

The reality under the reception of representations – a Stoic approach

Abstract: If we rewind each path that led us to knowledge, we discover that our access to it started with one basic act – the act of perception. But every sensory experience or mental event appears in our mind as a representation. Since Antiquity, the philosophers were quite aware that there is no representation without perception, but also no judgment without representation. By working with the Stoic texts it becomes more evident that the individual, as the subject of the receiving representations, is the only one in charge to master its own data of perception, namely to test and then to assent a representation or not. Prudent as always, the Stoics encourage the individual to be suspicious and careful in front of what appears to him in the first instance: objects, feelings or mental events. In this case, how do we deal with such appearances? How do we interpret them? Are we guided more by our emotions in front of what we perceive better than the truth itself? Following the Stoic doctrine, the purpose of this article is to investigate the work that is behind the reception of representations and to reveal the reason why one should control and correct them.

Keywords: object, representation, reception, assessment, philosophy, Stoicism

In the history of the philosophical ideas, the notion of representation (*phantasia*)¹ gained a lot of attention, being one of the main concepts through which the access to knowledge could be explained. This topic was a delicate subject to approach also in Antiquity, since the discussion refers to our awareness of receiving impressions from the outer world. There was no doubt that the term itself was strongly connected with the act of perception. But the link between both of them indicates us how tricky a representation can be. While the perception is instant, the representation is not. Indeed, we receive representations every time we perceive something. But the difficulty arises not from the fact that we perceive an object, an event or a feeling, but from how we manage to see the representations from each one of them. In the end, one should try to train its mind, in order to achieve a proper (objective) perspective of how reality looks like. At least, this is the vision that the Stoics conceived about this particular aspect. And yet, there are still other questionable sides of this phenomenon that require

* PhD Student in Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania, email: ruxandra.stoia@yahoo.com

further consideration. As a preliminary matter, a brief description of the Stoic doctrine may create the conditions to set the main scene of this article.

Stoicism, as any other philosophy developed in Hellenistic and Roman period, is conceived to deal more with the ethical inferences of the philosophical system. But the other two parts, physics and logic, are also involved in the Stoic discourse. In fact, there is a permanent correspondence between these parts. Precisely, the Stoics saw an interdependence that takes part between our way of thinking and our way of acting. A good government of the mind reflects itself in the conduct. But there are a lot of factors that are disturbing our logical thinking. For this reason, the entire Stoicism, mainly the Roman one, is filled with urges regarding the care of the self.² In this context, the notion of “care” must be understood as a form of exercise. Likewise, every action upon oneself determinates us to become the subject and the object of our own care. This mechanism assumes that the individual must work with himself and, in exact terms, he must train his thoughts. But the thoughts cannot be trained without a theoretical support. They need to be sustained by the philosophical discourses.

Despite their simplicity, the Stoic texts are a valuable source in the field of practical philosophy, due to the moral principles that they promote. In contrast with other philosophical works, the Stoic ones were written in a modest way. By far, the manner of explaining the philosophical ideas and beliefs occurs on a mundane level. Even if the doctrine is divided in three parts, one can see that the exposed theory remains in connection with the concrete world. In fact, being in the world determinates the individual to develop exactly three spheres of action. For instance, the *logic* part, which includes a complex association of theory of knowledge, grammar, semantics and logic principles, serves for developing an accurate way of thinking. At the same time, it stresses upon the use of valid arguments and how to reason correctly by criticizing the representations. On the other hand, the study of *physics* assures an awareness of the fact that we are part of the Universe and therefore we should become cooperative with the natural events brought by the fate itself.³ Ultimately, the role of *ethics* is to bring improvements in our own action, which in this case means to seek the common good. From this wide point of view, it might become easier to conceive that, via all of these three sides of the doctrine, the individual manifests a sort of care regarding oneself, the other and the Universe (Hadot 1995, 193-202).⁴

Without any doubt, the first form of care, as a preliminary stage, is the one regarding our own self. But, the preoccupation with oneself starts with a serious attention upon what we perceive from the external world and how do we handle the reception of it. This act of vigilance is important in the field of knowledge and action, because we understand and react based on

what we perceive. Certainly, this aspect had generated a lot of insecurity for the simple reason that we can easily fall into the temptation to assent whatever appears to us. Now, the ancient philosophers felt the need to shape rational arguments around this subject in the hope to avoid such risk. It seems that they end up investigating the meaning and the mechanism of our representations (*phantasiai*).

