptual error, let us take a particular example which figures prominently in Epicurean texts and modern discussions of them. The example is that of a large and square tower which, if seen from the distance, looks like something round and small (Lucretius, 4.353–63; transl. A. A. Long and D.N. Sedley):<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch, *Col.* 1109B; 1121A–E; Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.208–16; Diogenes Laertius 10.91; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.19; 82; 79; Lucretius, 2.795–805; 4.436–42.

<sup>10</sup>

quadratasque procul turris cum cernimus urbis,  
propterea fit uti videantur saepe rutundae,  
angulus obtusus quia longe cernitur omnis  
sive etiam potius non cernitur ac perit eius  
plaga nec ad nostras acies perlabitur ictus,  
aera per multum quia dum simulacra feruntur,  
cogit hebescere eum crebris offensibus aer.  
hoc ubi suffugit sensum simul angulus omnis,  
fit quasi ut ad tornum saxorum structa terantur,  
non tamen ut coram quae sunt vereque rutunda,  
sed quasi adumbratim paulum simulata videntur.

When we see from far off the square towers of a city, the reason why they often seem round is that any corner is seen as blunted from a distance, or rather is not seen at all, its impact fading away and failing to complete the passage to our eyes, because during the images' travel through a large expanse of air the corner is forced to become blunt by the air's repeated buffetings. Thus, when all the corners simultaneously escape our sensation, it becomes as if the stone structures are being smoothed on a lathe. They are not, however, like things genuinely round seen close-to, but seem to resemble them a little in a shadowy sort of way.

Hence, the Epicureans claim that our sense-impression of the tower looking like something small and round is not false. But if we want to understand this claim we need to see what exactly is the object of this particular sense-impression (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.208–10; transl. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley):<sup>11</sup>

. . . so too I would not say that the vision is deceived just because from a great distance it sees the tower as small and round but from near-to as larger and square. Rather I would say that it is telling the truth. Because when the sense-object appears to it small and of that shape it really is small and of that shape, the edges of the images getting eroded as a result of their travel through the air. And when it appears big and of another shape instead, it likewise is big and of another shape instead. But the two are already different from each other: for it is left for distorted opinion to suppose that the object of impression seen from near and the one seen from far off are one and the same. The peculiar function of sensation is to apprehend only that which is present to it and moves it, such as colour, not to make the distinction that the object here is a different one from the object there. Hence for this reason all impressions are true. Opinions, on the other hand, are not all true but admit of some difference.

Modern scholars have suggested that the possibility that the object of our perception is the large and square tower should, of course, be excluded. For in this case the sense-impression that the tower is small and round would be false, and the Epicurean doctrine would be entirely implausible. Hence some have resorted to the assumption that the object of the sense-impression of something small and round is not the large and square tower in the distance, but is the *eidōla* emitted by the large and square tower, and that the sense-impression that something is round and small is true only in the sense that it faithfully represents the *eidōla* which are emitted by the tower, and which in the course of their passage from the tower to the observer have become small and round. In fact, it has been argued that Epicurus does not hold the empiricist position that with our sense-impressions we have an incorrigible source of knowledge of

<sup>11</sup> οὕτως οὐκ ἂν ἐπινομι ψεύδεσθαι τὴν ὄψιν, ὅτι ἐκ μακροῦ μὲν διαστήματος μικρὸν ὄρα τὸν πύργον καὶ στρογγύλον, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ σύνεγγυς μείζονα καὶ τετράγωνον, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἀληθεύειν, ὅτι καὶ ὅτε φαίνεται μικρὸν αὐτῇ τὸ αἰσθητὸν καὶ τοιουτόσχημον, ὄντως ἐστὶ μικρὸν καὶ τοιουτόσχημον, τῇ διὰ τοῦ ἀέρος φορᾷ ἀποθρανομένων τῶν κατὰ τὰ εἶδωλα περάτων, καὶ ὅτε μέγα πάλιν καὶ.

