

The Foundation of Vividness: The Epistemological Development of the Term *Enargeia* in Plato

While scholars have often noted that the term ἐνάργεια plays a key role in Hellenistic philosophy and rhetoric, referring to the “clear view” or “vividness” of visual sensation and/or imagery (cf. Ierodiakonou 2011, Webb 2009, Otto 2009, Feldherr 1998, Walker 1993, Zanker 1981, Long 1971), they have mostly ignored how the concept developed from its archaic Greek origins until Epicurus, as well as the Stoics, named *enargeia* as a central “criterion of truth” in their epistemology. From the first use of the adjective ἐναργής, -ής in Homer, a sublime context is present, as the term usually refers to the powerful lucidity of divinities in an epiphanic setting. For instance, Hera remarks that Achilles “will be struck with fear if ever a god meets him face to face in the midst of battle. For gods are hard to bear when they appear distinctly [χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ φαίνεσθαι ἐναργεῖς]” (20.130-1). The association of the adjective *enarges* with indescribably vivid moments of sensation persists in later uses of the term as well, which I examine with a brief survey of its uses in Aeschylus and Sophocles (it is not used in Euripides) and of Herodotus. Nevertheless, the adjective remains relatively rare (it appears twice in Pindar) and is not used in Archaic or Classical elegy, iambos, in the fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers (see Graham 2010), or in Thucydides or Xenophon in prose.

Nevertheless, in the fourth century BCE, Plato employs the adjective to great effect in several of his dialogues (*Theatetus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, et al.) and even coins the abstract noun “*enargeia*” in the *Statesman* (277b-c) (cf. Campbell 1973). Through a close reading of a portion of the *Phaedrus* (§§250c-d), where the adjective is used several times in quick succession, I note how the epistemological (and scientific) context links the sensation of vision with knowledge of the forms. Moreover, the passage also draws on contemporary theories regarding visual perception (particularly those of Empedocles, as well as the atomists), which

will continue to be prevalent in later uses of *enargeia* by Hellenistic philosophers. The passage stresses the importance of vision, even noting that: “vision is the sharpest of the body’s senses, yet wisdom is not viewed with it” (ὄψις γὰρ ἡμῖν ὀξυτάτη τῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἔρχεται αἰσθήσεων, ἧ φρόνησις οὐχ ὁρᾶται). Furthermore, the lover’s senses fall short of seeing a distinct likeness (ἐναργὲς εἶδωλον) of the form of beauty. I argue that Plato’s association of the adjective with a different kind of vision—one that is beyond the senses and is linked to knowledge itself—paves the way for the Hellenistic use of *enargeia* as a criterion of truth. I conclude by briefly discussing the first use of the word *enargeia* in Plato’s *Statesman*, a passage that addresses the limits of human expression.

While Plato stresses the impossibility of achieving perfect clarity through the senses, it is this precise challenge that becomes a point of contention for Hellenistic philosophers. Indeed, both Epicurus and the Stoics argue that it is possible to achieve a verifiable knowledge through the senses, but only if the view is clear, i.e. if it possesses *enargeia*. Thus, I argue, Plato’s term becomes reused and radically altered by these later philosophers, who draw on the context of Plato’s (and even the earlier Homeric) uses of the term—i.e. sublime glimpses of divine realms or gods—but employ the adjective and its noun form to bolster their own claims, in direct opposition to Plato, that clear perceptions *are* capable of bringing knowledge and truth with them.

Bibliography

Campbell, Lewis (1973) *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato*. Arno Press: New York.

Feldherr, Andrew (1998) *Spectacle and Society in Livy’s History*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.

Graham, Daniel W., trans. and ed. (2010) *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy* (2 Vols.).

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Ierodiakonou, Katerina (2011) "The notion of enargeia in Hellenistic philosophy". In Morison, B. and Ierodiakonou, K., eds. *Episeme, etc.*

Long, A. A. (1971) "Aisthesis, Prolepsis and Linguistic Theory in Epicurus". *B.I.C.S.* xviii. pp. 114-33.

Otto, Nina (2009) *Enargeia: Untersuchung zur Charakteristik alexandrinischer Dichtung*. Franz Steiner Verlag: Stuttgart.

Walker, Andrew D. (1993) "Enargeia and the Spectator in Greek Historiography". *TAPA* 123; 353-77.

Webb, Ruth (2009) *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Ashgate: Berlington, VT.

Zanker, G. (1981) "Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry". *RhM* 124; 297-311.