

# Justifying without Explaining. Epicurus on *enargeia*

**Abstract:** According to a passage in Cicero's *Academica*, some philosophers considered it legitimate to justify the evidence<sup>1</sup>. This paper examines the view that Epicurus and his followers were among them. They did not claim to *explain* evidence, which would be contradictory since evident truth does not require any proof. However, they developed complex strategies to *justify* the evidence of sensations: not only, as is often said, by the physical description of sensations – which attests that they are reliable perceptions of the external world – but also by indirect and negative arguments. In particular, they used arguments by consequences. Several Epicurean texts state not only that sense-perceptions are irrefutable but also that the consequences of the opposite thesis would be disastrous for knowledge and for action. Thus, avoiding the mistake of trying to explain what is obvious, the Epicureans must be given credit for adopting a consistent theory of the criterion.

How can we justify what does not require any explanation? In other words, how can we legitimise the use of what is posited as a primary truth and whose validity, for this reason, does not depend on any kind of attestation? This is the main epistemological problem with evidence, *enargeia*: either we accept what is obvious as it is because it does not require any additional guarantee – which is, after all, in line with the very definition of evidence – or we seek to attest the validity of this evidence in explaining why it is true. In the first case, someone could always ask: how do you know that what has been posited as self-evident is really self-evident? In the second case, how can we escape the logical fault of trying to explain what *should not* be explained?

This difficulty is at the heart of the debates on the possibility of knowledge in Hellenistic philosophy, as shown by a passage in the Second Book (*Lucullus*) of Cicero's *Academica*. In this text, the question is whether it is possible to refute the sceptics by attesting to the validity of the criteria or whether, as some Stoics think, it is futile and even contrary to science to try to convince someone of what is *per se* obvious. The passage ends somewhat mysteriously:

[1] [...] they thought that no argument could be discovered that was clearer than evidentness itself, and they deemed that truths so manifest did not need defining. But others said that they would not have opened proceedings with any speech in defence of this evidentness, but held that the proper course was for argument to be directed to answering the case for the prosecution, so that they might not be somehow taken in. Still a good many of them do not object to definitions even of evident things themselves, and they think that any fact is a suitable matter for investigation and that human beings deserve to have their views discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> I will translate the Greek *enargeia* as 'evidence' throughout this text, in the sense of 'evidentness', bearing in mind that there is no ideal translation in modern languages. See Ierodiakonou (2011, 60, n. 2).

Sed tamen orationem nullam putabant inlustriorem ipsa evidentia reperiri posse, nec ea quae tam clara essent definienda censebant. Alii autem negabant se pro hac evidentia quicquam priores fuisse dicturos, sed ad ea quae contra dicerentur dici oportere putabant, ne qui fallerentur. [18] Plerique tamen et definitiones ipsarum etiam evidentium rerum non inprobant et rem idoneam de qua quaeratur et homines dignos quibuscum disseratur putant.

Cic., *Acad.* 2,17–18<sup>2</sup>

The text does not specify who are the philosophers concerned and in particular, who finds it necessary to respond to those who deny the validity of the evidence. Commentators are generally very cautious, if not embarrassed. Some of them think that they are Stoics, and this for good reason, since Antipater of Tarsus tried to justify the evidence in response to the Academics and was criticised for this by other Stoics who remained faithful to Zeno.<sup>3</sup> But E. Asmis, in her book on Epicurus' scientific method, without specifically identifying the Epicureans, believes that some of them take the same approach as those referred to here, in particular the Epicureans portrayed by Cicero: Velleius in the *De natura deorum* and Torquatus in the *De finibus*.<sup>4</sup> Asmis convincingly explains it thus: "Sincethere are those who are adept at overthrowing what is self-evident by argument, argument is needed to make these attacks ineffectual."<sup>5</sup> This reading is based on the very principles of the Epicurean conception of knowledge. Indeed, the Epicurean conception of primary evidence confronts us directly with the issue I began with: the first criterion of knowledge is sensation (or sense-perception), and any sensation, considered in itself, is always true and obvious.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that fire is hot, that ice is cold, and that I can see the sky through the window. This does not have to be demonstrated. However, if I simply adopt Epicurus' position on this point, it can always be objected – with the support of many philosophers of the tradition – that it is impossible to guarantee such evidence, except in a purely dogmatic way or by *petitio principii*. But if I admit to explain why it is obvious that fire is hot or ice is cold, then I must say that it is precisely not obvious since what is obvious must be self-evident.

The purpose of my paper is not to give a definitive answer to the question of *who* these philosophers are – I do not think it is possible to settle the question definitively – but to examine whether the Epicureans are good candidates for inclusion. Now, if they are, how do they respond in favour of *enargeia* without committing the logical fault I mentioned earlier, which consists in trying to explain what does not need to be explained?

The position I will defend is that the Epicureans do not make this mistake because they never question the status of evidence as a primary truth and do not seek to *explain it* in the strict sense (i.e. to demonstrate why an evidence *p* is necessarily true). They do, however, give various forms of *justification* for it. By this, I mean that they show in a non-deductive way that it is legitimate – and even, as we shall see, necessary – to make use of *p* and hold it to be true. In other words: they do not make the mistake of trying to infer the truth of *p* from higher principles or from better founded propositions, but they establish the truth of *p* by other means and on essentially pragmatic grounds.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Transl. Rackham 1933 ~~transl. Rackham 1933~~.

<sup>3</sup> As shown in Lévy (1992, 161–162 and 229). Brittain (2006) seems to think that Epicureans correspond of the group of Antipater's critics.

<sup>4</sup> Asmis (1984, 38–39).

<sup>5</sup> Asmis (1984, 39).

