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Critical Assent, Intellectualism, and Repetition in Epictetus

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Abstract

The didactic strategy of repeating a certain theoretical principle over and over again (either as a didactic strategy or as an exercise that the student must apply on himself) is ubiquitous both in Epictetus' *Discourses* and in the *Enchiridion*. However, although these techniques represent one of the most important strategies in the author's program of moral therapy, they seem to conflict with Epictetus' intellectualist conception of human agency. In this work, I aim to show that there is no such conflict, and that those techniques are necessary for his central therapeutical strategy (i.e., the demand for a critical examination of our impressions) to produce a virtuous outcome.

Keywords: Stoicism; intellectualism; psychology of action.

1 Epictetus' psychology of action and the demand for a critical examination of impressions

Epictetus' conception of the psychology of human action is strongly in line with the mainstream position on the subject that we find in early Stoic sources¹, a position that considers every human action as a sequence

¹ Epictetus' approach to the problem of the psychology of action is mainly practical: in what remains of the *Discourses*, we do not find any reference to the question of the ontological status of *lekta* (or, for that matter, a simple mention of the concept), and neither does Epictetus attempt (as far as we know) to provide a precise account of the material processes underlying every modification of the soul. The term *pneuma*, the central concept around which the whole of early Stoic psychology has been constructed, appears only on three occasions, functioning in all of them roughly as a synonym for *psychē* (2.23.3; 3.3.22; 3.13.15). Concerning the material basis of impressions, there are two parallel passages in the *Discourses* that use the term *typos*, namely,

of three distinct mental events: an impression (*phantasia*), an act of assent (*synkatathesis*²) to that impression, and an impulse (*hormē*) to act³. Within this framework, having an impression only means that it has come to my mind; it does not mean that I have in anyway committed myself to its truthfulness⁴. Additionally, to assent to that impression is to consider it to be true and accept it as portraying a true state of affairs. Although Epictetus sometimes seems to place the impression itself as the trigger of our actions⁵, the distinction between *having* an impression and assenting to it is crucial, not only for Epictetus' orthodoxy, but also for his entire pedagogical enterprise, because as we shall see, the possibility of adopting the critical attitude defining the first step in the road to moral and epistemic improvement lies in human beings' capacity to refrain from assenting to a given impression.

To understand this, it is necessary to make a very brief sketch of the notions of *impression* and *assent*, the first of which Anthony Long defines as 'anything at all that "appears" to us, anything that constitutes an instance of our awareness' (Long 1996b, 274⁶). If we take a quick look at the examples of impressions that the *Discourses* provide, Long's definition appears to be extremely accurate, because Epictetus seems to consider as an impression *anything* that comes to one's mind (*prospiptō*). A few examples taken from the *Discourses* will suffice: 'It is day', 'The stars are even', 'I am awake', 'It is appropriate to ...', 'Tomorrow you may die', the sound that

1.14.8 and 1.6.10. However, the goal of the general argument that frames both passages is to suggest that such a complex capacity as that of human reason is proof enough of the existence of an artificer. Other than these two passages, Epictetus does not deal with the question of the material basis of impressions. He does not even seem to take for granted that there is such a material basis for them, and simply speaks of impressions as events that take place in the soul, without giving further specifications as to their precise nature. As an expression of this attitude, we find Epictetus admitting in 1.27.15 that he ignores how exactly it is that perception (*aisthēsis*) arises, that is, if it is due to an affection of a single part of the body or of the whole of it.

² Apart from the canonical term *synkatathesis*, Epictetus frequently uses *epineuō* to refer to the act of assent (Vid. 1.5.3; 1.17.22; 1.28.1; 2.26.3).

³ The most rigorous reconstruction of Epictetus' psychology is perhaps Long 1996b, 275–85. On Epictetus' conceptual variations on the question of *hormē*, cf. Inwood 1985, 115–26.

⁴ Although an infinite number of impressions come to our minds during our lifetime, we do not assent to every one of them; we may, for instance, reject some or suspend assent to others until we have examined them more closely.

⁵ Cf. vg. 1.28.10; 2.18.9; 2.22.6; 3.25.6.

⁶ Cf. also Long 2002, 214.

comes from a collapsing building, or the sight of a beautiful woman⁷. When any of these types of impression comes to mind, the agent may do one of three things: he may assent to the impression, reject it or withhold his assent, the first two alternatives being translated, when dealing with practical matters, into desire (*orexis*) or rejection (*ekklisis*):

Just as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the true, dissent from the false, and to withhold judgement in a matter of uncertainty, so it is its nature to be moved with desire toward the good, with aversion toward the evil, and feel neutral toward what is neither evil nor good. ..The instant the good appears it attracts the soul to itself, while the evil repels the soul from itself. A soul will never reject a clear impression of good.⁸ (3.3.2–4)⁹

⁷ As can be expected given his ethical and pedagogical interests, Epictetus' major (or even exclusive) concern lies in the way we deal with *hormetic impressions*, i.e., impressions that present to us a certain course of action as worth pursuing or avoiding: whereas my assent to an impression such as 'Epaphroditus has died' will not directly become the cause of any impulse to act, such an impulse will necessarily follow once I we assent to an impression such as 'it is appropriate for me to grieve for Epaphroditus' death'. When we compare Epictetus' examples of impressions with the accounts we find in early Stoic sources, the first major difference that comes to mind is the shift in the *kind* of mental events each of them focuses on: while early Stoics relied largely on the analysis of sensory impressions, Epictetus deals primarily with impressions that are fully articulated in terms of conceptual and linguistic structure. This shift (which is due to Epictetus' ethical rather than epistemological concerns) becomes apparent in his partial disregard of the notion of *kataleptic* impressions (the analysis of which, in early Stoicism, was based on the model of sensory impressions) and of the problem of the relationship between impressions and the different *lekta* that correspond to them. Early Stoics seem to have built their analysis of impressions on the basic case of impressions that have an immediate empirical origin and projected those features to every type of impression, which becomes evident when we consider the several criteria that a *kataleptic* impression is supposed to meet (what would it mean to ask whether the impression 'It is convenient to grieve for Epaphroditus death' is 'stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is'? (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 7.247 [LS 40E]). Epictetus, on the contrary, seems to make the opposite move; specifically, he takes conceptually articulated, complex impressions as his models and does not care to discuss whether what is valid for that kind of impression is valid for simpler sensory impressions. It is not surprising that, on this matter, the only examples Epictetus indirectly provides of *kataleptic impressions* are actually visual images (of a man bathing and of another drinking too much wine); cf. *Enchiridion* 45.

⁸ πέφυκεν δὲ πᾶσα ψυχὴ ὥσπερ τῷ ἀληθεῖ ἐπινεύειν, πρὸς τὸ ψεῦδος ἀνανεύειν, πρὸς τὸ ἄδηλον ἐπέχειν, οὕτως πρὸς μὲν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὀρεκτικῶς κινεῖσθαι, πρὸς δὲ τὸ κακὸν ἐκκλιτικῶς, πρὸς δὲ τὸ μήτε κακὸν μήτ' ἀγαθὸν οὐδετέρως. ... τὸ ἀγαθὸν φανέν εὐθὺς ἐκίνησεν ἐφ' αὐτό, τὸ κακὸν ἀφ' αὐτοῦ. οὐδέποτε δ' ἀγαθοῦ φαντασίαν ἐναργῆ ἀποδοκιμάσει ψυχὴ.

⁹ All verbatim quotes are from Oldfather's translation with minor modifications (Oldfather, ed. 1961).

In all men thought and action start from a single source, namely, feeling, as in the case of assent the feeling that a thing is so, and in the case of dissent, the feeling that it is not so ... and ... in the case of suspended judgment the feeling that it is uncertain, so also in the case of impulse towards a thing, the feeling that it is convenient for me and that it is impossible to judge one thing convenient and yet desire another, and again, to judge one thing appropriate, and yet be impelled to another.¹⁰ (1.18.1–5)

Contrary to what might seem upon reading these passages, the act of assent is an extremely complex one, which covers the whole mental process stretching from the instant the impression appears to the mind until the moment when what is stated by the impression has been finally *appropriated* by the mind (provided, of course, that it has been accepted)¹¹. Furthermore, the process of assenting to an impression¹² is not something that *necessarily* takes place within an instant, and it is precisely the distinctive feature of rational beings to be able to refrain from immediately (*euthus*) assenting to an impression¹³: while the rest of living beings operate in a fully automatic manner, responding to external stimuli in a predictable and generic way, the mental operations of a rational being are mediated by acts of assent that express their epistemic and moral disposition at the same time. Given that each particular act of assent is an expression of what we take to be good, what we consider bad and inconvenient, and what – in the best case – we regard as indifferent, the sole instance of assent acts as an outwardly directed mirror of our quality as moral agents. Thus, it is only thanks to the presence of such an element in the process of human action that we are liable to being judged from a moral viewpoint and that, as a consequence, ethical reflection makes sense.

