

The Stoics and Carneades: Dialectic and the Holding of Views

Abstract

The article discusses the Stoics' support for their epistemology, especially the "cognitive impression", in the wake of Arcesilaus' challenge, and their continued insistence, against the Academics, that choice and action without assent are impossible. It then examines Carneades' responses to these moves: his renewed attack on the Stoic cognitive impression, his opposition to assent, and his vindication of the possibility of choice and action despite that. The latter includes both his account of persuasive impressions, and his distinction between assent and the more non-committal attitude of approval. The article interprets these as views accepted by Carneades himself; more generally, it opposes a reading of Carneades as engaged in purely dialectical activity. But it sides with Cicero in choosing Clitomachus' reading of Carneades over Philo's, though the difference between these is smaller than on many interpretations.

Keywords: cognitive impression, persuasive impression, assent, approval, Carneades, Clitomachus, Cicero

The previous chapter has considered Arcesilaus' challenge to Stoic epistemology, especially to Zeno's notion of the cognitive impression (*phantasia kataléptikē*).¹ But Arcesilaus did not, of course, reduce the Stoics to silence on the subject. Plutarch

¹ CROSSREF Caston, Allen

cites an unnamed Stoic as rejoicing that between Arcesilaus (316/5-244/3 or 241/0 BCE) and the other major skeptical Academic Carneades (214/3-129/8 BCE) came the Stoic Chrysippus (born 280-76, died 208-4 BCE), who not only provided written responses to Arcesilaus but also, in this Stoic's view, preemptively closed off various avenues of attack from Carneades (*Comm. not.* 1059B-C, LS 40G). Sextus attributes to the Stoics generally what is clearly the same three-part definition of the cognitive impression that Cicero attributes to Zeno (worked out in part through debate with Arcesilaus, *Acad.* 2.77): it is an impression that

- 1) is from an existing thing, and
- 2) stamped and impressed in accordance with the existing thing itself,
- 3) such as could not come about from a non-existent thing (*Math.* 7.248).

While there is room for dispute about exactly what is meant in each clause by "existing thing" (*huparchon*, or in Cicero's Latin, *quod est*), it is clear from both Sextus and Cicero that the force of the third clause is that the cognitive impression is such that there could not be an impression that was just like it, but *false* (Sextus, *Math.* 7.152, 252; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.112-13); the "non-existent thing" that the cognitive impression rules out is a non-existent *state of affairs*. Cognitive impressions, then, guarantee the truth of their contents².

This three-part definition is never explicitly and specifically attributed to Chrysippus himself, but there is no reason whatever to doubt that he adhered to it.

² There is considerable dispute about exactly how they were supposed to do this. There have generally been thought to be two major options, "internalist" and "externalist": the guarantee resides either in some subjectively accessible feature of the impression that somehow renders it indubitable, or in the impression's unimpeachable causal history. See Frede 1983, Annas 1990, Hankinson 2003. Also CROSSREF Caston.

First, views generically attributed to the Stoics may be assumed to have been held by Chrysippus, the great systematizer of the school, unless there is strong evidence against this. Second, the context in which the Stoic cited by Plutarch says that Chrysippus responded to Arcesilaus and headed off Carneades' criticisms is epistemological; Chrysippus, we are told, "left to sense-perception many aids against siege, and entirely removed the fuss about preconceptions and conceptions, articulating³ each one and putting it where it belongs". Clearly this exercise would have included a vindication of the cognitive impression, given its importance in both previous and subsequent Stoic thinking. Third, whether or not we agree that Chrysippus had the upper hand, Carneades is elsewhere reported as continuing Arcesilaus' challenge to the cognitive impression (*Sextus, Math.* 7.402), while Cicero reports that the dispute between Stoics and Academics on this issue has continued to his own time (*Acad.* 2.78). We can be pretty sure that Chrysippus had a stake in this dispute.

It would be interesting to know more about what these "aids to sense-perception" were, and how precisely Chrysippus clarified the status of "preconceptions and conceptions", but Plutarch does not elaborate. In what follows, I shall first try, by appealing to related evidence, to spell out a little further what Chrysippus' support of Stoic epistemology may have consisted in. But there is another aspect to his response to the Academics in this area, namely the so-called *apraxia* ("inaction") argument, and I shall continue with a look at this. The rest of the chapter will then concentrate on Carneades' contributions to this ongoing

³ Or perhaps, "straightening out" – the manuscript reading, *diorthôsas*, as opposed to Wyttenbach's emendation *diarthrôsas*, accepted by most scholars.

debate with the Stoics, including both his counter-arguments against the Stoics and his responses to the *apraxia* charge.