<sup>6</sup> On this fundamental thesis of Epicurean philosophy, see e.g. Verde (2018) and from a broader perspective Asmis (1984), Asmis (2009) or Giovacchini (2012). For an overview of Epicurean epistemology, see Morel (2019). As Asmis also says, "Epicurus proposed to anchor his theory in the clarity or 'evidence', called *enargeia*, of sensory observations" (Asmis 2009, 85).

<sup>7</sup> I mean 'pragmatic' in a broad sense: that which is legitimate or necessary for a benefit, whether in the practical or the knowledge domain.

I will proceed in four steps before returning to Cicero's text. First, after recalling the proper Epicurean framework of the debate, I will examine the hypothesis according to which the Epicureans respond indirectly to the attacks against the evidence with objectivist arguments, that is: arguments borrowed from physics. However, we will see why this first reading, without being false, is neither sufficient nor fully satisfactory. I will then consider the hypothesis that the Epicureans have other ways of justifying the evidence. This justification takes at least two forms: argumentation by the impossible (it is impossible to prove that no-*p*) and argumentation by the consequences or by the absurd, and this on the theoretical as well as on the practical level.<sup>8</sup>

## 1 The Epicurean framework

Let us start with some essential reminders of the theoretical framework of the debate. The notion of evidence is well attested in Epicurus' remains by about twenty occurrences of *enargeia*, *enargēma*, *enargōs* or *enargēs*. It plays a central role in Epicurean philosophy. As Sextus Empiricus says about the Epicureans, [2] "evidence is the base and foundation of all things".<sup>9</sup> Diogenes Laërtius' presentation of the Epicurean "canon", and in particular of the theory of preconceptions, is an essential document on this point, where we find several occurrences of the adjective:

[3] Preconception, they [the Epicureans] say, is as it were a perception, or correct opinion, or conception, or universal 'stored notion' (i.e. memory), of that which has frequently become evident externally: e.g. 'Such and such a kind of thing is a man'. For as soon as the word 'man' is uttered, immediately its delineation also comes to mind by means of preconception, since the senses give the lead. Thus what primarily underlies each name is something self-evident. And what we inquire about we would not have inquired about if we had not had prior knowledge of it. For example: 'Is what's standing over there a horse or a cow?' For one must at some time have come to know the form of a horse and that of a cow by means of preconception. Nor would we have named something if we had not previously learnt its delineation by means of preconception. Thus preconceptions are self-evident. And opinion depends on something prior and self-evident, which is our point of reference when we say, e.g., 'How do we know if this is a man?'

τὴν δὲ πρόληψιν λέγουσιν οἰοῦναι κατάληψιν ἢ δόξαν ὀρθὴν ἢ ἔννοιαν ἢ καθολικὴν νόησιν ἑναποκειμένην, τούτεστι μνήμην τοῦ πολλάκις ἐξωθεν φανέντος, οἷον 'τὸ τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος'. ἅμα γὰρ τῷ ῥηθῆναι 'ἄνθρωπος' εὐθὺς κατὰ πρόληψιν καὶ ὁ τύπος αὐτοῦ νοεῖται προηγουμένων τῶν αισθησέων. παντὶ οὖν ὀνόματι τὸ πρῶτως ἐπιτεταγμένον ἐναργὲς ἐστὶ καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἐζητήσαμεν τὸ ζητούμενον εἰ μὴ πρότερον ἐγνώκειμεν αὐτό· οἷον 'τὸ πόρρω ἐστὸς ἵππος ἐστὶν ἢ βοῦς'; δεῖ γὰρ κατὰ πρόληψιν ἐγνώκεναι ποτὲ ἵππου καὶ βοῦδος μορφήν· οὐδ' ἂν ὀνομάσαμεν τι μὴ πρότερον αὐτοῦ κατὰ πρόληψιν τὸν τύπον μαθόντες. ἐναργεῖς οὖν εἰσὶν αἱ προλήψεις· καὶ τὸ δοξαστὸν ἀπὸ προτέρου τινὸς ἐναργοῦς ἤρτηται, ἐφ' ὃ ἀναφέροντες λέγομεν, οἷον 'πόθεν ἴσμεν εἰ τοῦτό ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος;'

D.L. 10,33<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> These arguments could have the form: if no-*p*, then *a*, *b*, *c*, which are destructive or have absurd consequences.

<sup>9</sup> πάντων δὲ κρητὶς καὶ θεμέλιος ἢ ἐνάργεια, S.E. *M.* 7,216 (translation is mine).

<sup>10</sup> Transl. Long and Sedley 1987; edition Dorandi 2013, here and below, for Epicurus and Diogenes Laertius.

I will return to this text later on. From Epicurus himself, we have a precious text at the end of his *Letter to Herodotus*, which summarises the principles of the epistemology of the Garden:

[4] But tranquillity can be attained only by freeing ourselves of all these fears and keeping the principal and most important truths constantly in mind. Hence, we must take note of our present feelings and sensations, whether universal or particular, and pay heed to all the available evidence in light of each of the criteria. For by studying them we shall fully and correctly explain the cause of our anxiety and fear and free ourselves, accounting for celestial phenomena and for all the other regularly occurring phenomena that afflict mankind with its worst fears.

ἡ δὲ ἀταραξία τὸ τούτων πάντων ἀπολεύσθαι καὶ συνεχῆ μνήμην ἔχειν τῶν ὅλων καὶ κυριωτάτων. ὅθεν τοῖς πά<θε>σι προσεκτέον τοῖς παροῦσι καὶ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι, κατὰ μὲν τὸ κοινὸν ταῖς κοιναῖς, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ἴδιον ταῖς ἰδίαις, καὶ πάσῃ τῇ παρουσίᾳ καθ' ἕκαστον τῶν κριτηρίων ἐναργεῖα. ἂν γὰρ τούτοις προσέχωμεν, τὸ ὅθεν ὁ ταραχος καὶ ὁ φόβος ἐγένετο ἐξαιτιολογήσομεν ὀρθῶς καὶ ἀπολύσομεν, ὑπὲρ τε μετεώρων αἰτιολογοῦντες καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν ἀεὶ παρεμπιπτόντων, ὅσα φοβεῖ τοὺς λοιποὺς ἐσχάτως.