However, what is decisive from the perspective of the moral and epistemic progress of the agent is that the mind can do this not only when the impression is uncertain (*adēlos*), but also even when it seems, at first

¹⁰ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις μία ἀρχὴ καθάπερ τοῦ συγκαταθέσθαι τὸ παθεῖν ὅτι ὑπάρχει καὶ τοῦ ἀνανεῦσαι τὸ παθεῖν ὅτι οὐχ ὑπάρχει καὶ νῆ Δία τοῦ ἐπισχεῖν τὸ παθεῖν ὅτι ἀδελόν ἐστιν, οὕτως καὶ τοῦ ὀρμῆσαι ἐπὶ ᾧ τὸ παθεῖν ὅτι ἐμοὶ συμφέρει, ἀμήχανον δ' ἄλλο μὲν κρίνειν τὸ συμφέρον, ἄλλον δ' ὀρέγεσθαι καὶ ἄλλο μὲν κρίνειν καθήκον, ἐπ' ἄλλο δὲ ὀρμᾶν.

¹¹ This, perhaps, explains Epictetus' frequent preference for the less technical notion of the (rational) use (*chrēsis*) we make of our impressions. This, in turn, accounts for the semantic complexity of the notion of *proairesis*, which is precisely defined as the capacity of making a rational use of our impressions. On this subject, vid. Dobbin 1991; Gourinat 2005; Long 2002, 18–220; Bobzien 1998a, 330–57.

¹² Concerning the question of whether the impression is endowed with propositional content or not, Epictetus' position seems to be absolutely clear: impressions *do have propositional content* and, as such, can either be true or false, and can, in consequence, be the *proper object of assent*. For an overview of the problem in early Stoicism, cf. Frede 1987 and Sorabji 1990.

¹³ Cf. Inwood 1985, 84.

sight, completely truthful. In the first case, the withholding of assent will be a natural, spontaneous and inevitable operation, because the mind *cannot help* withholding assent in the case of uncertain impressions¹⁴. In the second case, on the contrary, the act of refraining from assenting will be the result of a practical *decision*, an act which, far from being natural and spontaneous, will probably demand a great deal of effort and training¹⁵.

It is this possibility that has been traditionally signalled out as one of Epictetus' most distinctive contributions to Stoic philosophy. This is especially true given the frequency with which it appears throughout the *Discourses* and the rhetorical elaboration with which it is presented by the author; moreover, it brings to light the fact that the instance of assent represents the cornerstone of the possibility of moral progress and of the and therapeutic strategies designed to achieve that goal¹⁶. Concerning the first aspect, if the possibility of withholding assent were absent from the workings of the human mind, moral progress would be impossible in principle, because the mind would be forced to assent to what appears *at first sight* to be correct, without being able to question that first impression. Given that we evaluate the impressions that come to us based on the opinions or beliefs that we hold, this would throw the agent into an endless loop of intellectual errors, reducing the possibility of his moral and intellectual improvement. As regards the second aspect, the possibility of withholding assent is relevant to Epictetus' therapeutic strategies; this is because Epictetus' central distinction between a *critical* and an *uncritical* (or

¹⁴ 'This is the nature of the intellect: to agree to what is true, to be dissatisfied with what is false, and to withhold judgement regarding what is uncertain. ὅτι ἡ φύσις αὕτη ἐστὶ τῆς διανοίας τοῖς μὲν ἀληθέσιν ἐπινεύειν, τοῖς δὲ ψευδέσι δυσαρεστεῖν, πρὸς δὲ τὰ ἀδύνατα ἐπέχειν' (1.28.1). Cf. also 1.18.1–7.

¹⁵ In truth, and as far as textual evidence is concerned, Epictetus does not state explicitly that we can withhold our assent to an impression that appears at first sight to be truthful; quite on the contrary, several passages might be taken to deny that possibility altogether (cf., inter alia, 3.3.24: 'οὐδέποτε δ' ἀγαθοῦ φαντασίαν ἐναργῆ ἀποδοκιμάσει ψυχῇ'; 3.7.14–15: 'ὥς γὰρ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τῷ ψευδεῖ φαινομένῳ συγκαταθέσθαι καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀπονεύσαι, οὕτως ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τοῦ φαινομένου ἀγαθοῦ ἀποστήναι'; 1.18.2–3; 1.28.1–9; 2.26.2–6). However, given that *ought implies can*, Epictetus' demand that we adopt (at least as long as we are still making progress) a cautious or distrustful attitude towards every appearance, suggests that we *can* do so. In other words, if we did not have the capacity to voluntarily refrain from assenting even in cases where the impression appears to us to be completely truthful, Epictetus' demand that we exercise or perform a critical examination of our impressions would be a demand that we could not possibly meet. I will return to this problem in the third section.

¹⁶ On the issue of moral progress and the shift in interest in Epictetus from the figure of the sage to that of the 'moral progressor', cf. Long 2002, 97–125; Roskam 2005, 111–24.

rash, or precipitate) assent is built based on such capacity. What that distinction states is that our assent to a certain impression can be a purely automatic or spontaneous reaction to an impression, or it can be the end result of a process involving the critical analysis and evaluation of the truthfulness of the impression.

The first type of assent, recently examined by Ricardo Salles in his detailed analysis of the psychology of ‘precipitate action’¹⁷, covers the cases of agents who *immediately* give their assent to *any* impression that comes to their minds without critically judging whether or not the impression correctly depicts or represents a certain state of affairs. In rigor, their mistake lies not only in the fact that they frequently assent to false impressions¹⁸, but also that they assent to either false or true impressions without having evaluated them¹⁹. Following E.P. Arthur’s approach to the notion of assent, this is equivalent to the two perspectives that are implicit in the early Stoics’ treatment of the concept: 1) that which depends on the quality of the impression being assented to, and 2) that related to the psychology of the agent who assents²⁰. However, although early Stoic sources show that they also focused on both aspects²¹, Epictetus’ discussion of the notion of assent is based primarily on the second perspective, and the decisive issue shifts from the impressions assented to²² to *how* they are taken in, i.e., whether they are taken in after careful analysis, which is precisely what the wise person does:

Just as Socrates used to tell us not to live a life unsubjected to examination, so we ought not to accept an impression unsubjected to examination, but should say, ‘Wait, allow me to see who you are and whence you come’ (just as the night-watch say, ‘Show me your tokens’). Do you have your token from nature, the one which every impression which is to be accepted must have?²³ (3.12.15–6)²⁴

The first and greatest task of the philosopher is to test the impressions and discriminate between them, and to apply none that has not been tested.²⁵ (1.20.7–8)

¹⁷ Vid. Salles 2007.

¹⁸ Cf. 1.20.11.

¹⁹ Cf. 1.28.30; 4.10.13.

²⁰ Cf. Arthur 1983; Meinwald 1995; Ioppolo 1990.

²¹ On the first perspective, cf. vg. LS 41E–F; on the second perspective, cf. LS 41B–D.

²² We may assume that Epictetus would agree with early Stoics that even if such individual eventually gives his assent to a *kataleptic* impression, this is not at all a sign of virtue, since his correct assent has been the result of mere chance.

²³ ὥς γὰρ ὁ Σωκράτης ἔλεγεν ἀνεξέταστον βίον μὴ ζῆν, οὕτως ἀνεξέταστον φαντασίαν μὴ παραδέχεσθαι, ἀλλὰ λέγειν, ἐκδεῖξαι, ἄφες ἰδῶ, τίς εἰ καὶ πόθεν ἔρχῃς, ὥς οἱ νυκτοφύλακες, δείξόν μοι τὰ συνθήματα, ἔχεις τὸ παρὰ τῆς φύσεως σύμβολον, ὃ δεῖ τὴν παραδεχθισομένην ἔχειν φαντασίαν.