I

The two parts of Plutarch's report quoted above include the particles *men* and *de* respectively, which imply a connection but also a contrast between the two points: Chrysippus said some things about sense-perception *but also* some things about preconceptions and conceptions. The point of the contrast must be that the latter have to do with reason, not the senses. An important text of Aetius (4.11.1-4, LS 39E) tells us that the growth of rationality in the early years of human life consists in the “writing” of conceptions (*ennoiai*) on the blank page that is the soul at birth. This occurs, at least initially, through repeated perceptions of similar objects that cluster into a consolidated “experience” (*empeiria*)⁴. Some of these conceptions are said to arise naturally and automatically, others through human instruction, and the former are called, more specifically, “preconceptions” (*prolēpseis*); on this last point, Diogenes Laertius also ascribes to Chrysippus the idea of preconception as a “natural conception of universals” (7.54). Since the Stoics consider nature providential, this amounts to saying that preconceptions give us an accurate way of seeing things; the way our natures prompt us to classify the world through our concepts corresponds to how the world is. It is no surprise that in the same place Diogenes cites Chrysippus as saying that preconception is a criterion of truth⁵. This

⁴ The terminology has much in common with Aristotle's in his account of how we come to know the principles of demonstration in *An. post.* II.19; this is surely not accidental.

⁵ Diogenes claims Chrysippus contradicts himself, since he also said that the cognitive impression was the criterion. But there need be no conflict here. Cognitive

is not to cast doubt on the reliability of those conceptions that are not preconceptions; but preconceptions have a kind of additional anchor that makes them especially trustworthy.

Alongside preception, according to Diogenes, Chrysippus also said that sense-perception (*aisthēsis*) was a criterion of truth. This takes us to the other side of the contrast marked by Plutarch; the way he states the matter implies that Chrysippus also bolstered the credibility of sense-perception, separately from his elucidation of the roles of conception and preception. It is not so clear what this may have amounted to; but we can maybe get some idea from the remarks on the power of the senses that Cicero in the *Academica* gives Lucullus, the spokesman for Antiochus, who at least in epistemology follows the Stoic line. Lucullus begins as follows: "Let's start with the senses. Their judgments are so clear and certain that if human nature were given the choice – if a god demanded of it whether it is satisfied with its senses when they are sound and undamaged or whether it requires something better – I can't see what more it could ask for" (*Acad.* 2.19)⁶. Lucullus goes on to speak of the ways in which our senses, already so effective in judging things, can be yet further refined by training of various kinds (e.g., in painting or music) (2.20). Of course, the senses can occasionally deceive us. But one can well imagine Chrysippus pointing, in a similar spirit to Lucullus, to how flawless the workings of the senses are in innumerable everyday cases. Diogenes Laertius

impressions are conceptually articulated – more on this in a moment; so they may very well (in fact, almost always will) incorporate preconceptions. Chrysippus may, then, simply be speaking of different levels at which truth is guaranteed. On their compatibility, see also LS vol.1, 252-3, and on this topic more generally, see Brittain 2005.

⁶ I follow the translation of Brittain 2006.

reports that he wrote seven books *About Ordinary Experience* (*Peri Sunêtheias*, 7.198)⁷, which presumably expanded on these matters. In the same place we are told that he also wrote six books *Against Ordinary Experience*, which must have discussed reasons for doubting the senses. But Plutarch quotes a passage of Chrysippus making clear that the point of this was to undermine any arguments to that effect, much as an attorney will try to demolish an opponent's case before the opponent even has the chance to make it (*Sto. rep.* 1036A)⁸.

In addition, of course, the division between the senses and reason is itself artificial. For one thing, as noted above, at least at the early stages the growth of preconceptions takes place via the senses. But more importantly, according to the Stoics the impressions of rational beings, including their sensory impressions, are rational through and through. We do not first have non-rational sense-perceptions that reason then has to interpret; our sensory impressions have linguistically expressible content from the start – they are impressions (as) *of certain states of affairs obtaining*. If one puts into words what one is seeing, the verbal expression may of course come later. But as Diogenes Laertius puts it, “thought, which is capable of utterance, expresses in words *what it experiences by the impression*” (7.49); the rationally structured content is already there in the impression. So if

⁷ Or perhaps *On Behalf of Ordinary Experience* (*Huper Sunêtheias*), a proposed emendation to the manuscript text. But even if this is mistaken, we can assume these books were in favor of ordinary experience.