Epicur. *Ep.* 82<sup>11</sup>

Epicurus urges us to consider the evidence present under each of the headings that define the criteria of knowledge, namely: sensations, preconceptions and affection (pleasure or pain). In this passage, he insists on the practical benefits of this attitude: one will thus protect oneself from trouble and fear by discarding empty or false opinions, not least because we will be able to grasp the true explanations of celestial phenomena, instead of attributing them to the will of the gods. However, the implications are also properly epistemological: by admitting the evidence of the criteria, we give ourselves the means to conduct scientific research on a solid and unmistakable basis. This is shown by the methodological passage that precedes the actual physical investigation in the same text:

[5] First, then, Herodotus, we must grasp the things which underlie words, so that we may have them as a reference point against which to judge matters of opinion, inquiry and puzzlement, and not have everything indiscriminated for ourselves as we attempt infinite chains of proofs, or have words which are empty. For the primary concept corresponding to each word must be seen and need no additional proof, if we are going to have a reference point for matters of inquiry, puzzlement and opinion. Second, we should observe everything in the light of our sensations, and in general in the light of our present focusings whether of thought or of any of our discriminatory faculties, and likewise also in the light of the feelings which exist in us, in order to have a basis for sign-inferences about evidence yet awaited and about the non-evident.

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν τὰ ὑποτεταγμένα τοῖς φθόγγοις, ὧς Ἡρόδοτε, δεῖ εἰληφέναι, ὅπως ἂν τὰ δοξαζόμενα ἢ ζητούμενα ἀπορούμενα ἔχωμεν εἰς ταῦτα ἀναγαγόντες ἐπικρίνειν, καὶ μὴ ἄκριτα πάντα ἡμῖν <ἴη> εἰς

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<sup>11</sup> Transl. Mensch 2018.

ἄπειρον ἀποδεικνύουσιν ἢ κενούς φθόγγους ἔχωμεν. [38] ἀνάγκη γὰρ τὸ πρῶτον ἐννόημα καθ' ἕκαστον φθόγγον βλέπεσθαι καὶ μηθὲν ἀποδείξεως προσδεῖσθαι, εἴπερ ἔξομεν τὸ ζητούμενον ἢ ἀπορούμενον καὶ ἐφ' ὃ ἀνάξομεν. ἔ<τ>ι τε κατὰ τὰς αἰσθήσεις δεῖ πάντα τηρεῖν καὶ ἀπλῶς τὰς παρούσας ἐπιβολὰς εἶτε διανοίας εἶθ' ὅτου δῆποτε τῶν κριτηρίων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὰ ὑπάρχοντα πάθη, ὅπως ἂν καὶ τὸ προσμενόμενον καὶ τὸ ἄδηλον ἔχωμεν οἷς σημειωσόμεθα.

Epicur. *Ep.* 37–38<sup>12</sup>

Having the evidence and recognising it as evidence, therefore, makes it possible to make inferences. To put it schematically, Epicurean inference consists in organising the propositions of science, not in an analytical and deductive way, but by relating them – directly or indirectly – to “signs”, that is: to empirical attestations. Thus, the existence of the void is attested by the existence of motion, which I commonly experience. This is, roughly speaking, what Epicurus calls “inferring by signs”, an approach that Philodemus will defend in his *De signis*.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the search for knowledge requires the ability to posit unprovable knowledge or propositions, knowledge that does not have to be demonstrated: sensations and preconceptions, immediate affections of pleasure or pain, just as, in another register, the meaning of commonly accepted linguistic terms.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear, then, that for Epicurus, these knowledges require no further demonstration because they are self-evident;<sup>15</sup> any evidence is its own proof, beginning with sensation. As Lucretius says, “every sensation is true at every moment”.<sup>16</sup>

## 2 Objective justification: from physics to epistemology

What now calls for our attention is the fact that the Epicureans, as I said at the outset, nevertheless provide justifications for the evidence of the criteria. One could initially consider that the best justification comes from physics itself. This is what I have called the ‘objectivist’ solution.<sup>17</sup> The Epicurean Torquatus, in Cicero’s treatise *De finibus*, argues in this direction, at least initially:

[6] [...] if we do not clearly grasp the nature of things, then there is no way in which we will be able to defend the judgments of our senses. And everything that comes before our mind has its origin in sense-perception. If all sense-perceptions are true, as Epicurus’ system teaches, then knowledge and understanding are in the end possible. Those who do away with sense-perception and deny that anything can be known, are unable, once sense-perception is removed from the scene, even to articulate their own

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<sup>12</sup> Transl. Long and Sedley 1987.

<sup>13</sup> For Philodemus, the “sign” (σημεῖον) is precisely the starting point for inference and is sometimes referred to as “what is evident” (τὸ ἐναργές), as recalled by Manetti and Fausti (2022, 254). In fact, the surviving parts of the treatise contain a large number of occurrences of the terminology of *enargeia*.

<sup>14</sup> On Epicurean preconception and its methodological functions, see Goldschmidt (1978); Morel (2008); Tsouna (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Ierodiakonou (2011, 63): “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.”

<sup>16</sup> Lucr. 4,499 (translation is mine).

<sup>17</sup> Admitted by Auvray Assayas (1997); Asmis (2009). Compare, also, Ierodiakonou (2011, 64): “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.”

argument. Besides, once knowledge and science have disappeared, with them go any rational method for conducting one's life and one's activities.