²⁴ Cf. 1.20.6; 2.18.24; 3.22.104.

²⁵ τοῦτο ἔργον τοῦ φιλοσόφου τὸ μέγιστον καὶ πρῶτον δοκιμᾶζειν τὰς φαντασίας καὶ διακρίνειν καὶ μηδεμίαν ἀδοκιμαστον προσφέρειν.

Unlike the vicious individual, Epictetus' moral progressor does not assent to impressions as soon as they come to his mind, but rather stops to examine them (*diakrinō*, *dokimazō*)²⁶ before assenting to or rejecting them. As is evident, this involves a shift from the purely descriptive perspective to the normative one; in this case, the exercise of a 'well considered assent' (*synkatathesin aproptōton*; 2.8.29) becomes the criterion by which to measure the epistemic (and moral) quality of the individual as well as the regulative ideal to which we should aim in all our actions²⁷. Therefore, the core of Epictetus' teaching is as follows: however persuasive an impression may seem to be, we must first check its persuasive force, not allowing it to influence us; we should turn it upside down, examine, and test it until we are certain that it is a true impression.

From the pedagogical perspective, this *demand*²⁸ for a critical examination of impressions – which I shall refer to as **DC** – is not merely a demand for a Socratic self-examination (if it were just that, it could hardly be singled out as one of Epictetus' innovations): although a process of examination of the set of beliefs we hold is, as we shall see, an integral part

²⁶ Cf. 1.7.7; 2.8.21; 2.22.20; 2.23.7; 3.26.13.

²⁷ Salles (2007:253–5) points out that 3.3.4 might seem to contradict the idea that 'a critical examination of first impressions is indeed *constitutive* of full rationality in practical contexts'. The beginning of the passage (*euthus*) suggests that there is a virtually *automatic* response to an impression, provided that it is a 'clear impression of good'. Given that the passage does not focus on the rash assent of the vicious individual, it might be taken to mean that there is *no critical assessment at all* of an impression before assenting to it, given that we assent *euthus*. Salles states that it is not necessary to accept such interpretation, because the passage does not preclude 'that some examination be required to determine whether a given impression is kataleptic or clear in the first place' (Salles 2007, 253–4). Although I agree with this answer, I believe that when we read 3.3.4 together with 4.1.134–7, some doubt is cast on the assumption that evaluation of impressions is a necessary condition for optimal rationality. Nonetheless, there is no explicit evidence that Epictetus agreed with the early Stoic sources that the Stoic sage does not (necessarily) examine his impressions in virtue of his optimal epistemic disposition. It is true that this lack of evidence could be due to the fact that (as has often been pointed out) Epictetus is not concerned with the ideal picture of the wise person but with the middle ground of the individual who is making progress towards virtue. The fact remains, however, that no unambiguous evidence can be put forward – as far as I can see – to settle the question.

²⁸ Although I agree with Long's remark (2002, 108–9) that this demand takes the form of a conditional statement ('If you want to be free, then ...') rather than a universal imperative, I believe that this is a purely rhetorical device, which aims at stressing not only the reward that awaits us if we follow Epictetus but also the sacrifices that we have to make in order to achieve the proposed goal. This seems to me to be so even in the case of 3.5.8–13, which Long interprets as 'a strong discouragement of the faint-hearted'.

of Epictetus' moral therapy²⁹, DC requires more than that. It demands a complete alertness concerning our impressions, and that we be constantly on guard against every impression that comes to us, systematically distrusting what they pretend to ascertain of the world around us³⁰.

2 Epictetus' techniques of repetition and intellectualism

Throughout Arrian's records of Epictetus' discourses, we encounter on numerous occasions a psychological principle expressed in a variety of ways. Under one description, it states that every action is the result of the *opinions* or *beliefs* we hold; under another, our opinions or beliefs³¹ are signalled as the *only* possible cause of our actions; under a third alternative, it is suggested that we cannot possibly follow a specific course of action *unless* we have considered it to be worth pursuing³². As is evident, all of these expressions are just variations on the general theme of an intellectualist conception of agency or, more specifically, on the basic model of human action stated earlier, i.e., the idea that each action consists of a sequence of impression, assent and impulse. However, these variations each carry considerable weight, because each of them is designed to emphasize one of many logical consequences deriving from an intellectualist conception of human action, including stating that our actions are determined by our beliefs does not imply that there is no other possible source for it (vg. a non rational or non cognitive element, such as an appetitive part of the soul); stating that our opinions or beliefs determine our actions could fail to put across the idea that every time we act, we actually assent to a certain impression concerning the appropriateness of that course of action, and so on. The sum of Epictetus' expressions on the psychology of human action (which could perhaps be condensed in the idea that an act of assent to a given impression is the *exclusive* and *necessary* – but not sufficient³³ – condition that must be met for an impulse to act to take place) constitutes

²⁹ Cf. esp. 1.11, one of the most Socratic moments in the *Discourses*.

³⁰ As a complement to Salles 2007, cf. Bartsch 2007; Inwood 1985, 83–4.

³¹ I take Epictetus' usage of *dogmata* and *doxai* in epistemic contexts as a shorthand for the sequence impression-assent (such as in 1.11.28–38; 1.17.26; 1.18.3–4; 1.19.7; 1.29.3; 2.26.6–7; 3.2.12; 3.3.18–19; 3.5.4; 3.9.2–13; 3.23.9; 4.1.110; 4.10.36; 4.11.6–8).

³² 'To desire, or to avoid, or to choose, or to refuse, or to prepare, or to set something before yourself, what man among you can do these things without first conceiving an impression of what is profitable, or what is not appropriate? *ὁρέγεσθαι δ' ἢ ἐκκλίνειν ἢ ὁρμαῖν ἢ ἀφορμαῖν ἢ παρασκευάζεσθαι ἢ προτίθεσθαι τίς ὑμῶν δύναται μὴ λαβῶν φαντασίαν λυσιτελοῦς ἢ μὴ καθήκοντος*' (3.22.43).

³³ Our assent is not a *sufficient* condition for an impulse to occur because of the existence of non-hormetic impressions.

what is, perhaps, the most detailed, profound and systematic account of human agency considered from within an intellectualist framework. This is, incidentally, one of the reasons why it becomes all the more interesting to analyze the consistency of Epictetus conception of human action).

One of the variations we find on the central intellectualist theme is, for reasons we will immediately see, particularly noteworthy:

The instant the good appears it attracts the soul to itself, while the evil repels the soul from itself. A soul will never reject a clear impression of good.³⁴ (3.3.4)

As long as a man does not understand that he is involved in contradiction, there is nothing to prevent him from doing contradictory things, but when he has come to understand the contradiction, he must of necessity abandon and avoid it, just as a bitter necessity compels a man to renounce the false when he perceives that it is false.³⁵ (2.26.3)

Just as it is impossible to assent to what is seen to be false, and to reject what is true, so it is impossible to reject what is seen to be good.³⁶ (3.7.14–15)

‘Cannot a man ... think that something is profitable to him, and yet not choose it?’ He cannot.³⁷ (1.28.6–7)

Although it is not entirely clear from the evidence that the *Discourses* provide what this idea implies when considering the case of non-hormetic impressions³⁸, the underlying thought becomes clear when we consider hormetic impressions (as is clear from the passages just quoted, those are the impressions that Epictetus has in mind): whenever we consider a certain impression to be truthfully portraying a certain course of action, an impulse to act according to what is stated by that impression will necessarily take place in the soul. In other words, we cannot help but choose what appears to us to be precisely worth choosing.

Although this is, as I said, just a variation on the main intellectualist theme (a variation Long has significantly termed Epictetus’ ‘optimistic rationalism’; Long 2002, 100), there are two reasons why this particular form of expression is noteworthy. First, it seems to contradict the existence of a human capacity of withholding assent, even to those impressions that appear to be truthful at first sight, which, as I claimed pre-

³⁴ τὸ ἀγαθὸν φανὲν εὐθὺς ἐκίνησεν ἐφ’ αὐτό, τὸ κακὸν ἂφ’ αὐτοῦ. οὐδέποτε δ’ ἀγαθοῦ φαντασίαν ἐναργῆ ἀποδοκιμάσει ψυχὴ.