Approaching the Stoic texts on this topic is an advantage because the concept of *phantasia* remained essential through the whole Stoic tradition. The word cannot be traced “in the Greek literature before the dialogues of Plato, in which it occurs only seven times. Aristotle is apparently the first writer both to have used it regularly and to have discussed its meaning at length” (White 1985, 484).⁵ Then, from the Zenonian fragments until the later Stoics the term gained a crucial position, for the fact that it became the criterion by which the truth of things is tested. Yet, we still need to explore how the Stoics constructed their philosophy around the reception of representations.

Based on the evidences of Diogenes Laertius, Zenon defined a representation as “an imprint on the soul: the name having been appropriately borrowed from the imprint made by the seal upon the wax” (Diogene Laertius, VII. 45). Later, Chrysippus will add that a representation implies, in fact, a process of change, more than an act of imprinting something in the soul (*ibid.* VII. 50). In the both cases, the nature of the representation indicates a sort of alteration, like an affect that takes part once a representation reveals itself. Moreover, “as a *pathos*, a representation is passive; it is an instance of our being affected, «stamped», or imprinted in such way that we are made aware of something – e.g. in the case of seeing, of something white; in the case of pain, of an unpleasant disturbance to my leg; in the case of fear, of something dangerous” (Long 1996, 271). For sure, if the representation is passive, then the interpretation of what we receive from it, it will require an active mood of the ruling part of the soul (*hegemonikon*), often associated with the concept of mind in Stoicism.

Unquestionably, some representations are false or, at least, misleading. In this case, the role of the *hegemonikon* is to examine what is real and what stays under the appearance. In fact, the Stoics distinguished between a cognitive and a non-cognitive representation. A representation is cognitive (*kataleptike*) when it is in accord with the object itself, while a non-apprehending one “does not proceed from any real object, or, if it does, fails to agree with the reality itself, not being clear or distinct” (Diogene Laertius, VII. 46). Still, what does it mean for a representation to agree with the object itself and how do we know if an object is real? The questions are related to one another and the answer it might be found if we follow some examples in this area.

The relationship between the representation and the represented object requires few clarifications. A representation doesn't come alone; it comes with what has caused it (SVF II. 54), *i.e.* an external object, an event or a feeling. A representation shapes the form that comes from the perceived object, even if it doesn't cover all the qualities of the object itself, as it appears in the following situation:

“One day when a discussion had arisen on the question whether the wise man could stoop to hold opinion, and Sphaerus had maintained that this was impossible, the king, wishing to refute him, ordered some waxen pomegranates to be put on the table. Sphaerus was taken in and the king cried out, «You have given your assent to a presentation which is false». But Sphaerus was ready with a neat answer. «I assented not to the proposition that they are pomegranates, but to another, that there are good grounds for thinking them to be pomegranates. Certainty of presentation and reasonable probability are two different things.» (Diogene Laertius, VII. 177).

Here, the representation was an adequate vision of pomegranates. In the end, we were dealing with a cognitive representation, for the reason that the representation matched the characteristics of pomegranates. But the situation proved that Sphaerus assented the *idea* that in front of him were things that looked like pomegranates. The fact that they are pomegranates was true only in a propositional form. The example suggests some phenomenological aspects. It seems that a representation cannot guarantee knowledge, but it can play the role of a potential judgment. (Long 1996, 275).⁶ So, how should we then treat a representation? More or less, a representation is an announcement of a presence of an object or of an event.