Nisi autem rerum natura perspecta erit, nullo modo poterimus sensuum iudicia defendere. quicquid porro animo cernimus, id omne oritur a sensibus; qui si omnes veri erunt, ut Epicuri ratio docet, tum denique poterit aliquid cognosci et percipi. quos qui tollunt et nihil posse percipi dicunt, ii remotis sensibus ne id ipsum quidem expedire possunt, quod disserunt. praeterea sublata cognitione et scientia tollitur omnis ratio et vitae degendae et rerum gerendarum.

Cic. *Fin.* 1,64<sup>18</sup>

I will come back to this text later on, but for the moment I will retain the indications given by the first sentence. Physics, in fact, explains the perfect adequacy, or “sympathy”, of sense-perception with the perceived object. The theory of simulacra and the formation of mental images, set out in the *Letter to Herodotus* from paragraph 46, shows precisely why sensation is always true. Here, then, we find positive statements in favour of *enargeia*.

The physiological explanation of sense-perception runs as follows: vision, for example, results from the reception of “replicas” (*tupoi*) or “simulacra” (*eidōla*) coming spontaneously from the object. Because these transmitted emanations preserve the structure and properties of the object, they produce, in the sensory organs of the perceiver, an image or “appearance” (*phantasia*), which remains in “sympathy” (*sumpatheia*) with the object, that is: with the “substrate” or “underlying reality” (*hupokeimenon*), as Epicurus says.<sup>19</sup> A passage from Epicurus is particularly revealing on this point:

[7] For none of these possibilities is contradicted by our sensations if we consider how we ascribe to them the effects and qualities coming from external objects to us.

οὐθὲν γὰρ τούτων ἀντιμαρτυρεῖ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσιν, ἂν βλέπη τις τινα τρόπον τὰς ἐνεργείας, ἴτινα καὶ τὰς συμπαθείας ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀνοίσει.

Epicur. *Ep.* 48<sup>20</sup>

Note that Gassendi had thought it wise to correct the “ἐνεργείας” of the manuscripts to “ἐναργείας”, which would be tantamount to saying that the very “evidence” of external things comes to the senses. On the one hand, this addition introduces an unnecessary circularity, but on the other hand, it does show that this passage provides a physical justification for the validity of the criteria.

Moreover, Diogenes of Oenoanda, the latest ancient Epicurean, attests that all representations, including mental images, such as preconceptions, are concerned by this explanation:

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<sup>18</sup> Transl. Woolf 2001, with slight modifications.

<sup>19</sup> Epicur. *Ep.* 49–53 (transl. Mensch 2018; I read here *τίνα τρόπον*); see also Lucr. 4,46–268.

<sup>20</sup> Transl. Mensch (2018).

[8] [...] and after the impingements of the first images, our nature is rendered porous in such a manner that, even if the objects which it first saw are no longer present, images similar to the first ones are received by the mind [...].

[...] μετὰ δὲ τὰς τῶν

πρώτων ἐνπτώσεις εἰ-

δώλων ποροποιεῖται

ἡμῶν οὕτως ἡ φύσις

col 3,10

ὥστε, καὶ μὴ παρόντων

ἔτι τῶν πραγμάτων ἂ τὸ

πρῶτον εἶδεν, τὰ ὅμοι-

α τοῖς πρώτοις τῆ δια-

νοίᾳ δεχθ[ῆ]ναι φάσμα-

Diog.Oen. fr. 9 col 3,6–14 Smith<sup>21</sup>

This text clearly shows that the image is not purely subjective and even less strictly mental: what we perceive in ourselves, through our sense-organs, is the very result of a physical process, which includes the penetration of simulacra into the sensory organs, the imprinting of images on them and the preservation of traces of the initial experience.<sup>22</sup>

Now, a physical process is something real, that is something true; hence, what happens in sense-perception is the immediate and reliable attestation of a physical reality. In other words, we perceive something that is inherent in the object itself or that the object produces by itself. Because our sensations are physically similar to their objects, they can be called “true” prior to any judgment about their truth or falsity.<sup>23</sup> The distortion of the images is a physical process which is epistemologically neutral. The error comes from that which is “added by opinion” (*prodoxazomenon*; *Ep.* 50). It is probably partly for this reason that some texts, which report the Epicurean conception of evidence, equate the latter with appearance itself, i.e. *phantasia*, as can be seen in some of the accounts of Sextus Empiricus: [9] “[...] the presentation, which he also terms ‘evidence’, is constantly true ([...] τὴν φαντασίαν, ἣν καὶ ἐνάργειαν καλεῖ, διὰ παντὸς ἀληθῆ φησιν ὑπάρχειν).”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Edition and transl. Smith (1993), here and below.

<sup>22</sup> On this fragment, see the careful reading by Corsi (2022, 75–89).

<sup>23</sup> It is not clear whether the Epicureans explicitly admit a distinct notion of truth or falsehood, which would be “ascribed to the judgements and presentations about things in the world” (Bown 2016, 464, who argues in this sense), and consequently whether they admit two notions of truth and falsehood. Dealing with this issue would go beyond the scope of this article. For a detailed answer to Bown’s reading, see Verde (2018, 92–99), who insists in particular on the fact that an opinion will be true if and only if its content, once verified, truly corresponds to the phenomenon it describes. He points out that “it is always up to perceptual evidence to decide whether a supposition is true or false”. (“A convalidare se un’ipotesi sia vera o falsa è l’evidenza percettiva (*enargeia*)”) (Verde 2018, 97).

<sup>24</sup> S.E. *M.* 7,203 (transl. Bury 1935). See also: *M.* 8,63. As E. Asmis says: “Both Diogenes’ and Sextus’ analyses are thus in agreement with Epicurus’ view that the criteria are the mind and the senses, having the evidence present to them by a direct perceptual response to external influences.” (Asmis 1984, 96).