³⁵ μέχρι μὲν ἂν μὴ παρακολουθῇ τούτῳ, ὅτι ἐν μάχῃ ἐστίν, οὐδὲν καλύπεται τὰ μαχόμενα ποιεῖν. παρακολουθήσαντα δὲ πολλὴ ἀνάγκη ἀποστήναι τῆς μάχης καὶ φυγεῖν οὕτως ὡς καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ψεύδους ἀνανεῦσαι πικρὰ ἀνάγκη τῷ αἰσθανομένῳ, ὅτι ψεύδός ἐστιν.

³⁶ ὡς γὰρ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τῷ ψευδεῖ φαινομένῳ συγκαταθέσθαι καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀπονεῦσαι, οὕτως ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τοῦ φαινομένου ἀγαθοῦ ἀποστήναι.

³⁷ οὐ δύναται οὖν τις δοκεῖν μὲν, ὅτι συμφέρει αὐτῷ, μὴ αἰρεῖσθαι δ’ αὐτός. οὐ δύναται.

³⁸ What, indeed, would it mean to say, vg., that once we have assented to the idea that the whole is bigger than the part we cannot reject it or that or that we will renounce to the contrary idea once we perceive that it is false?

vously, is a necessary condition for DC to make sense. Second, if we interpret literally the passages quoted above, i.e., as stating that there is an automatic or nearly mechanical nexus between my act of considering an impression to be truthful and the impulse to act in accordance with what it describes, such a contradiction cannot be denied. If so, we must either acknowledge the presence of a serious problem between Epictetus' psychology of action and his moral therapy or put DC into question.

I believe, however, that DC does not need to be questioned as a legitimate therapeutical strategy. Furthermore, the internal consistency of Epictetus' psychology can be preserved if we interpret those passages not as stating that we will immediately and necessarily act accordingly (once we have considered that X is the correct course of action), but rather, that our action will not contradict the impression we have assented to when (and if) we eventually decide to act. In other words, we cannot act contrary to our better judgement. If we interpret those passages in this way, we are making room for the possibility that we may voluntarily refrain from assenting to a certain impression, and yet not be able to act contrary to it as long as we have not ruled it out as false. In other words, *when* I act, my action is the result of my having assented to the idea that the chosen course of action is the most appropriate, but this does not entail that I will be forced to follow it *the instant* I have the impression that a certain course of action is the most appropriate. Consequently, it becomes possible that I may hesitate about the reliability of the impression and withhold my assent (even indefinitely).

The other reason why that particular expression of Epictetus' intellectualist approach to human action is worth considering is that it seems to conflict with an important number of passages both from the *Discourses* and from the *Enchiridion*:

'If Thou sendest me to a place where men have no means of living in accordance with nature, I shall depart this life, not in disobedience to Thee, but as though Thou wert sounding for me the recall. I do not abandon Thee – far be that from me! But I perceive that Thou hast no need of me. Yet if there be vouchsafed a means of living in accordance with nature, I will seek no other place than that in which I am, or other men than those who are now my associates'. Have thoughts like these ready at hand by night and by day; write them, read them, make your conversation about them, communing with yourself, or saying to another, 'Can you give me some help in this matter?' And again, go now to one man and now to another. Then, if some one of those things happens which are called undesirable, immediately the thought that it was not unexpected will be the first thing to lighten the burden.³⁹ (3.24.101–103)

³⁹ ἂν μ' ἐκεῖ πέμπῃς, ὅπου κατὰ φύσιν διεξαγωγή οὐκ ἔστιν ἀνθρώπων, οὐ σοὶ ἀπειθῶν ἐξείμι, ἀλλ' ὥς σοῦ μοι σημαίνοντος τὸ ἀνακλητικόν. οὐκ ἀπολείπω σε. μὴ γένοιτο. ἀλλ' αἰσθάνομαι, ὅτι μου χρεῖαν οὐκ ἔχεις. ἂν δὲ διδῶται κατὰ φύσιν διεξαγωγή, οὐ ζητήσω ἄλλον τόπον ἢ ἐν ᾧ εἰμὶ ἢ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους ἢ μεθ' ὧν εἰμὶς. Ταῦτα νυκτός, ταῦτα ἡμέρας

If you have these thoughts always at hand and go over them again and again in your own mind and keep them in readiness, you will never need a person to console you, or strengthen you.⁴⁰ (3.24.115)

Any reader familiar with the *Discourses* or the *Enchiridion* knows that these passages represent some of the multiple expressions of a strategy that is recurrent throughout both works, because the technique of repetition constitutes not only a central element of Epictetus' rhetorical repertoire, but also one of the main techniques that he encourages his students to apply when dealing with the founding principles of Stoic ethics:

That is why I say over and over again, 'Practice these things and have them ready at hand, that is, the knowledge of what you ought to face with confidence, and what you ought to face with caution – that you ought to face with confidence that which is outside the province of the *proairesis*, with caution that which is within the province of the *proairesis*.'⁴¹ (2.1.29–30)

'What aid, then, must we have ready at hand in such circumstances?' Why, what else than the knowledge of what is mine, and what is not mine, and what is permitted me, and what is not permitted me? I must die: must I, then, die groaning too? I must be fettered: and wailing too? I must go into exile: does anyone, then, keep me from going with a smile and cheerful and serene? 'Tell your secrets.' I say not a word; for this is under my control, 'But I will fetter you.' What is that you say, man? Fetter me? My leg you will fetter, but my *proairesis* not even Zeus himself has power to overcome. 'I will throw you into prison.' My paltry body, rather! 'I will behead you.' Well, when did I ever tell you that mine was the only neck that could not be severed? These are the lessons that philosophers ought to rehearse, these they ought to write down daily, in these they ought to exercise themselves.⁴² (1.1.21–25⁴³)

πρόχειρα ἔστω· ταῦτα γράφειν, ταῦτα ἀναγιγνώσκειν· περὶ τούτων τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι, αὐτὸν πρὸς αὐτόν, πρὸς ἕτερον, μὴ τι ἔχεις μοι πρὸς τοῦτο βοηθῆσαι; καὶ πάλιν ἄλλω· προσελθεῖν καὶ ἄλλω. εἴτα ἂν τι γένηται τῶν λεγομένων ἀβουλήτων, εὐθὺς ἐκεῖνο πρῶτον ἐπικουφίσσεις, ὅτι οὐκ ἀπροσδόκητον.

⁴⁰ Ταῦτα ἔχων αἰεὶ ἐν χερσὶ καὶ τρίβων αὐτὸς παρὰ σαντῶ καὶ πρόχειρα ποιῶν οὐδέποτε δεήσει τοῦ παραμυθουμένου, τοῦ ἐπιρρωννύντος.

⁴¹ Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω πολλάκις, ταῦτα μελετᾶτε καὶ ταῦτα πρόχειρα ἔχετε, πρὸς τίνα δεῖ τεθαρρηκεῖν καὶ πρὸς τίνα εὐλαβῶς διακείσθαι, ὅτι πρὸς τὰ ἀπροαίρετα θαρρεῖν, εὐλαβεῖσθαι τὰ προαιρετικά.

⁴² Τί οὖν δεῖ πρόχειρον ἔχειν ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις; τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἢ τί ἐμὸν καὶ τί οὐκ ἐμὸν καὶ τί μοι ἔξεστιν καὶ τί μοι οὐκ ἔξεστιν; ἀποθανεῖν με δεῖ· μὴ τι οὖν καὶ στένοντα; δεθῆναι· μὴ τι καὶ θρηγνύοντα; φυγαδευθῆναι· μὴ τις οὖν κωλύει γελῶντα καὶ εὐθυμοῦντα καὶ εὖρο οὔντα; εἰπέ τὰ ἀπόρρητα· οὐ λέγω· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐπ' ἐμοὶ ἐστίν., ἄλλα δῆσω σε· ἄνθρωπε· τί λέγεις; ἐμέ; τὸ σκελος μου δῆσεις, τὴν προαίρεσιν δὲ οὐδ' ὁ Ζεὺς νικῆσαι δύναται., εἰς φυλακὴν σε βαλῶς τὸ σμάτιον., ἀποκεφαλίσω σε· πότε οὖν σοι εἶπον, ὅτι μόνου ἐμοῦ ὁ τράχηλος ἀναπότμητός ἐστιν; ταῦτα ἔδει μελετᾶν τοὺς φιλοσοφοῦντας, ταῦτα καθ' ἡμέραν γράφειν, ἐν τούτοις γυμνάζεσθαι.