⁸ Plutarch disagrees, seizing upon the negative arguments as giving the Academics all they could wish for (*Sto. rep.* 1036B-C), and as furnishing him with one more “Stoic self-contradiction”. Cicero, speaking from the Academics’ perspective, agrees with Plutarch both about Chrysippus’ intention (*Acad* 2.75) and about the actual effectiveness of the negative arguments (*Acad*. 2.87).

reason and the senses are as closely intertwined as this, and reason is oriented towards the truth as indicated just now, so much the better for the senses too.

Here, then, is a sketch of the kinds of argument we can guess Chrysippus to have offered to support the Stoics' generally optimistic epistemology against Academic attack – and in particular, to support their central contention that the cognitive impression not only exists, but is a commonplace occurrence for any normal human being⁹. Now, as noted above, the cognitive impression is supposed to be a guarantee of truth. But Arcesilaus had refused to accept that there could be any such self-guaranteeing impression (*Math.* 7.154, *Acad.* 2.77).¹⁰ And he had argued that this gave the Stoics two choices: for any given impression that confronts them, they can either assent to it – that is, commit themselves to the truth of the impression – or not do so. In the former case, they would be holding an opinion (*doxa*) – that is, assent to a non-cognitive impression – which to them was anathema. In the latter case, they would suspend judgment. But if there are *no* cognitive impressions, this is always going to be the choice; and so, to avoid holding opinions, one will have to suspend judgment about *everything* (*Math.* 7.156-7).

The inadmissibility of opinion seems to have been common ground between Arcesilaus and his Stoic opponents. Where they disagreed was on the possibility of suspending judgment about everything. And it is clear that, long after Arcesilaus' time, the Stoics continued to insist on its impossibility. It is this that forms the other side of the Stoic attack on Academic thinking, extending to Carneades and beyond. In

⁹ See also Ioppolo 2018, 39 on a separate, methodological attack by Chrysippus against Arcesilaus' practice of arguing against whatever was proposed to him.

¹⁰ CROSSREF Allen [discusses both passages]

addition to supporting their own epistemology, the Stoics ask, how is suspension of judgment compatible with the decisions and actions that we all engage in every day?

This is the *apraxia* charge. The charge can come in various different versions, but there seem to be two issues of particular importance in the Stoic-Academic debate. First, how can one make choices among alternative courses of action without discriminating in favor of some impressions and against others? And second, whether or not a choice of that kind is involved, how is action even possible except via judgments about the way the world is¹¹?

The *apraxia* charge occurs in Lucullus' speech in Cicero's *Academica* (e.g., 2.37-9, which seems to include both the versions just mentioned). But the most chronologically specific report of the charge occurs in Plutarch, who says that both Chrysippus and Antipater devoted "the most argument", in their disputes with the Academics, to the following point: "that there is neither action nor impulse without assent, and that those who maintain that, when a suitable impression has occurred, there is an impulse right away, without their having yielded or assented, are talking fictions and empty suppositions" (*Sto. rep.* 1057A, LS 53S). The point is not developed—Plutarch immediately goes on to accuse Chrysippus of saying something else that contradicts it¹²—and one can imagine it being used in either of

¹¹ The distinction between these two versions was first made by Striker 1980, 63f. Vogt 2010, 166 introduces a more elaborate taxonomy of *apraxia* charges. But she seems broadly to agree that the two mentioned above are the ones most relevant to the Academics.

¹² Chrysippus is said to have claimed that god and the wise sometimes induce false impressions in people, with the aim of getting them to act on them, or have an impulse towards them, but not to assent to them – which entails that he thinks action and impulse do *not* require assent (*Sto. rep.* 1057A-B). That Chrysippus may have sanctioned deception for certain purposes, by god or the wise, is quite possible.

the two ways I have distinguished: either that choice among alternatives, or that *doing* anything at all, requires assenting to certain things being the case. But it underlines the importance of assent in the Stoic theory of action. The Stoics take impulse (*hormē*) to be the proximate cause of action, and impulse is a response to the way the world appears to the agent.¹³ But the impulses of rational beings are not simply automatic reactions to the impressions with which they are presented. One has to *endorse* the impressions before they can have any practical effect; that is, one has to assent to them or, in other words, take them to be true.