However, the objectivist solution is not fully satisfactory. It shows that sensation is true because it is real, but it does not establish sensation *as a criterion* of truth. In other words, although it is a positive argument in favour of evidence, it cannot be said to ground the truth of evidence, or to be foundational for it. Indeed, if Epicurus did this, he would be at fault since evidence needs no foundation, including by physics. But can we even say that the objectivist point of view offers a justification for evidence *as such*, that is: for its epistemological priority? In my opinion, it is significant that, in the section where he explains the formation and physical origin of the images Epicurus considers that the evidence of the criterion is already admitted and, therefore, does not have to be established. Thus, he says in *Letter to Herodotus*, 47: [10] “[...] the exceptional thinness of the images is infirmed by none of the phenomena we observe.”<sup>25</sup> This argument by non-contestation, in accordance with the general theory of judgement,<sup>26</sup> supposes precisely that “what appears”, the *phainomenon*, already has the value of attestation; and this, since it is an attestation by sensation, necessarily has the status of evidence. Text [7] above is also very clear on this point: Epicurus justifies the physical explanation by pointing out that it “is not contested by sensations” and by the evidences linked to them. Therefore, the truth of the sensations is not inferred from the physical explanation of the perceptual process; it is stated prior to any evaluation of the latter – in this case, an evaluation by non-contestation.

To conclude this first step, we can admit that the physical explanation of the formation of images gives an additional reason to recognise the evidences as true and primary, but this does not mean that it provides an epistemic guarantee or that it provides an attestation of the evidence as such. It is, in fact, quite likely that the physical or physiological explanation of image formation in the *Letter to Herodotus* is not specifically intended to rescue the evidence of the criteria – this would be a circle or a kind of petition of principle – even if it does provide *de facto* a solid support to the empiricist thesis. From this point of view, the Epicureans can even be said to have adopted an attitude similar to those who, in the *Academica* passage [1], “said that they would not have opened proceedings with any speech in defence of the evidentness”.

### 3 Indirect justification (1): the irrefutability of sensation

I now come to the arguments I have called ‘pragmatic’, in favour of *enargeia*, and which are, in my view, much more convincing, insofar as they confirm the status of evidence as a criterion of truth or action. They consist in showing, not *why* what is obvious is *per se* obvious, but *why it is legitimate*, and even necessary, for knowledge and action to take for granted what appears to us as *per se* obvious. They are not *explanations*, properly speaking, but rather *justifications*, i.e. arguments showing – not proving – that it is legitimate or necessary to use evidence as evidence.

I have already alluded above to Lucretius’ passage in favour of the evidence of sense-perception. It is clear that this passage is polemical and that its purpose is to refute those who reject such evidence. These are probably some sceptics.<sup>27</sup> Against their arguments, Lucretius defends the infallibility of sensations by arguing that no sense, such as sight or smell, can be corrected by a different sense: sight cannot be corrected by hearing, or hearing by touch, or touch by taste, since each sense has a particular and distinct power.<sup>28</sup> Now nothing but sensation can refute sensation, since reason is posterior and derived from sensible experience. In this case, we are not dealing with a positive argument for the reliability of sensations but with a purely negative argument through the non-refutability of each of the

<sup>25</sup> εἶθ’ ὅτι τὰ εἶδωλα ταῖς λεπτότησιν ἀνυπερβλήτοις κέχρηται, οὐθὲν ἀντιμαρτυρεῖ τῶν φαινομένων (transl. Mensch 2018).

<sup>26</sup> See S.E. M. 7,211–216.

<sup>27</sup> I cannot dwell here on the issue of the precise identification of the sceptics who are targeted in Lucretius’ text. For a recent update on this, see Stoneman (2020).

<sup>28</sup> Lucr. 4,486–490.



senses. Thanks to this argument by impossibility, Lucretius can answer the opponents of evidence without having recourse to evidence itself or to a pseudo-demonstration of it.

In a very similar way, Diogenes Laertius reports the words of Epicurus, according to whom the reliability of sensation is established in an essentially negative way, as it were by subtraction or exemption from the defects that are those of judgement: “All sensation, he [Epicurus] says, is irrational (*alogos*) and does not involve memory.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, error and illusion always presuppose a propositional content plus a belief related to this propositional content. Now, this twofold operation requires the use of a rational faculty. In other words, being deprived of any kind of rational activity, sensation cannot judge; hence it cannot fail.

#### 4 Indirect justification (2): Arguments from consequences

Let us return to Lucretius. He is not satisfied with a purely negative argument by the impossibility of refuting sensations. He also resorts, in the same passage, to arguments by consequences. Reason, Lucretius says, comes from sensation and so cannot refute it, since it would refute itself in claiming to refute its own origin.<sup>30</sup> This first phase of the development is a form of argument by reversal – a kind of *peritropē* – in which what is refuted is refuted by the very refutation it accomplishes. After the section on negative argument already mentioned, Lucretius comes to the argument by consequences itself: to subscribe to the sceptical critique would be to “betray our original confidence” and, thus, to make life itself impossible because we would be unable to rely on the senses and avoid, for instance, falling into precipices. The evidence provided by the senses is like the “rule” (*regula*) in architecture: if it is wrong, the whole edifice risks collapsing.<sup>31</sup>

We find the same type of indirect argument by consequences in Epicurus himself. In text [3] on preconceptions – a text where Diogenes Laertius obviously follows Epicurus very closely – we are struck by the recurrence of negative conditional arguments of the type: if we do not take the preconceptions – of human being, horse, or ox – as self-evident, then such and such problematic consequences follow.<sup>32</sup>

As can be seen in the text of Lucretius, the argument by consequences does not only concern knowledge, but also action. There is obviously a long tradition, in this sense, within the Epicurean family. It probably originates in Book XXV of Epicurus’ *Peri phuseōs*, when he invokes the self-evidence of the preconception of responsibility. This evidence is inherent in the mere fact that most of our actions are up to us: we congratulate each other on our good deeds and blame each other, in line with the idea that we are responsible for our actions. It is therefore empirically attested – as seen in everyday experience and practice – that we are free and that most of our actions depend on us<sup>33</sup>. So,

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<sup>29</sup> D.L. 10,31 (transl. Long and Sedley 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Lucr. 4,483–485; see also D.L. 10,32.