But after a representation is declared to be cognitive, one still has to assent it or not. The decision to be affected or not remains up to the percipient, like in the following examples:

“But whereas the older Stoics declare that this apprehensive presentation is the criterion of truth, the later Stoics added the clause «provided that it has no obstacle ». For there are times when an apprehensive presentation occurs, yet is improbable because of the external circumstances. When, for instance, Heracles presented himself to Admetus bringing back Alcestis from the grave, Admetus then received from Alcestis an apprehensive presentation, but disbelieved it; [...] and when Menelaus on his return from Troy beheld the true Helen at the house of Proteus, after leaving on his ship that image of her for which ten years' war was waged, though he received a presentation which was imaged and imprinted from an existing object and in accordance with that object, he did not accept it as valid.” (Sextus Empiricus, I. 253-256).

The closer we get to the late Stoic texts, the better we can see the responsible status that the individual has for giving or withholding assent to a representation. Now that the texts are stressing upon moral and practical facts, one can say that the Roman Stoics had in attention more the representations received through the mind itself, like the ones that comes from incorporeal things, instead of the ones derived from the sense organs.⁷ The reason is quite evident, if we take into account the interest of the Stoics to control the passions and the emotions. For instance, Seneca in his work, *On Anger* (Seneca 1970), captures the irrational nature of the feeling of anger. Moreover, anger is the result of a bad management of representations and judgments. No wonder why stoicism is famous for the rational guide of thinking with inferences in everyday life. In this sense, it will be captivating to follow the carefulness that the Roman Stoics used through the logic part of the doctrine in order to protect themselves.

Back to the feeling of owning each decision to assent a representation, Epictetus can be here a perfect example for fixing this idea: “the gods have put under our control only the most excellent faculty of all and that which dominates the rest, namely, the power to make correct use of the external impressions” (Epictetus, *The Discourses*, I.1.7).⁸ The world is full of prejudices, therefore this hermeneutical technique of controlling the representations comes to destroy what the crowd constructs. The crowd is always guided by beliefs and some of them remain without foundation. Epictetus realized this when he claimed that “it is not the things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things. For example, death is nothing dreadful, or else Socrates too would have thought so, but the judgment that death is dreadful, this is the dreadful thing. When, therefore, we are hindered, or disturbed, or grieved, let us never blame anyone but ourselves, that means, our own judgments” (Ibid. *The Manual*, § 5). But, probably the most known passage from Epictetus that amplifies how dangerous a judgment can be is the next one: “His son is dead. What happened? His son is dead. Nothing else? Not a thing. His ship is lost. What happened? His ship is lost. He was carried off to prison. What happened? He was carried off to prison. But the observation: «He has fared ill» is an addition that each man makes on his own responsibility” (Ibid. *The Discourses*, III.8.5-6). Both examples are helpful to realize that the reality itself doesn’t have moral or aesthetical attributes. In this case, the individual must try to think objectively the life events. Such a technique requires prudence and a slow act of assimilation the representations.⁹ By Epictetus, this exercise might be even easier to fulfill if we take into consideration his theory regarding the separation between the things which are under our control and the ones that are not. Being aware that there are things not in our control, reduce the possibility to get affected. To arrive at the point of apathy or resignation means that to use objective representations. So,

working with such a distinction it can be an advantage to learn how to be distant in front of the daily challenges.