⁴³ Three additional passages are worth reading in this context, which I cannot quote *in extenso* due to their length: 2.16.1–4, 3.3.14–16, and 4.1.111–13. All of these apply

The logical problem between these therapeutic exercises and the intellectualist approach to human action described earlier is evident: given that we cannot reject the truthfulness of an impression once we see it, what is the rationale behind Epictetus' demand that we expose ourselves to a reiteration of one and the same principle 'from morning till evening' (4.1.111), whether it be through his preaching or through the exercise of repeating something to ourselves over and over again? In other words: when I am confronted with a true impression, I either grasp its truth or I do not; if I do, what need is there for me to repeat it over and over to myself? What is the use of rehearsing if I have already accepted it as true (or rejected it as false)? To exhort me to adopt those practices, and to make of that exhortation a central element of the pedagogical enterprise of moral and epistemic improvement either points to the presence of non-cognitive elements in the sequence of human action, or to a deep conflict between Epictetus' psychology and his moral therapy. At this point, it is worthwhile to quote Tad Brennan on this point, since he has unveiled the most critical aspect of the problem:

Some of the methods envisioned by Epictetan *askēsis* should prompt us to ask the general question: Can cognitive theorists help themselves to just any possible means of behavior modification, while still claiming that what they are attempting to do is to reshape beliefs? What if they claim that our actions are the result of a belief that we do not avow and are unaware of having, and further claim that we cannot rid ourselves of this putative belief, even in principle, except by the use of electric shocks? What sort of a belief is this, when it can only be altered this way? We should at least be disappointed when the bright Socratic hope of rationally arguing our way to virtue is replaced by the grim Epictetan tedium of catechetical pushups; in time, I think we should also be deeply skeptical of the theoretical coherence of the underlying conceptions of psychology and rationality. It is a plausible rule of thumb that what can only be altered by non-rational means is a non-rational state; even if we reject it as too simplistic, we must still ask what in detail separates cognitivism of the Stoic sort from a full Platonic acceptance of irrational parts of the soul, when our means of altering the dispositions for behavior amount to the same thing in each case. (Brennan 2003, 278–279)⁴⁴

However, I believe that 'the grim Epictetan tedium of catechetical push-ups' does not present a logical problem for his intellectualist approach to

the principle of repetition to the exercise of evaluating whether each event we are faced with belongs to the sphere of proairesis or not and, hence, whether they are something that has to do with us or not. Cf. also 2.18.

⁴⁴ A tempting (more charitable) reading of the *Discourses* would consist of judging Epictetus' problematic techniques not as contradictory with his intellectualism but merely as an *unnecessary* exercise. However, the ubiquity in both the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* of the techniques of repetition makes that reading untenable: if those techniques are unnecessary, why does Epictetus rely on them so frequently and so strongly?

human action; likewise, I believe that it operates as a necessary complement to DC, which I will try to demonstrate later. To understand why this is so, however, it is necessary to go back to DC and address a fundamental question: What does it mean to examine an impression?

3 The techniques of repetition and the demand for a critical examination of impressions

Whether or not we critically examine our impressions before assenting to or rejecting them, that act is not the operation of a neutral, transcendental faculty which might be considered to be independent from our epistemic history. More importantly, it is not an evaluation of the impression *in isolation*. Concerning the first aspect, every act of assessing an impression is done *on the basis* of the judgements or opinions that constitute our soul (which are actually impressions we have assented to in the past). Concerning the second aspect, the act of *examining* an impression that comes to our mind is not to evaluate it in terms of logical consistency, but rather to *confront* it with the opinions and beliefs we hold and, by doing so, to evaluate whether it contradicts them or not⁴⁵. As a consequence, whether or not we assent to an impression depends largely on the beliefs we confront it with:

If your judgments are right, you will fare well, and if they are wrong, ill: for, in every case, the way a man fares is determined by his judgment. For what made you desire to be elected patron of the Cnossians? Your judgment. And what prompts you now to go to Rome? Your judgment. And in wintry weather, too, and at some risk and expense? Why, because it is necessary. What tells you so? Your judgment. If, then, judgments are the causes of all our actions, whenever anyone has bad judgments, the outcome will correspond to the cause. Well, then, are all our judgments sound? Are both yours and your opponent's? How is it, then, that you disagree? Or is it that you are right and he is wrong? Why? Because you think so; and so does he, and so do madmen. This is a bad criterion. But show me that you have made some examination of your judgments and taken some care over them. ... A person only meets a man as a man only when he comes to understand his judgments and exposes his own in return. Discover my judgments, and show me your own, and then say that you have met me. Let us cross-examine one

⁴⁵ As an extension of the last expression that I emphasized as regards the intellectualist approach, Epictetus assumes that once the agent perceives that a certain impression contradicts his present set of beliefs, he will immediately reject it. Of course – and this is the key warning – a certain impression may contradict one or several of our opinions without our being aware of it, which holds most clearly for the case of precipitate assent; in comparison, as mentioned earlier, the agent assents to any impression that comes to his mind, without stopping to examine it.

another; if any of my judgments is bad, take it away, if you have any that you value, put it forward.⁴⁶ (3.9.2–13)

If we consider the evidence provided by an important number of passages that are similar in content and style to the one just quoted, Epictetus might seem to believe that our judgments *directly* determine our actions. A similar pattern can be found in Epictetus' recourse to a more radical ellipsis, that is, when referring to the sequence of impression-assent-action, we find that, instead of stating that a certain agent did something because he *assented* to a certain impression, Epictetus merely states that he did it because he *had* that impression (cf. 2.26.2–6; 2.17.18–20). The idea appears to be rather straightforward and consistent with the deterministic framework of the school: I cannot consider glory and reputation as something valuable and yet decline an award (however unmerited it may be); I cannot believe material things to be conducive to happiness and decline a promotion (however corroding it may be to the quality of my family life)⁴⁷. Epictetus' warning on this issue seems clear: *watch your judgments*⁴⁸. For once a certain set of beliefs is fixed within us, our actions will be a direct consequence of them⁴⁹.

How far can we push this reasoning? Is there no way out of the vicious cycle it seems to condemn us to concerning our moral quality? Certainly, to state (as I have previously done) that our acts of assent are based

⁴⁶ εἰ μὲν ὀρθὰ δόγματα ἔχεις, καλῶς, εἰ δὲ φαῦλα, κακῶς. παντὶ γὰρ αἴτιον τοῦ πράσσειν τι δόγμα. τί γάρ ἐστιν, ὃ ἐπεθύμησας προστάτης χειροτονηθῆναι Κνωσίαν; τὸ δόγμα. τί ἐστιν, δι' ὃ νῦν εἰς Πρώμην ἀνέρξῃ; τὸ δόγμα. καὶ μετὰ χειμῶνος καὶ κινδύνου καὶ ἀναλωμάτων; -Ανάγκη γάρ ἐστιν. -Τίς σοι λέγει τοῦτο; τὸ δόγμα. οὐκοῦν εἰ πάντων αἰτία τὰ δόγματα, φαῦλα δὲ τίς ἔχει δόγματα, οἷον ἂν ἢ τὸ αἴτιον, τοιοῦτον καὶ τὸ ἀποτελούμενον. ἄρ' οὐν πάντες ἔχομεν ὑγιῆ δόγματα καὶ σὺ καὶ ὁ ἀντίδικός σου; καὶ πῶς διαφέρεσθε; ἀλλὰ σὺ μᾶλλον ἢ ἐκεῖνος; διὰ τί; δοκεῖ σοι. κακείνῳ καὶ τοῖς μαινομένοις. τοῦτο πονηρὸν κριτήριον. ἀλλὰ δείχόν μοι, ὅτι ἐπίσκεψίν τινα καὶ ἐπιμέλειαν πεποιήσαι τῶν σαντοῦ δογμάτων ... ἀνθρώπῳ δ' ὡς ἀνθρώπῳ συμβάλλει ὁ τὰ δόγματα αὐτοῦ καταμανθάνων καὶ ἐν τῷ μέρει τὰ ἴδια δεικνύων. κατὰμαθέ μου τὰ δόγματα, δείχόν μοι τὰ σὰ καὶ οὕτως λέγε συμβεβληκέναι μοι. ἐλέγχωμεν ἀλλήλους· εἴ τι ἔχω κακὸν δόγμα, ἄφελε αὐτό. εἴ τι ἔχεις, θές εἰς τὸ μέσον. τοῦτό ἐστι φιλοσόφῳ συμβάλλειν.