<sup>31</sup> In this paragraph, I follow Lucr., 4,469–513.

<sup>32</sup> Thus, as the Epicurean say in text [3], “what we inquire about we would not have inquired about if we had not had prior knowledge of it. For example: ‘Is what’s standing over there a horse or a cow?’ For one must at some time have come to know the form of a horse and that of a cow by means of preconception”; and then: “Nor would we have named something if we had not previously learned its delineation by means of preconception. Thus preconceptions are self-evident.” It is clear that the last proposition does not introduce the conclusion of a positive inference, as if the evidence of the preconception were produced by the argument itself, but the anteriority and necessity of the assertion. It is therefore understandable that “it must be admitted and posited that pre-notions are by themselves self-evident”.

<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, the following passage: “[...] the fact that we rebuke, oppose and reform each other as if the responsibility lay also in ourselves, and not just in our congenital make-up and the accidental necessity of that which surrounds and penetrates us. (3) For if someone were to attribute to the very process of rebuking and being rebuked the accidental necessity of whatever happens to be present to one self at the time, I’m afraid he can never in this way understand <his own behaviour in continuing the debate [...] > (4) <He may simply choose to maintain his thesis while in practice continuing to> blame or praise. But if he were to act in this way he would

the thesis of human responsibility does not have to be *established* in the strong sense, that is: to be *proved* properly speaking. As I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> the Epicurean ‘up to us’, in this context, is not a *demonstrandum*: it is a matter of fact. Epicurus is certainly interested in describing the physical process that leads to action, and in explaining that not all our movements are determined by our initial atomic composition and by what is called here “accidental necessity”. However, he is probably less interested in basing the responsibility on a *demonstration* properly speaking – for instance, a physiological explanation – than in pointing out the mere fact of our responsibility. The force of this primary evidence is also decisive at the dialectical level against the supposed determinism of Democritus,<sup>35</sup> no doubt, but also against any doctrine that would contest the agent’s responsibility in the name of fate, necessity or antecedent causes. Against the fatalist view, we can invoke everyday experience and the mere fact that we attribute responsibility to each other without the need for further proof. The evidence of responsibility is, therefore, justified on his own grounds.

This line of argument favouring practical evidence was clearly followed by Epicurus’ immediate successors and then by his later heirs. Two other texts can be cited here. The first comes from Plutarch and his testimony on the Epicurean Colotes, in a passage where the latter directly attacks Democritus of Abdera:

[11] [Colotes] says that Democritus’ words “colour is by convention, sweet by convention,” a compound by convention, and so the rest, “what is real are the void and the atoms” are an attack on the senses; and that anyone who abides by this reasoning and puts it into practice could not even conceive of himself as a man or as alive.

τὸ γὰρ “νόμῳ χροίην εἶναι καὶ νόμῳ γλυκὸν” καὶ νόμῳ σύγκρισιν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα, “ἐτεῆ δὲ τὸ κενὸν καὶ τὰς ἀτόμους” ἀντειρημένον φησὶν ὑπὸ Δημοκρίτου ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι, καὶ τὸν ἐμμένοντα τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ καὶ χρώμενον οὐδ’ ἂν αὐτὸν ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶν ἢ ζῆν διανοηθῆναι.

Plu., *Adversus Colotem*, 1110E–F<sup>36</sup>

In this passage, Colotes – a friend of the Master of the Garden even before it was founded – attacks the heart of Democritus’ philosophy. He quotes the most famous of the surviving fragments of the Abderite.<sup>37</sup> According to Democritus, sensible qualities – and even material compounds, in this particular version of his fragment – have no real existence and are determined only by convention, that is: by our beliefs or representations. We usually think that what is blue *is* blue, but in reality, it *is not*. In fact, only atoms and the void really exist, and they are deprived of any sensible properties, such as colour or taste. For his part, Colotes uses a strategy that he adopts on several occasions against the other non-Epicurean philosophers. He criticises Democritus for depriving sensible experience of all reliability, to the point of preventing the agent from conceiving of his own nature as a human being,

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be leaving intact the very same behaviour which as far as our own selves are concerned creates the preconception of our responsibility. And in that he would at one point be altering his theory, at another < ... >” (Long and Sedley’s transl., 20C2–4; *PHerc.* 1191/697/1056; Laursen 1997, 35).

<sup>34</sup> Morel (2014).

<sup>35</sup> Sedley (1983); Masi (2006, 145).

<sup>36</sup> Edition and transl. Einarson and De Lacy 1967.

<sup>37</sup> The fragment is quoted by different sources and traditions, in Diogenes Laërtius, Galen, Sextus Empiricus and, as we shall see, in Diogenes of Oenoanda’s Epicurean inscription. See Aët. 4,9,8 [67 A 32 DK]; D.L. 9,45 [68 A 1 DK]; 9,72 [68 B 117 DK]; Gal. *De elementis*, 1,2 [68 A 49 DK] and *De med. exp.* 15, ed. Walzer-Frede [68 B 125 DK]; S.E. *M.* 7,135 [68 B 9 DK].

and thus making human life impossible. In essence, Democritus ignores the force and irrefutable nature of evidence.