In like manner, Marcus Aurelius is quite meticulous with his thoughts. He offers clear steps to achieve an objective perspective about the external events. The passages under our attention are revealing a method that requires to define and then to decompose an object or an event. For sure, the more details we have about a representation, the more we dominate it:

“a definition or a delineation should be made of every object that presents itself, so that we may see what sort of thing it is in its essence stripped of its adjective, a separate whole taken as such, and tell over with ourselves both its particular designation and the names of the elements that compose it and into which it will be disintegrated. For nothing is so conducive to greatness of mind as the ability to examine systematically and honestly everything that meets us in life, and to regard these things always in such a way as to form a conception of the kind of Universe they belong to [...]” (Marcus Aurelius, III.11).¹⁰

The suggestion is repeating itself also on VI.13: “As in the case of meat and similar eatables the thought strikes us, this is the dead body of a fish, this is a fowl or pig [...] – such, I say, as are these impressions that get to grips with the actual things and enter into the heart of them, so as to see them as they really are, thus should it be thy life through, and where things look to be above measure convincing, laying them quite bare, behold their paltriness and strip off their conventional prestige”.

Marcus Aurelius is trying to put into practice how to be faithful to reality. Indeed, the perception is an involuntary act and there is nothing to blame on it. But, the appearances don't contain any sort of moral or aesthetic qualities, like the judgments do. So the risk of being affected or not comes from the way we describe what we perceive. In consequence, one should cultivate a disinterested, impersonal and unemotional vision. Somehow, this technique involves a reduction from every external aspect that surrounds the object perceived.

Based on the preceding pages, one can affirm that *phantasia* is more than a concept, because it is expressing a way of looking at the world. We are a sum of perceptions and the fact that we work in our everyday life with representations is an undeniable statement. This article attempted to discuss the Stoic version of testing the representation, in order to see the reality as it is and to live in a rational way as possible. It seems like the Stoics were not only aware, but extremely concerned to prove that the power is in our hands to evaluate each representation. Stoicism is, by far, a philosophy that requires self-government. Hence, to attest such a responsibility, one should start by exercising and training his own representations.

Notes

¹ The Greek word doesn't have a proper equivalent in English. The philosophical tradition plays also a decisive part for choosing the right term. For instance, in Aristotle's philosophy, *phantasia* is often translated as imagination, but its meaning still remains in the field of having mental images. Regarding Stoicism, the term has been translated into many forms, such as: representation, presentation, appearance or impression. At any rate, all of them are connected with the basic significance of what *phantasia* represents. By taking into consideration the etymological sense, the word comes from the verb *phainesthai*, which indicates the idea of something that becomes apparent. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the meaning of *phantasia* is less related to aesthetics, but rather to epistemology.

² For further investigations concerning this topic see Foucault (2005, 85).

³ The belief that one should live in accordance with the Nature is a characteristic of the Stoic theory. This fact means to agree and to conform to all the natural law (death, illness) and principles provided by the Nature.

⁴ The description of the ternary scheme can be applied more in the late Stoa, by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. More precisely, Hadot remarked that each register corresponds to a discipline of the soul, namely: for logic one needs the discipline of assent, for physics the one of desire, and for ethics the one of action.

⁵ Surprisingly or not, these are the only locations in Plato's work dealing with the noun form of *phantasia*. *Republic* II, 382e10; *Theaetetus* 152c1, 161e8; *Sophist* 260c9, 260e4, 263d6, 264a6. Even if Plato didn't insist on this subject, that doesn't mean that the paragraphs where *phantasia* appears are not giving us a clue regarding the nature of it. On the contrary, for instance in *Sophist* 264a-b, *phantasia* is explained as being something that comes through sensation, but the final result of "what appears" is a mixture of sensation and opinion.

⁶ The author gives the following illustration: "«That looks like my hat», as distinct from «There's my hat»".

⁷ Based on the Stoic distinction noticed by Diogenes Laertius, VII.51.

⁸ The belief that the proper use of representation is the key of having a moral life hunts Epictetus in most of his work, such as II.I.4; II.22.29; IV.6.34 or *The Manual*, §1.

⁹ The idea of a prudent technique comes from Epictetus, *The Discourses*, II.18.24-26: "Wait for me a little, O impression; allow me to see who you are, and what you are an impression of; allow me to put you to the test."

¹⁰ See also XII.18.

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