That Chrysippus insisted on this point implies that someone before him had already denied it. The obvious candidate is Arcesilaus; and support to this is given by a passage of Plutarch's *Against Colotes*, which defends the possibility of action without assent against the attacks of both the Stoics and Colotes himself (*Adv. Col.* 1122A-F, LS 69A).¹⁴ Arcesilaus is not mentioned by name in the passage itself. But Colotes and Arcesilaus were rough contemporaries, and Plutarch mentions their intellectual confrontation immediately beforehand (1121E-1122A). However, it is not just Chrysippus who is said, in the previous Plutarch passage, to have insisted on the necessity of assent for action; it is also Antipater, who was Carneades' contemporary and who is said to have sparred with him at great length¹⁵. We can

But the rest is highly dubious – probably either a hostile misreading of what Chrysippus said, or pure speculation on Plutarch's part.

¹³ CROSSREF Kamtekar

¹⁴ CROSSREF Allen

¹⁵ Numenius cites them as contemporaries (in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.8.10=SVF 3.6), and there are anecdotes that have them dying around the same time (Diogenes Laertius 4.64, Stobaeus 4.52a.19=SVF 3.7). A birth date for Antipater is elusive. But Plutarch reports that on the subject of the ethical end, Antipater developed his position because of pressure from Carneades (*Comm. not.* 1072F), which may imply

hardly doubt, then, that Carneades was the main opponent Antipater had in mind on this topic. And indeed, Cicero reports, on the authority of Clitomachus, that Carneades “had driven assent – that is, opinion and rashness – from our minds, like a wild and savage beast”, and likens this to a Herculean labor (*Acad.* 2.108). This point will be of some importance in what follows.

Thus Carneades faces two challenges from the Stoics. First, there is the revived and enhanced account of the cognitive impression that is due to Chrysippus. And second, there is the enduring Stoic complaint that action and impulse without assent is impossible, at least for a rational being. So it is not surprising that there is evidence both of his having argued against the feasibility of the cognitive impression, and of his having developed an account of how choice and action are possible despite there being no cognitive impressions or, for that matter, any other criterion of truth, in the strong sense in which a criterion is a *guarantee* of truth. These are not, of course, the only areas in which Carneades had things to say. We know that he was also active at least in debates in ethics, which are the subject of the next chapter, as well as in theology (Sextus, *Math.* 9.182-90)¹⁶. But the matters on which I am concentrating are, it is fair to say, central topics of philosophical methodology. I now turn my attention directly to Carneades, with a focus on these.

II

that Carneades was the older of the two. In any case, several sources report that Antipater went after Carneades at great length, albeit in writing rather than in person (Numenius, loc. cit.; Plutarch, *De garr.* 514D=SVF 3.5; Cicero, *Acad.* Fr.1).

¹⁶ One thing that we do not know, however – but is frequently cited as one of his best-known pieces of argumentation – is that he argued for and against justice on successive days while on an embassy to Rome in 155 BCE. Powell 2013 makes a strong case that this story is a scholarly concoction. [CROSSREF Inwood]

Carneades' attack on the cognitive impression is in one way the same as Arcesilaus': it is focused on the third clause of its definition, "such as could not come about from a non-existent thing" (Sextus, *Math.* 7.402). His point is simply that for any true impression, there could be a false one indistinguishable from it; hence no impression can be self-guaranteeing in the way the Stoics claim. Sextus goes on to mention numerous examples that are supposed to illustrate this indistinguishability, which fall into two broad categories – altered mental states (dreams, madness, etc.) and doppelgangers (twins, pairs of eggs, etc.) (*Math.* 7.403-10); and Cicero confirms the Academics' use of these (*Acad.* 2.84-5, 88-90). The examples may predate Carneades – Diogenes Laertius cites the early Stoic Persaeus using a pair of twins to trick his fellow-Stoic Aristo (7.162) – but the evidence suggests that Carneades was the one to develop them in detail.¹⁷.