However, the most important is this: Plutarch's criticism of Colotes, insofar as it is based on his opponent's own text, reveals the crucial role that the Garden attributes to evidence in their theory of knowledge.<sup>38</sup> In this passage, Colotes does not only place the debate on the level of the theory of knowledge and the epistemological problem of the reliability of the senses. Although the text is incomplete, it clearly shows that the stakes are also practical: Democritus, by doubting the reliability of the senses and by going so far as to deny the real existence, not only of the sensible qualities, but also of the compounds that serve as substrates for these qualities, plunges the whole of life into confusion. All practice, and *a fortiori*, all rules of life and ethics, are thus invalidated in principle.

After Colotes, Diogenes of Oenoanda made the same observation and also fed the polemic in this sense.<sup>39</sup>

[12] Even Democritus erred in a manner unworthy of himself when he said that atoms alone among existing things have true reality, while everything else exists by convention. For, according to your account, Democritus, it will be impossible for us even to live, let alone discover the truth, since we shall be unable to protect ourselves from either fire or slaughter or [any other force].

ἐσφά-

λη δ' ἀναξίως ἑαυτοῦ

καὶ Δημόκριτος, v. τὰς

col 2,5

ἀτόμους μόνας κατ' ἄ-

λήθειαν εἰπὼν ὑπάρχειν

ἐν τοῖς οὐσι, v. τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ

νομιστεῖ ἅπαντα. κατὰ

γὰρ τὸν σὸν λόγον, ὃ Δη-

col 2,10

μόκριτε, οὐχ ὅπως τὸ ἄ-

ληθὲς εὐρεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ

ζῆν δυνησόμεθα, μή-

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<sup>38</sup> See in particular Plu. *Non posse* 1089A, on the evidence of memories preserved from experience; *Adv. Col.*, 1117F, on the intrinsic evidence of affections, if we adopt Pohlenz's correction in line 4 (ἐνάργειαν) against the manuscript version (ἐνέργειαν); 1121E and 1124A–B on the equal evidence of all sensations; 1123A, where Plutarch criticizes the Epicureans for “fighting evidence” (μάχεται τοῖς ἐναργέσι), even though they base their entire theory on the irrefutable nature of the latter. It should be noted that this polemical approach of Epicureanism has a long history in the Platonic tradition, if we accept that Epicurus is one of Plotinus' targets, in his Treatise 32, when the latter attacks philosophers “who believe that sense-perceptions inspire a confidence that has the strongest evidence” (ἃ δὴ δοκεῖ πίστιν ἔχειν ἐναργεστάτην; Plot. V 5 [32] 1,12–13). See in this sense Morel (2016); Taormina (2016).

<sup>39</sup> On the proximity between the two texts, see Morel (1996, 341–342); Corsi (2022, 56–62).

τε τὸ πῦρ φυλαττόμε-  
νοι [μήτε τ]ήν σφαγὴν  
col 3,1  
μήτ' [...]

Diog.Oen. fr. 7 col 2,2–3,1 Smith

Once again, by referring polemically to Democritus' most famous fragment, the Epicureans justify evidence without the need either to explain its physical genesis or to invoke a higher guarantee, which would be contradictory to the very definition of evidence. The evidence of the sensations is attested both by the consequences (we would fall into precipices, we would burn in the flames, etc.), but also by itself: it is obvious that we live, that we are human beings, that we avoid burning ourselves because it is obvious that fire burns.

The argument by the practical consequences is, in fact, similar to the argument by the epistemological consequences. Thus, in *Key Doctrines XXIII–XXIV*, Epicurus draws the consequences, disastrous for knowledge as well as for practice, of an attitude which would consist in not distinguishing the obvious from what is still waiting to be attested:

[13] XXIII. If you fight against all your sensations, you will not have a standard by which to judge the ones that you claim are false.

XXIV. If you reject any sensation absolutely, and do not distinguish between an opinion that awaits confirmation and a present reality (whether of sensation, feeling, or perception), you will also throw your other sensations into confusion with your groundless belief, and in doing so will be rejecting altogether the criterion. But if, when assessing opinions, you affirm as true everything that awaits confirmation as well as that which does not, < . . . > you will not escape error; for you will be preserving complete uncertainty in every judgment between right and wrong opinion.

(23) εἰ μαχῆ πάσαις ταῖς αἰσθήσεσιν, οὐχ ἔξεις οὐδ' ἄς ἂν φῆς αὐτῶν διεψεῦσθαι πρὸς τί ποιούμενος τὴν ἀναγωγὴν κρίνεις.

(24) εἴ τιν' ἐκβαλεῖς ἀπλῶς αἰσθησιν καὶ μὴ διαιρήσεις τὸ δοξαζόμενον κατὰ προσμενόμενον καὶ τὸ παρὸν ἤδη κατὰ τὴν αἰσθησιν καὶ τὰ πάθη καὶ πᾶσαν φανταστικὴν ἐπιβολὴν τῆς διανοίας, συνταράξεις καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς αἰσθήσεις τῆ ματαίῳ δόξει, ὥστε τὸ κριτήριον ἅπαν ἐκβαλεῖς. εἰ δὲ βεβαιώσεις καὶ τὸ προσμενόμενον ἅπαν ἐν ταῖς δοξαστικαῖς ἐννοίαις καὶ τὸ μὴ τὴν ἐπιμαρτύρησιν < . > οὐκ ἐκλείψεις τὸ διεψευσμένον – ὡς τετηρηκῶς ἔση πᾶσαν ἀμφισβήτησιν κατὰ πᾶσαν κρίσιν τοῦ ὀρθῶς ἢ μὴ ὀρθῶς.

Epicur. *Sent.* 23–24<sup>40</sup>

In other words, if we do not differentiate between the criteria – here, the apprehension of images by thought is placed on the same plane as sensation and the affections, as in a discussed passage of Diogenes Laertius (10,31) – we confuse sensation with empty or groundless opinion; consequently, we

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<sup>40</sup> Transl. Mensch 2018.

expose sensation to error, so that we no longer have true criteria of knowledge. To put it another way: not attributing to evidence the status of an absolute attestation is destroying all knowledge.