ἄλλοιόσχημον, πάλιν ὁμοίως μέγα καὶ ἄλλοιόσχημον, ἥδη μέντοι οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ ἀμφοτέρω καθεστώς. τοῦτο γὰρ τῆς διαστροφῆς λοιπὸν ἐστὶ δόξης οἴεσθαι, ὅτι τὸ αὐτὸ ἦν τό τε ἐκ τοῦ σύνεγγυς καὶ τὸ πόρρωθεν θεωρούμενον φανταστόν. αἰσθήσεως δὲ ἴδιον ὑπῆρχε τοῦ παρόντος μόνον καὶ κινούντος αὐτὴν ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι, οἷον χρώματος, οὐχὶ δὲ τὸ διακρίνειν ὅτι ἄλλο μὲν ἐστὶ τὸ ἐνθάδε ἄλλο δὲ τὸ ἐνθάδε ὑποκείμενον. διόπερ αἱ μὲν φαντασίαι διὰ ταῦτα πᾶσαι εἰσιν ἀληθεῖς, <αἱ δὲ δόξαι οὐ πᾶσαι ἦσαν ἀληθεῖς>, ἀλλ' εἶχόν τινα διαφορὰν.

external solid objects; rather, he is supposed to merely claim that each person's experience faithfully represents the actual character of the *eidōla* which he receives. In this way, they stress, we may be able to save Epicurus' epistemological thesis that all sense-impressions are true.<sup>12</sup> However, if we thus accepted that our sense-impressions are not representations of the solid objects themselves, this would mean that it is not possible, on the basis of our sense-impressions, to arrive at the truth about the external world. And this cannot be the case, as Epicurus' epistemological project clearly aims at explaining how we can acquire certain knowledge about the solid objects themselves.

I think we have to look for an alternative interpretation. The Epicureans insist that our sense-impression of something in the distance looking as being small and round is true, even though the tower is large and square. What they must have in mind is that the object of our sense-impression is not the large and square tower, nor the distorted small and round *eidōla* which impinge on our senses. Rather, they must claim that the object of this particular sense-impression is what we, given the distance, actually see—something looking as being small and round: namely, part of the large and square tower. So, the Epicureans insist that our sense-impression of something in the distance which looks like something small and round is not a sense-impression of the large and square tower. About the tower in the distance we can make no statement whose truth would be guaranteed by the sense-impression we have. But the sense-impression we actually have is nevertheless true, insofar as it represents a real object which excites our senses: namely, a part of the large and square tower which is deceptively like a small and round tower, and hence is easily mistaken for it. For the *eidōla* which the large and square tower emits do not reach us in their original condition; they have their corners and fringes rubbed away by their passage through the air. Thus, information about the angles and the size of the tower is lost. It still is the case, though, that even these mutilated small and round *eidōla* correspond to some solid object: the core part of the large and square tower. And of this we have a true sense-impression. The fact that this sense-impression is very much like the sense-impression of a small and round tower makes us easily think that we perceive a small and round tower, if we do not pay attention to what we actually see.

Thus both the sense-impression of the tower from close up being large and square, as well as that of something in the distance appearing small and round, are true. Error arises when the sense-impression of the small, round part of the tower is taken to be the sense-impression of a small, round tower, and the large, square tower seen in the distance is taken to be a small, round tower. In other words, it is not because of the mutilation of the *eidōla* that we have false beliefs; rather, it is because our mind goes beyond the evidence of the sense-impression, and thinks in both cases that the sense-impression is a faithful representation of the same object—of the whole tower. Epicurus claims that if one attends closely to what is given or present to the senses, such error can be avoided. Our sense-impression of something appearing small and round

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Taylor (1980), pp. 119–22, and Everson (1990), pp. 174–9.

does truly present the solid object that we actually see in the distance; but what is false is our belief that the object that we see in the distance is the same as the object that we see in close-up, when in fact it is only part of it.

In the light of this interpretation we can also defend Epicurus against the accusation that his epistemological thesis that all sense-impressions are true involves some kind of perceptual relativism. For he does not claim that it is both true that the tower is small and round for somebody who perceives it from a distance, and that the same tower is large and square for somebody who perceives it from close up. In this case too, sense-impressions would not provide us with any reliable knowledge about the objects of our perception. But Epicurus is not a relativist. On the contrary, he strongly believes in the possibility of acquiring certain knowledge about how the world is, independently of our perception of it, on the basis of the evidence provided by our sense-impressions, and in general by our impressions. For it is in virtue of the fact that our impressions are evident that they constitute witnesses who attest or contest, to follow the forensic analogy of Epicurus' terminology (*epimartyrêsis*, *antimartyrêsis*), the truth or falsehood of our beliefs (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.211–16; 8.324; Diogenes Laertius, 10.34; 48–51).