But Sextus also reports a more comprehensive approach to this issue on Carneades' part: he "positioned himself on the criterion of truth not only against the Stoics but against everyone before him" (*Math.* 7.159). This kind of global ambition seems to be characteristic of Carneades; according to Cicero, his division of ethical ends also purported to review all possible opinions on the subject (*Fin.* 3.16).¹⁸ In any case, Sextus continues by summarizing an argument from Carneades against the

¹⁷ Note that these examples would seem to be effective against the Stoics only on the "internalist" reading of their position (cf. n.2); if the self-guaranteeing aspect of cognitive impressions consists instead in their causal history, our ability to tell the difference between these and other false impressions is irrelevant. On the other hand, a criterion is supposed to be a method for distinguishing something; and if this method is not available to the subject at the time – as it would not be on the "externalist" reading – there is a real question as to whether it is fulfilling its function.

¹⁸ CROSSREF Wynne

existence of any criterion (*Math.* 7.159-65). This starts by observing that any faculty one might choose as a criterion can deceive us (7.159). But then, apparently as a backup, it claims that any criterion must in the end come down to the deliverances of ordinary sense-perception reacting to something that affects it – in other words, to sensory impressions (7.160-3). Against this as a criterion, it brings up the familiar point that there can be no true impression such that there could not be a false one just like it (7.164) – which suggests that despite his seemingly global ambition, Carneades continues to have the Stoics especially in mind. And then it argues that reason could not be a criterion, since reason must take off from impressions of the kind he has just been talking about. The conclusion is then that “neither non-rational sense-perception nor reason can be a criterion” (7.165).

It seems clear that the Stoics would not be convinced by this. For as we have seen, they do not accept a distinction between reason and “non-rational sense-perception” (*alogos aisthēsis*). While reason may have developed via sensory experience in early childhood, they hold that in a mature human being sensory experience is infused with rationality; reason does not interpret non-rational sensory data that is separate from itself. This might not give them an immediate response to the claim of indistinguishability. But if sensory experience is conceptually rich, and conceptions are formed, as they claim, through memory, then in looking at the world, we are bringing to bear a large body of previous knowledge that shapes how we see it. And this might very well give us ways of ruling out indistinguishable false impressions. We may not be able to tell we are dreaming when we are dreaming; but in that case we are not employing our rationally infused

sensory capacities. When we are, we are perfectly capable of telling that we are not dreaming – and a great deal else about what is going on around us. And while we may sometimes give up on trying to distinguish two objects, such as eggs, our background knowledge can often allow us to dismiss the kinds of possibilities Carneades raises. So, at least, the Stoics could argue. On the other hand, there is much about this story that Carneades could challenge – most obviously, the teleologically based account of the development of our reason on which it depends.

So it seems as if the dispute about the criterion of truth is at a stalemate, and this was always likely; it is no surprise that, as Cicero says, the viability of the third clause in the Stoics' definition of the cognitive impression was a point of contention from Zeno and Arcesilaus to his own day (*Acad. 2.77-8*). Now, one might say that a stalemate is precisely what Carneades wants. He is in the business of suspending judgment, not of accepting anything himself; and this should surely include the question whether there is any criterion of truth, Stoic or otherwise. But both Sextus and Cicero suggest something different. In the passages where he reports the arguments against the criterion, Sextus is not explicit about Carneades' intentions. But at the opening of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, he distinguishes the Academy of Carneades and Clitomachus from himself in that they, unlike him, maintain that the truth cannot be apprehended – that is, that no reliable criterion, guaranteeing truth, is available (*PH 1.1-3*). And when he discusses the Academy, in his review of positions that should not be confused with his own, he repeats that the New Academy (that is, Carneades and Clitomachus) affirm that everything is

inapprehensible (*PH* 1.226)¹⁹. Cicero tells us the same thing. Antipater is reported as saying that someone who holds that nothing is apprehensible should at least claim to apprehend *that*²⁰; and Carneades then denies this – if one holds that *nothing* is apprehensible, that should include the very statement that nothing is apprehensible (*Acad.* 2.28). We shall come back to the issue of what it means to hold something without claiming to apprehend it. But what Carneades emphatically does not do here is reject the attribution to himself of the view that nothing can be apprehended. So the best evidence suggests this was a conclusion that he in some sense accepted; he was not just balancing anti-criterion arguments against the Stoics' positive position with a view to suspension of judgment.