## 5 Back to Cicero's *Academica*

But this text is interesting for an additional reason, which concerns us directly. It is likely to be echoed in the text that is our starting point, Cicero's *Academica*:

[14] Epicurus brings the issue to this point, that if one sense was told a lie once in a man's life, no sense must ever be believed. This is true candour – to trust in one's own witnesses and persist in perversity! Accordingly, Timagoras the Epicurean denies that he has ever really seen two little flames coming from the lamp when he has screwed up an eye, since it is a lie of the opinion, not of the eyes.

Eo enim rem demittit Epicurus, si unus sensus semel in vita mentitus sit, nulli umquam esse credendum. Hoc est verum esse, confidere suis testibus et in pravitate insistere! Itaque Timagoras Epicureus negat sibi umquam, cum oculum torsisset, duas ex lucerna flammulas esse visas; opinionis enim esse mendacium, non oculorum. Eo enim rem demittit Epicurus, si unus sensus semel in vita mentitus sit, nulli umquam esse credendum. Hoc est verum esse, confidere suis testibus et in pravitate insistere! Itaque Timagoras Epicureus negat sibi umquam, cum oculum torsisset, duas ex lucerna flammulas esse visas; opinionis enim esse mendacium, non oculorum.

Cic. *Acad.* 2,79–80<sup>41</sup>

Two things should be noted in this text. On the one hand, we find the maximalist strategy of saying that if we lose confidence in the criterion once, our confidence is lost forever. On the other hand, Cicero refers to the Epicurean Timagoras concerning the experiment of producing a double image by pressing the eye with a finger.<sup>42</sup> For Timagoras, this is not a mistake of the sense organs but of opinion and opinion alone, hence, he claimed not to have “seen”, strictly speaking, the two images of the same object. In this passage, as in *Sent.* XXIV, sensible evidence stands in radical contrast to opinion and imposes itself as self-evident through an argument by consequences.

Moreover, in the same treatise, we have an additional testimony of this strategy: [15] “What is the principle of Epicurus? ‘If any sense-presentation is false, nothing can be perceived.’”<sup>43</sup> If we return to text [1], we find that we now have stronger arguments to consider that it is very likely that Cicero is also referring to Epicurus when he mentions those who want to justify the evidence by indirect arguments and, if we think of the polemic against Democritus and then against the sceptics, by way of refutation.

It is difficult to state with absolute certainty that the Epicureans are among the philosophers Cicero thinks of in *Acad.* 2,18. The idea of resorting to ‘definitions’ of *enargeia* seems, moreover,

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<sup>41</sup> Transl. Rackham 1933.

<sup>42</sup> On this radical Epicurean, see Verde (2010).

<sup>43</sup> Quod est caput Epicuri? “Si ullum sensus visum falsum est, nihi percipi potest”; Cicero, *Acad.* 2,101 (transl. Rackham 1933).

incompatible with the Epicurean critique of definition as such,<sup>44</sup> which is undoubtedly a corollary of their rejection of dialectics or logic. Moreover, Cicero's allusion to a dialogical context and to a kind of moral obligation towards human beings or to some of them does not seem to me to correspond to an attested Epicurean feature.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Cicero observes through the mouth of Torquatus, in *De finibus* 1,30–31, that the Epicureans are themselves divided as to whether it is relevant to reason in favour of the criteria or not.

However, more broadly, there are also good reasons for admitting the Epicureans (or some of them) among the philosophers who argue one way or another in favour of *enargeia*. In fact, preserved texts show that the Epicureans have different ways of justifying evidence. They do so, first of all, in a positive way, by physics and, more precisely, by the physiology of sensation, that is: by setting out the theory of simulacra and the formation of mental images. However, this first path calls for another, as we can clearly see in the text [6], where Torquatus moves from the physical argument to another register, negative and pragmatic. As we have seen, this path makes it possible to show two essential things: on the one hand, that sensations are irrefutable; on the other hand, that the consequences of the opposite thesis would be disastrous for knowledge and for action. Obviously, Epicurus and his successors considered this to be a legitimate way to defend the evidence.

As we have seen, such a defence is certainly justified, by polemical needs (against Democritus or against scepticism). But it may also have something to do with the pedagogical dimension of Epicurean discourse. The Epicureans were undoubtedly sensitive to the need to address different audiences, as the beginning of Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* clearly shows.<sup>46</sup> By justifying what cannot be proved, they may have sought to win over beginners who were reluctant to accept the thesis of the immediate validity of sensations, preconceptions or immediate affections.

Be that as it may, I hope to have shown that the Epicureans are not content with a dogmatic position in favour of *enargeia*, but develop complex and varied strategies to justify it, both in scientific discourse and in practice. Thus, not only do they avoid the logical error of trying to explain what does not need to be explained, but they also provide themselves with the means to respond to those who would question the evidence of the criteria, be they sensation, preconceptions or immediate affections of pleasure or pain. Epicurus could be seen as adopting a maximalist or radical position here, which, by considering only extreme negative consequences, excludes the possibility that some sensations are true and others false.<sup>47</sup> In any case, the Epicureans must be given credit for adopting a consistent theory of the criterion and for avoiding the mistake of trying to explain what is, in fact, obvious.

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<sup>44</sup> Anon. in *Thet.* 22,39–47.

<sup>45</sup> One exception might be Diogenes of Oenoanda's promotion of "philanthropy" (*philanthrōpia*), which plays an important role in the inscription of which he is the author. At any rate, this text is very likely to have been written after Cicero, probably in the second century AD.

<sup>46</sup> Epicur. *Ep.* 35–36.

<sup>47</sup> This is the objection that Cicero addresses to Epicurus and his successors in *Acad.* 2,80.

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