Thus far, in our attempt to explain Epicurus' notion of *enargeia* as the primary characteristic of his criteria of truth, we have focused on impressions. We have tried to reconstruct the reasoning behind the Epicurean dogma that our impressions are always true and thus constitute reliable evidence for the external reality, which they, being impressions of something, are indicative of. However, one of the many difficulties with the Epicurean position is that it does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question which it invites: how can we be certain that what we take to be a true impression is not, and does not involve, a false belief? How can we, within our thoughts, distinguish between what is impression and what is mere belief added by the mind? For even if all impressions are true and evident, this is not of much help if they are not readily recognizable as pure impressions. Epicurus must insist that in principle it is possible to distinguish what is an impression from the additions of belief, and thus also to determine whether a proposition, being certified by an evident impression, is guaranteed to be true. Of course, he could claim that we do in fact learn to distinguish within limits between that which is given by an impression and that which is added belief. But he does not even try to specify conditions abiding by which will guarantee that we make this distinction correctly. He indicates only that we should always remember that the mind tends to interpret, rather than merely to identify, what is given to the senses. Our impressions are supposed to be like photographs, in that they provide genuine evidence and, if properly handled, can lead to true judgements about external reality. But the question is whether there is such a distinction to be made in the first place between what is given in perception without the interference of the mind, and what is added by the mind. The Stoics deny that such a distinction can be made.

To briefly summarize, *enargeia* is not, on Epicurus' view, a matter of subjective feeling or conviction; it rather describes a feature of an impression, or generally of our criteria of truth, relative to the objects to be known. According to Epicurus, the fact that the

criteria of truth are evident means: (i) that what they are indicative of does not stand in need of proof or further scrutiny, because impressions by themselves, for instance, given their relation to the external object, are guaranteed to faithfully represent the things of which they are impressions; and (ii) that they constitute our basis for judging the truth or falsehood of all beliefs. But although Epicurus can argue that the evident criteria afford us a grasp of basic truths without the intermediary of argument, this will raise questions about the reliability of the assumptions involved. Even if these could be answered, there are serious difficulties about establishing membership in the class of evident impressions, preconceptions, or feelings. Hence, although Epicurus' doctrine that there are evident criteria of truth is meant to secure the possibility of infallible knowledge, it does not provide us with a simple way of recognizing, in a concrete case, the criteria on which we have to rely for discriminating between truth and falsehood.

The Stoics, who were clearly influenced by Epicurus, present us with a more elaborate notion of *enargeia*. They do so again in the context of the issue of the criterion of truth; and it seems that they modify the notion of *enargeia* at least in part in response to the difficulties which they rightly think the Epicurean theory raises.

According to Stoic doctrine (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.227; 401; Diogenes Laertius, 7.46), the criterion of truth on which the whole of our knowledge is supposed to rest are the 'cognitive impressions' (*kataléptikai phantasiai*), which are said to be all evident (*enargeis*).<sup>13</sup> The Stoics define cognitive impressions as imprints on the mind which (i) arise from what is; (ii) are imprinted on the mind exactly in accordance with what is; and (iii) could not arise from what is not (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.248; 402; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.18; 77. Diogenes Laertius, 7.46; transl. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley):<sup>14</sup>

Of impressions, one kind is cognitive, the other incognitive. The cognitive, which they [the Stoics] say is the criterion of things, is that which arises from what is and is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is. The incognitive is either that which does not arise from what is, or from that which is but not exactly in accordance with what is: one which is not clear or distinct.

Like the Epicureans, therefore, the Stoics too suggest that we should secure the possibility of our knowledge of external reality by postulating certain evident criteria, which will help us to discriminate truth from falsehood. But although Epicurus advocates that all of our sense-impressions have the status of such a criterion, the Stoics deny that all sense-impressions are true, and posit the thesis that it is only our cognitive impressions which may constitute the basis of our knowledge. They also deny that even all true sense-impressions are cognitive and evident; for if one perceives an object

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Frede (1999) and Hankinson (2003).

