“Stoics on the criterion of truth”

The major epistemological debate between the Hellenistic philosophers was on the question of the criterion of truth. The primary object of my discussion is to answer the following questions as regards the Stoic criterion of truth.

1) What is the Stoic criterion of truth?
2) Is the Stoic criterion able to be accepted as a genuine criterion of truth?

Analyzing debate on the criterion we can get two conclusions.

First, according to the Stoics the criterion of truth is generically (kata genos) a cognitive impression (kataleptike phantasia), which is defined as an impression that comes from what is, is imprinted and impressed in exact accordance with what is, and is such that an impression of this kind could not come about from what is not. The reason why the Stoics defined the cognitive impression as
criterion of truth is that in indirect way it guarantees the truth of all other propositions, giving rise to the common conceptions and becoming the foundation of every human investigation. So it is only through cognitive impressions that we have any knowledge of what is true or not. Although some scholars maintain that about the criterion Chrysippus disagreed with Zeno who defined the criterion as a cognition (katalepsis), in my opinion Chrysippus seemed to clear some vague points of Zeno. Therefore the Stoic criterion of truth which satisfies both correspondence and coherence is cognitive impression.

Second, the criterion of truth should be true, requiring no more proof. That is why the Stoics maintained that cognitive impressions with the right kind of history are clear and by themselves different from all other impressions. But the Sceptics tried to show that there are impressions which have all the supposed characteristics of cognitive impressions but nevertheless are false. They contend that the so-called criterion of truth is not means for judging truth and falsehood, but a plausible criterion at best. On the other hand, the criterion of the Stoics is rather “by which” the existence and the truth of a state of affairs come to be known. Therefore sometimes ordinary people cannot distinguish cognitive impressions from abnormal impressions, because they cannot systemize and justify their cognitive impressions. Finally only the sage can justify and use properly cognitive impressions as criterion of truth, although cognitive impressions appear clear and distinct to all human beings.

[Key Words: Stoics, Scepticism, Criterion of Truth, Coherence Interpretation, Correspondence Interpretation, Cognitive Impression (Kataleptike Phantasia), Cognition (Katalepsis)]