⁴⁷ Cf. 3.8.15–16.

⁴⁸ Considered from this perspective, this is not only a powerful warning – it is, at the same time, an expression of Epictetus' strongly optimistic outlook on our chances of reaching a virtuous life, that is, if we manage to cast away our vicious judgments, we will instantly have reached imperturbability, *euroia* and *eudaimonia* (Cf. 4.5.25–8).

⁴⁹ Robert Dobbin calls this principle *ethical or psychological determinism*. Although he does not state it in terms of *assent* to impressions, the formulations he provides are equivalent to what I suggest by ED: 'all our actions are determined by our judgments' (Dobbin 2008, 131) or by our opinions (136); 'impulses are strictly conditioned by our perception of the good, the appropriate, etc.' (218); 'it is the soul's nature always to accept the truth' (220).

on the *beliefs we hold* is not equivalent to the claim that my actions are *caused* by the impressions that come to my mind or by my beliefs or opinions. If the *dogmata* that constitute our souls are the cause of our actions, those of us who have vicious *dogmata* necessarily fare well, and those who have correct *dogmata* (only) perform virtuous actions. The consequences are evident and extremely serious, for, in the first place, the possibility of moral progress (as I stated before) disappears altogether, and, in the second place, the instance of assent seems to become completely idle and dispensable, turning all of Epictetus verbal displays about assent being up to us into completely void claims.

That these consequences are not legitimate is fairly obvious, and both of Epictetus' ellipses concerning the sequence of human action comprise a shorthand (completely consistent with the orthodox conception of agency) for the idea that every one of our actions is the result of our *assent* to a given impression⁵⁰. However, this does not mean that those strategies can be interpreted as *mere* rhetorical devices, which would be somehow distorting the truth for didactic reasons. What this means is that given a certain epistemic disposition (i.e., a certain set of *dogmata*), whether we assent to a certain impression, reject it, or withhold our assent will depend on the disposition of our soul at that moment. Furthermore, even in the case where my epistemic disposition caused withhold my assent, such assent or rejection will also be determined by that disposition whether I finally assent to or reject it after careful scrutiny. In other words, there is only *one possible alternative* when faced with an impression, and that alternative is determined by our epistemic disposition⁵¹.

If we go back to Epictetus' demand for a critical examination of our impression and to the idea that ought implies can, a serious problem seems to arise, which is that, if our acts of assent are an expression of our epistemic disposition, DC seems to make no sense from a practical point of view, because whether or not I critically examine my impressions before assenting to them depends on my epistemic disposition. However, this

⁵⁰ The claim that our actions are determined by our *dogmata* does not make sense at all on its own, as it might seem to imply that no impression is needed to set in motion the mental processes that will lead to an action.

⁵¹ On the question of free will and on the idea of epistemic determinism (or ethical determinism, as Dobbin calls it), cf. Dobbin 1991, Bobzien 1998b, 160–1; Long 1996a, 189–92; 2002, 210–22; 2006, 385–6; Dragona-Monachou 2007; Hahm 1992. The bibliography on these issues in early Stoicism is immense; cf. among others, Frede 2006; Gould 1974; Long 1996a; Reesor 1965; Sharples 1986. Cf. Chrysippus' account of human action in Aulus Gellius, *Noctes atticae*, 7.2.6–13 [LS 62D] and Alexander's and Nemesius' criticisms (fully justified from an indeterminist standpoint) in Alexander, *De fato*, 196.22–197.2 and Nemesius, *De natura hominis*, 34.46–9.

problem is completely illusory; although it is true that whether or not we exercise a critical assessment of our impressions before assenting to or rejecting them depends on our epistemic disposition, it is also true that that disposition can be changed. Given that our epistemic disposition is nothing other than the set of beliefs we hold (both the impressions we have assented to in the past and our preconceptions), a change in our beliefs will have, as a consequence, a change in the quality of our assents⁵².

The decisive change that needs to take place in the epistemic disposition of the individual who is striving towards moral progress is the understanding of the principle that our impressions must not be trusted, and that, as a consequence, we must not rush our decision to assent. Once this has become a part of my epistemic disposition, not exactly as a habit or a disposition, but rather as a *belief* I hold, as a conviction, the otherwise mechanic direction of my future acts of assent or rejection will no longer constitute the only 'scope of what it is open to us to do' (Long 1996b, 278). As is evident, this does not amount to any breach in the causal nexus, because my acts of assent will still be an expression of my present epistemic disposition⁵³. However, the otherwise circular relationship between vicious *dogmata* and vicious actions will be broken, and one of the necessary conditions for the vicious agent to start performing virtuous actions will be fulfilled.

It is precisely this last idea that justifies the urgent tone in Epictetus' exhortation for an epistemic and moral reformation; it also explains why (and how) the Socratic process of self-examination becomes a process of purification (*katharsis*⁵⁴) of our judgements or beliefs. To achieve such goal, a careful scrutiny of our beliefs is required, which entails *i*) detecting which of our beliefs are false, *ii*) eradicating them, and *iii*) replacing them with correct beliefs⁵⁵. However, this does not amount to a mere search for

⁵² Although Epictetus does not *explicitly* address the issue of whether we would assent otherwise if our epistemic dispositions are different, the main drive behind his overall pedagogical enterprise is precisely to help his students modify their vicious epistemic dispositions, so that they may achieve freedom. Cf. 1.18.2–3; 1.28.1–9; 2.26.2–6; 3.3.2–4; 3.7.14–15; 3.22.43.

⁵³ Epictetus is not concerned with excluding *all* sources of determination from human action (either actual or ideal). Quite on the contrary, it is perhaps his main objective to show that a free action cannot be other than an action that proceeds from correct determinations. Although he takes great pains to show that external factors cannot possibly determine our thoughts and actions, given that our interaction with them is always *mediated* by our impressions and assents, he does not, in doing so, erase every source of determination; he just moves it from the outside to the interior of the mind. Thus construed, freedom becomes tantamount to *auto-nomy* (and not *a-nomy*), because it is the agent (or, more specifically, his *proairesis*) that determines the *nomoi* by which his actions are to be guided (Cf. 1.19.7; 4.12.12).

⁵⁴ Cf. 2.21.15; 4.9.11.

⁵⁵ Cf. 3.3.19; 3.5.4; 4.6.14.

internal *consistency*: an objective criterion is present in every one of us in the form of our preconceptions (*prolēpseis*⁵⁶) of what is right and wrong, and it is this criterion which becomes the scale, the canon against which the rest of our present beliefs and future impressions must be evaluated or measured⁵⁷. Without this internal objective standard, moral progress would be impossible, as true impressions would be immediately and necessarily rejected by the vicious agent on account of its being in conflict with the wrong beliefs that constitute his soul⁵⁸.

Apart from the process of analyzing our *dogmata*, eradicating the false ones and substituting them for correct ones, there is a second aspect in the enterprise of *epimeleia*, which consists in ensuring that the correct judgements or beliefs are ready 'at hand' (*procheiros*), so that the impressions that come to the soul may not catch us off guard:

To meet sophistic arguments we must have the processes of logic and the exercise and the familiarity with these; against the plausibilities of things we must have our preconceptions clear, polished like weapons, and ready at hand.⁵⁹ (1.27.6)

Here are the two principles that you ought to have ready at hand: 'Outside the sphere of the *proairesis* there is nothing either good or bad;' and 'We ought not to lead events, but to follow them'.⁶⁰ (3.10.18)

Whenever some disturbing news is reported to you, you ought to have ready at hand the following principle: News, on any subject, never falls within the sphere of the *proairesis*. Can anyone bring you word that you have been wrong in an assumption or in a desire?⁶¹ (3.18.1–2)

This second aspect provides us with an altogether different perspective, because it does not focus on whether we hold a certain belief or have assented to a certain impression in the past, but rather, it focuses on its

⁵⁶ Cf. especially 1.22 and 2.11. A recent analysis of the notion of *prolēpseis* can be found in Dyson 2009.

⁵⁷ It is the existence of this objective and universal standard that allows Epictetus to state that 'every error involves a contradiction; πᾶν ἀμάρτημα μάχην περιέχει' (2.26.1).