<sup>14</sup> τῆς δὲ φαντασίας τὴν μὲν καταληπτικὴν, τὴν δὲ ἀκατάληπτον· καταληπτικὴν μὲν, ἣν κριτήριον εἶναι τῶν πραγμάτων φασί, τὴν γινομένην ἀπὸ ὑπάρχοντος κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ ὑπάρχον ἐναεσφραγισμένην καὶ ἐναπομεγαμένην· ἀκατάληπτον δὲ ἢ τὴν μὴ ἀπὸ ὑπάρχοντος, ἢ ἀπὸ ὑπάρχοντος μὲν, μὴ κατ' αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ ὑπάρχον· τὴν μὴ τρανῆ μηδὲ ἔκτυπον.

under abnormal conditions, there is no guarantee that the impression one receives, even if it should happen to be true, necessarily is true. That is to say, truth here is explicitly said not to be the distinctive characteristic of cognitive impressions that is responsible for their exclusive place as the Stoic criterion of truth.

Thus the Stoics insist that an impression, in order to be evident and to serve as a criterion, not only has to be true, but has to be guaranteed to be true. They assume that cognitive impressions are those which, given the way they come about, cannot fail to be true. If, for instance, we perceive an object under normal conditions, the impression we receive is guaranteed to be true and hence cognitive and evident. However, the Stoics also stress that there is no such thing as a human impression which is non-rational—that is to say, free from the interference of the mind (cf. Diogenes Laertius, 7.51). Indeed, it is their view that the mind is crucially involved even in the formation of perceptual impressions. They regard sense-impressions as a particular kind of thought (*noêseis*). Obviously, this makes even more difficult the task of showing that there are impressions which, given the way they come about, are guaranteed to be true.

But there is also the problem that we have already encountered in Epicurus as to how we are to recognize an evident impression, even if there should be such impressions. With this, let us return to the question: what do the Stoics mean when they say that cognitive impressions—their criterion of truth—are evident? It is well documented that cognitive impressions are considered as evident, because they constitute the most accurate form of impressions. That is to say, when we receive a cognitive impression of an external object, it not only correctly represents the external object which is its cause, but more importantly, it represents the external object in a way which allows us to discern all the features of that object in such detail that no other object could fit that impression, given that the Stoics assume that no two objects qualitatively are completely alike. A cognitive impression is evident, because in this way it is clear (*tranês*: Sextus Empirius, *M* 7.172; 258; 404; Diogenes Laertius 7.46), intense (*entonos*: *M* 7.408), striking (*plektikê*: *M* 7.173; 257; 258; 403), and distinct (*ektypos*: *M* 7.171; Diogenes Laertius, 7.46), as opposed to dim (*amydra*: *M* 7.171; 258), feeble (*eklytos*: *M* 7.172), and confused (*synkechymenê*: *M* 7.171). Hence, whereas the Epicurean notion of *enargeia* refers only to the reliably faithful representation of the external object by the sense-impression, the Stoics not only stress that the cognitive impression is a faithful representation of the external object, but also specify, as a further requirement for its being a reliably faithful representation, that it reveals the external object in a clear and distinct way.

This may suggest a subtle shift in the understanding of the notion of *enargeia*. For something's being evident now seems to become—at least in part—a matter of an intrinsic character of the impression. This at least begins to allow for the possibility that we, simply in virtue of the kinds of impressions which we have, might be able to discriminate cognitive impressions from the non-cognitive impressions. The Stoics even come to claim that cognitive impressions grasp us as if by our hair (*M* 7.257), are instantaneously ceded to like weights by a scale (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.38), and differ from other impressions

in the way in which horned snakes are different from other snakes (*M* 7.252). One suggestion that has been made is that this intrinsic distinctive mark of cognitive impressions is a causal feature which they have which is independent of the external object and which makes the mind react in a distinctive way, so that in this sense it is able to discriminate cognitive and non-cognitive impressions.<sup>15</sup> But even this suggestion raises various questions. For example: what is it in human nature which brings it about that we are seized by the evidence of cognitive impressions? Moreover, if the human mind assents to cognitive impressions automatically, why do the Stoics say quite generally that it is up to us whether we assent to, or refrain from assenting to, impressions? Given these difficulties, there is the temptation to think that cognitive impressions, precisely because they stand in a privileged relation to the external object, also have a distinctive intrinsic character which we can learn to recognize, and in virtue of which they are evident.

In any case, the Stoics do make an important point in distinguishing between cognitive and non-cognitive impressions. Unlike non-cognitive impressions, cognitive impressions are evident. It is this peculiar characteristic of theirs which establishes them as reliable criteria of truth. But they seem to go beyond the Epicureans in assuming that the *enargeia* of impressions is reflected by a distinctive intrinsic character of those impressions which are objectively evident, though the precise nature of this distinctive character remains unclear. Still, as with the Epicureans, *enargeia* for the Stoics remains not a matter of subjective feeling or conviction. If it produces conviction, it is a conviction based on a recognition of a feature of impressions which they objectively have, because they are appropriately related to the objects to be known. And it seems that this is precisely the point on which the Sceptics focus in order to rebut Epicurean and Stoic attempts to secure a reliable basis for knowledge by appealing to the evident character of impressions.

The Sceptics try to show that however convinced we are, there is no reason to suppose that this conviction is based on the recognition of evident impressions as such, in the sense in which the Epicureans and the Stoics understand this, because there are no impressions which are evident in this sense, let alone impressions which have such a distinctive character as to be recognizable as such. Thus there is no criterion of truth which allows us to distinguish truth from falsehood, and thus knowledge of the external world is not possible in this way. But they do not argue that we need to dispense with the notion of *enargeia* altogether. They suggest that we accept a different notion: namely, a subjective notion, which does not guarantee truth, but is restricted to what very much appears to be true and is convincing. But this subjective *enargeia* is not supposed to be based on the objective *enargeia* of the impressions, and it is thus consistent with the Sceptics' view on the impossibility of knowledge as the Epicureans and the Stoics understand it.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Frede (1983), and the more detailed discussion in Lefebvre (2007).

According to Academic Sceptics such as Carneades there is, then, no criterion of truth which would allow us to absolutely and reliably discriminate truth from falsehood. Hence the Sceptic should suspend judgement about everything in all circumstances (cf. *M* 7.159–65; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.59; 66–7). On the other hand, Carneades seems to allow for a criterion for the conduct of life. He claims that it is not in conflict with suspension of judgement to rely on an impression that is apparently true (*phainomenê alethês*) and probable, convincing or persuasive (*pithanê*). Such apparently true or probable impressions are sufficient to motivate our actions, but they do not saddle us with mere beliefs. For in relying on them in practice, Carneades claims that we merely respond to what appears to us to be true or false, and we subsequently make no claims as to what in reality is true or false (cf. Plutarch, *Col.* 1122A–F; *M* 7.166; 401; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.103–4). In particular, following the distinction mentioned at the beginning between the two aspects of an impression—one relative to the external object and the other relative to the perceiver—Carneades argues that nothing can be said about the truth or falsehood of an impression relative to the external object. On the other hand, the first requirement that a probable impression which serves as the Sceptic’s criterion of action has to satisfy is that it be evident (*M* 7.169–75). This is also supposed to depend on the conditions under which we receive the impression, but it is not taken to guarantee its truth.

In Carneades’ view, then, there is no reason to think that we can match our impressions against external objects as such. Nor are we justified in thinking that we have impressions which somehow are guaranteed to be true, and hence that judgements can ever be absolutely relied upon to be true or false. But we can form some judgements which, though they might in fact be false, it is reasonable to accept as apparently or probably true. A judgement will be the sounder the more evident it is, and the more rigorously all the circumstances attending it are examined. We should keep in mind, however, that external reality might, as a matter of fact, be quite different from our perception of it. Hence *enargeia*, as Carneades understands it, is entirely subjective.

As I said at the outset, we nowadays tend to agree with Carneades; but we should keep in mind that some early modern philosophers, such as Descartes, ultimately under the influence of the Stoics, regard *enargeia* or, in Descartes’ terms, clarity and distinctness, as a feature of ideas or impressions relative to the external world. But Descartes’ situation is radically different from that of the Epicureans and the Stoics. When Epicurus and the Stoics argue that there are impressions which are guaranteed to be true because of the way they come about, they rely on a presumed natural order of things. It is because of this order that evident or cognitive impressions do not simply happen to be true, but are necessarily true. Descartes has to deal with the further difficulty that whatever natural order one presumes, the mere existence of an impression can never logically guarantee its truth. For God, as the scholastics saw, may destroy the object of the impression which gave rise to it, while maintaining the very same

impression in existence. So however difficult it may be to defend or even understand an objective notion of *enargeia*, it seems to me that we have to make the effort if we want to understand an important tradition in epistemology, and also that it might be worthwhile making it for its own interest.

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