⁵⁸ Otherwise, assenting to an objectively false impression would constitute an act of virtue. Such is the case, curiously, for Spinoza, who has, at least partially, done away with every objective (transcendent) standard by which to measure our actions, and states that 'in relation to such a perverted human nature, crimes would be virtues' (Letter 23 to Blyenbergh, 1665).

⁵⁹ πρὸς τοὺς σοφιστικούς λόγους τὰ λογικὰ καὶ τὴν ἐν τούτοις γυμνασίαν καὶ τριβὴν, πρὸς τὰς τῶν πραγμάτων πιθανότητας τὰς προλήψεις ἐναργεῖς ἐσημνημένας καὶ προχείρους ἔχειν δεῖ.

⁶⁰ δύο γὰρ ταῦτα πρόχειρα ἔχειν δεῖ· ὅτι ἔξω τῆς προαιρέσεως οὐδὲν ἐστὶν οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακὸν καὶ ὅτι οὐ δεῖ προηγέσθαι τῶν πραγμάτων, ἀλλ' ἐπακολουθεῖν.

⁶¹ Όταν σοί τι προσαγγελθῇ ταρακτικόν, ἐκεῖνο ἔχε πρόχειρον, ὅτι ἀγγελία περὶ οὐδενὸς προαιρετικοῦ γίνεται. μή τι γὰρ δύναται σοί τις ἀγγεῖλαι, ὅτι κακῶς ὑπέλαβες ἢ κακῶς ὠρέχθης.

availability (i.e., if it is within reach)⁶², or if it conforms to the set of beliefs against which our future impressions will be evaluated⁶³. All of this implies, as is evident, that not all the impressions we have assented to in the past are equally available at every moment, i.e., that not all of our beliefs are at hand whenever we are confronted by an impression⁶⁴:

What does it mean, then, that I have heard the words of the philosophers and assent to them, but that in actual fact my burdens have become no lighter? [...] Can it be [...] that reason has not convinced me? Why, indeed, there is nothing to which I have so given my approval from the very first, or so preferred, and now I read about these matters, and hear them, and write about them. Down to this moment we have not found a stronger argument than this. What is it, then, that I yet lack? Can it be that the contrary opinions have not all been put away? Can it be that the thoughts themselves are unexercised and unaccustomed to face the facts,

⁶² Epictetus' frequent usage of the expression '*memnēso*' ('Remember that...', 'Remember to...') -noted by Hijmans 1959, 69–70 and Brennan 2003, 278–9- should be interpreted as an expression of this idea.

⁶³ For an interesting projection of this idea in contemporary cognitive psychology, cf. Tversky and Kahneman's notion of 'availability bias' in Tversky and Kahneman 1974.

⁶⁴ A very likely objection would be to claim that if the agent had really *grasped* the truth of a certain impression, i.e., if he had acquired a *true knowledge* (*epistēmē*) of it, then that knowledge would not need to be 'freshened' – so to speak – or 'kept alive' through any therapeutic strategy. This objection seems to be completely legitimate if we believe that Epictetus has not deviated from early Stoicism on epistemological issues, and I do not see any reason why we should doubt his orthodoxy on this matter. However, as already stated, Epictetus' interests do not lie in the ideal figure of the sage, but in the individual who is making progress. This individual is an agent who may never reach such a degree of certainty of knowledge, i.e., one who may never *fully grasp* the truth or falsehood of any impression, and who may be condemned to dwell forever in the land of the *doxai*. That this is so becomes most clear when we consider not only Epictetus' relative disregard for the distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa*, but also his more realistic attitude concerning the third field of study, which consists in achieving such a security in our beliefs or assents 'that even in dreams, or drunkenness, or a state of melancholy-madness, a man may not be taken unaware by the appearance of an untested impression' (3.2.5). Cf. Hadot 1978; Gill 2006, 380–90; Long 2002, 112–18. It is particularly illustrative on this issue to contrast a passage from Sextus Empiricus with one of the few passages from the *Discourses*, where Epictetus hints at the idea of a weak assent: in LS 41C Sextus states the early Stoic distinction between *doxa* and *epistēmē*, and defines the former as a 'weak and false assent' (*tēn asthenē kai pseudē sygkatathesin*). In *Discourses* 3.16.7–10, on the contrary, Epictetus admonishes one of his students for merely paying 'lip service' to the principles of Stoic ethics, without those ideas being secure (*asphalēs*) or 'firmly fixed' (*pagos*) in his mind. What is curious in this passage is that Epictetus opposes this to the state shown by the laymen (*hoi idiōtai*), whose 'rotten talk' is stronger than his student's discourse, *because* it is based on *dogmaton*. Cf. also LS 41D, F, G.

and, like old pieces of armour that have been stowed away, are covered with rust, and can no longer be fitted to me?⁶⁵ (4.6.12–15)

The relevance of this second aspect of Epictetus' moral therapy is decisive: Epictetus knows that the act of examining an impression cannot possibly consist of a logical confrontation against the totality of our beliefs and opinions, but rather that the beliefs, the ideas against which the confrontation can take place, are merely a subset of that totality, which is why it becomes all the more pressing to make sure that the correct (and relevant) beliefs be at hand when it is time to deal with any given impression⁶⁶:

When the need arises for each separate belief, we ought to have it ready; at lunch our beliefs about lunch, at the bath our beliefs about a bath, in bed our beliefs about a bed. ... Again, in a fever have ready the beliefs which apply to that. Let us not, if we fall into a fever, abandon and forget all our principles, saying: "If I ever study philosophy again, let anything happen that will I I'll have to go away somewhere and take care of my poor body." Yes indeed, if fever does not go there too! But *what is philosophy?* Does it not mean *making preparation to meet the things that come upon us?*⁶⁷ (3.10.1–5)

Therefore, the reason why Epictetus' techniques of repetition do not stand in contradiction with his intellectualist approach to human action is that the goal of those techniques is not that the individual may *see* the truth of a certain impression, but rather that *certain* ideas (i.e., impressions which have been assented to and have thus become *dogmata*) be at hand, ready and available to become the background against which each new impression is to be tested⁶⁸. As is evident, however, these techniques do not stand

⁶⁵ τί οὖν τοῦτό ἐστιν, ὅτι τοὺς μὲν λόγους ἀκήκοα τοὺς τῶν φιλοσόφων καὶ συγκατατίθεμαι αὐτοῖς, ἔργῳ δ' οὐδὲν γέγονα κοφώτερος; ... μή τι οὖν οὐ πέπεικέ με ὁ λόγος; καὶ μὴν οὐκ ἄλλα τινὰ οὕτως ἔχ ἀρχῆς ἐδοκίμασα ἢ εἰλόμην καὶ νῦν περὶ τούτων ἀναγινώσκω, ταῦτα ἀκούω, ταῦτα γράφω. ἄλλον οὐχ εὐρήκαμεν μέχρι νῦν ἰσχυρότερον τούτου λόγον. τί οὖν τὸ λείπόν μοι ἐστίν; μὴ οὐκ ἐξήρηται τὰναντία δόγματα; μὴ αὐταὶ αἱ ὑπολήψεις ἀγύμναστοί εἰσιν οὐδ' εἰθισμένοι ἀπαντὰν ἐπὶ τὰ ἔργα, ἀλλ' ὥς ὀπλάρια ἀποκείμενα κατὰνται καὶ οὐδὲ περιαρμόσαι μοι δύναται.

⁶⁶ Concerning the *Ench.*, although the final selection of contents can be seriously questioned when we consider whether it is representative or not of Epictetus' actual priorities, the fact remains that Arrian's *decision* to produce such a selection, a manual to be kept 'at hand', reflects that he deeply grasped this dimension of his teacher's pedagogical project.

⁶⁷ Ἐκάστου δόγματος ὅταν ἡ χρεία παρῇ, πρόχειρον αὐτὸ ἔχειν δεῖ· ἐπ' ἀρίστῳ τὰ περὶ ἀρίστου, ἐν βαλανεῖω τὰ περὶ βαλανείου, ἐν κοίτῃ τὰ περὶ κοίτης. καὶ τούτους τοὺς στίχους κατέχειν χρηστικῶς, οὐχ ἵνα δι' αὐτῶν ἀναφωνώμεν, ὡς διὰ τοῦ Παιᾶν Απολλων. πάλιν ἐν πυρετῷ τὰ πρὸς τοῦτο· μή, ἂν πυρέξωμεν, ἀφιέναι πάντα καὶ ἐπιλανθάνεσθαι, ἂν ἐγὼ ἔτι φιλοσοφῶσω, ὃ θέλει γινέσθω. πού ποτ' ἀπελθόντα τοῦ σωματίου ἐπιμελεῖσθαι δεῖς εἰ γε καὶ πυρετὸς οὐκ ἔρχεται. τὸ δὲ φιλοσοφῆσαι τί ἐστίν; οὐχὶ παρασκευάσασθαι πρὸς τὰ συμβαίνοντα.

⁶⁸ Although these techniques have been analyzed by Hijmans in his reconstruction of Epictetus' moral therapy, I believe that there are two shortcomings in his approach:

on their own in Epictetus' global pedagogical enterprise, because they are entirely dependent on their content, i.e., on the ideas or principles⁶⁹ that are being exercised: it is not the act of repeating to ourselves *any* piece of knowledge that contributes to our moral progress; moreover, the goal of critically assenting *only to true impressions* can be reached only if the correct beliefs are at hand whenever we are faced with any given impression.

When we consider it under this light, the logical connection with DC becomes clearer. Even if we grant that a critical analysis of the impressions that come to my mind is a *necessary* condition for my actions (or at least my impulses⁷⁰) to be virtuous, it is certainly not a *sufficient* condition – after all, I can spend days or even months deliberating about whether the impression 'it is *kathēkon* to do X' is true or not, and yet end up assenting to the wrong alternative. For DC to become the source of a virtuous action, the process of examination must be completed on the basis of the correct 'measures and standards' (*metra kai kanonas*; 2.20.21), i.e., on the correct beliefs and judgements. It is this last fact which explains the *raison d'être* of Epictetus' techniques of repetition, because it is precisely their goal to make sure (or at least more *probable*) that it will be against the appropriate beliefs that the examination demanded by DC will be carried out.

first, he fails to acknowledge the general conflict between Epictetus' *askēsis* and his intellectualist conception of human agency, which is precisely the merit of Brennan's reading (whether this conflict is illusory or not is something that has to be decided case by case). Second, Hijmans considers that the practical justification for the techniques of repetition is 'their suggestive force' (Hijmans 1959, 69), which, unless a reason to the contrary is provided, might be interpreted as entailing a clear conflict with the intellectualist account of human action, because it would suggest that there is an element of irrationality that resists the rational grasp of the truth value of the impression. However, there is no evidence to support Hijman's claim: even if Epictetus contemplates in several places the distinction between a weak and a secure or unshaken assent, the question does not involve the issue of whether or not we have assented to them in a weak or secure manner, but whether they are now at hand, which are two independent aspects. Moreover, Epictetus insists that we must search for the correct way to make the other *see* the contradiction, which requires a constant search for the correct way to explain a certain principle; effort must also be exerted in trying different approaches depending on the target of our discourse, all of which are perspectives that remain well within the boundaries of rational argumentation. For the early Stoic treatment of the distinction between weak and secure assent, cf. Section 41 in Long-Sedley (especially 61D–I).

⁶⁹ In truth, the content of these techniques is basically one and the same throughout the whole of the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion*, to wit, the distinction between what belongs to the realm of our *proairesis* and what does not, which is the center around which the whole of Epictetus' reflexions are articulated.

⁷⁰ My impulses may fail to translate into action due to the presence of external hindrances. Cf. especially 4.1.66.

If this is the case, and if what I have presented so far is an accurate reconstruction of Epictetus' approach to human action, the techniques of repetition we find throughout the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* are not only perfectly compatible with Epictetus' intellectualist conception of agency, but also comprise a necessary condition for DC to have a virtuous outcome. Therefore, this aspect of Epictetus' reflections can be safely considered as one of the elements of a systematic project of moral therapy that, at least in this specific respect, does not show signs of inconsistency.

However, it is important to notice before we finish that Epictetus' techniques in ensuring that the right beliefs are at hand at the appropriate moment are not limited to the relationship with DC that I have just outlined: they also prove useful even when the sequence impression-assent is not mediated by a critical assessment of the testimony of our impressions. As stated earlier, Epictetus' concern does not lie in the possibility of achieving (or helping his students achieve) the ideal stage of perfect wisdom that partially guided early Stoic ethical reflection, but rather in the possibility of moral progress, which is considered a daily, ceaseless effort⁷¹ that is most likely never to be crowned by perfect wisdom. In this sense, Epictetus is well aware that on most of the occasions on which the *prokop-tōn* is faced with an impression, he will assent to or reject it before stopping to consider whether or not it is a true impression; he probably also perceives that, as a technique to applied daily, DC is extremely demanding and – to a certain degree – unfulfillable. As previously demonstrated, when we fail to stop to examine the impressions that come to our mind and assent to them as soon as they appear, that assent is being made in an automatic or spontaneous manner, and it is virtually a direct function of the beliefs that we possess at that moment. In comparison, this not so in the case of critical assent, because the very act of examining our impressions makes it possible that the direction of the way we would otherwise have assented may well be inverted. This is by no means a rare possibility, and given that, if anything, a *prokoptōn* precipitating his assent is the most probable scenario, it becomes even more urgent to secure *which* beliefs are at hand than it is in the case of a critical examination of our impressions.

4 Conclusions

My intention in the previous pages has been twofold. First, I have tried to defend a partial aspect of Epictetus' moral therapy (his techniques of repe-

⁷¹ 'Even if you are not yet a Socrates, still you ought to live as one who wishes to be a Socrates.' (*Enchiridion* 51).

tion) from the charge of conflicting with his intellectualist approach to human action. As I mentioned earlier, the reasons for trying to free Epictetus of that charge lie in the fact that his reflections offer one of the richest moments in the tradition of moral therapy in pre-Christian philosophy⁷²; moreover, such reflections comprise arguably the most systematic elaboration of an intellectualist approach to human agency. Although the more general enterprise of demonstrating that every aspect of Epictetus' moral therapy is consistent with his intellectualism is something that exceeds my present aim⁷³, the task of producing an intellectualist interpretation of the techniques of repetition is a first step towards that goal.

Second, I have attempted to show that these techniques are compatible with Epictetus' intellectualist approach and are also essential for his central therapeutical strategy (i.e., the demand for a critical examination of our impressions) to deliver a virtuous outcome. The general argument through which I have aimed to show that this is so can be summed up as follows: *i*) Epictetus demands that we critically examine our impressions before assenting to or rejecting them [DC]; *ii*) to examine an impression is to analyse it against the background of my present set of beliefs and to decide whether there is a contradiction between that impression and any of my beliefs, opinions or judgements (including my preconceptions); *iii*) even when critically examined, the impression cannot be contrasted against the totality of my present beliefs, but can only be confronted with a reduced set of beliefs; *iv*) for us to assent only to true impressions after having critically examined them, they must be assessed against correct beliefs; *v*) there are differences in the degree of 'availability' of each of our beliefs, given that we may have assented to a certain impression in the past without that belief being now 'at hand'; and *vi*) Epictetus' techniques of repetition are intended to ensure (or to increase the chances) that the correct beliefs are always 'at hand', thus enabling DC to be the source of virtuous actions (or more precisely, impulses)⁷⁴. My aim in reconstructing this argument has been to defend the internal coherency of (at least) that precise aspect of Epictetus' conception of human agency, as well as call attention to the idea of the different degrees of 'availability' of our beliefs or opi-

⁷² Vid. Hijmans 1959; Foucault 2001; Sorabji 2000; Nussbaum 1996.

⁷³ There are, after all, numerous passages that do not seem, at first sight, to be able to be accommodated within an intellectualist framework, such as, *vg.*, the idea expressed in 2.18.11 that 'certain imprints and weals are left behind on the mind' (ἔχνη τινὰ καὶ μώλωπες ἀπολείπονται) if an individual has had a certain habit for an extended period of time, and that these weals can hinder our decisions. Broadly speaking, what needs to be done is to provide a reading of the whole rhetoric of mental events that is endowed with variable degrees of *force*, which is consistent with the intellectualist approach.

⁷⁴ By 'virtuous' I also mean here not merely the product of chance.

nions, an idea that has not been carefully analyzed so far and which can become an important element in our understanding of other aspects of Epictetus' psychology, mainly of his conception of *akrasia*.

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