III

Having reported Carneades' arguments against any criterion of truth, Sextus immediately says that Carneades is compelled to provide a criterion for the conduct of life (*Math.* 7.166); and there follows an elaborate account of Carneades' theory of the “persuasive impression” (*pithanē phantasia*) (*Math.* 7.166-89). While Sextus himself elsewhere distinguishes criteria of truth from criteria of action (*PH* 1.21), it does not look as if he has that distinction in mind here, since he later refers to the persuasive impression as Carneades' criterion of truth (*Math.* 7.173). It is not, however, a criterion of truth in the full sense, since Sextus is quite explicit that persuasive impressions can occasionally turn out to be false (*Math.* 7.175). Indeed,

¹⁹ *Akatalēpta* might mean “not apprehended” rather than “inapprehensible”. But since Sextus contrasts himself with them by saying that he leaves open the possibility that things might be apprehended, “inapprehensible” seems the correct translation here.

²⁰ On what Antipater's intentions may have been, see Burnyeat 1997.

this was already hinted at earlier when, in introducing the arguments against any criterion of truth, Sextus said that Carneades aimed to show that nothing is a criterion of truth “without qualification” (*haplôs, Math.* 7.159); the persuasive impression, then, is a criterion in a qualified sense. That aside, however, it is clear from Sextus, and from a good deal of corroborating evidence in Cicero’s *Academica* (e.g., 2.99), that the persuasive impression was intended as at least part of Carneades’ answer to the question how choice and action are possible if one avoids assent.

According to Sextus’ report, impressions can be assessed in their objective or their subjective aspect. Objectively, they are either true or false, while subjectively, they are either apparently true or not – and if they are apparently true, the degree to which they strike us as true can vary. A persuasive impression is one that is apparently true and strikes us as true to at least a considerable degree, although, among those that clear that threshold, there is room for further variation in degrees of persuasiveness (*Math.* 7.168-75). Yet, as noted just now, no amount of persuasiveness can amount to a guarantee of truth; this is not a criterion in the Stoic style. But that is no cause for alarm; we manage in ordinary life with something less than full certainty, and in practice it works pretty well to rely on those impressions that strike us as true, even if occasionally one will deceive us (*Math.* 7.175).

Suppose, though, that one wants greater confidence. The report continues by describing two further steps one can take. First, one can compare multiple impressions for their consistency with one another; if a whole cluster of impressions points in the same direction, that is more persuasive than a single

isolated persuasive impression – and here too there are differences of degree (*Math.* 7.176-81). Second, one can go back and check to see whether there was anything in the circumstances of these impressions that might lead one to distrust them; if not, one's confidence becomes greater still (*Math.* 7.181-3)²¹. The importance of the matters at stake (7.184) and the amount of time one has for consideration (7.185-9) will obviously affect what level of scrutiny one brings to bear. Again, none of this will give one absolute certainty. But the idea seems to be that this is a perfectly adequate model of how practical reasoning – even on the most important questions, those surrounding happiness and how to achieve it (*Math.* 7.184) – can occur in the absence of any infallible criterion. And it is worth emphasizing that at least these higher two levels of persuasiveness clearly do involve active reasoning; rather than simply registering the level of persuasiveness in a given impression, one takes deliberate steps to get the most persuasive impressions possible, and acts accordingly. Carneades has taken pains to give us a picture of human agency, as opposed to mere instinctual reacting.

Yet, if we take the evidence of Cicero seriously, all of this is supposed to happen without assent (*Acad.* 2.108). This may well seem problematic. Does not deciding that an impression is sufficiently persuasive, and acting on it, amount to assenting to its truth? At one point at the close of his account, Sextus does use the

²¹ In the briefer account in book 1 of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* 1.227-9), Sextus reverses the order of these two higher levels of persuasiveness. I am inclined to think that nothing much turns on this. In practice the two will not be as distinct as Sextus makes them sound; widening the range of impressions consulted is a way of checking on one's first impressions, and checking on an impression will almost inevitably involve comparing it with others. For a detailed interpretation of their interconnected character, see Allen 1994.

language of assent (*Math.* 7.188). But either this is a mistake, or “assent” here means something weaker than a definite commitment to truth; for, as we saw earlier, Antipater continued to hammer the point that action required assent, which would have made no sense if Carneades had conceded it. This takes us to the other version of the *apraxia* charge, and to an important passage of Cicero’s *Academica* that seems designed to answer it (2.104).

Cicero says that he is giving us Clitomachus’ account of Carneades’ way of handling this objection. He tells us that Clitomachus used “almost these words” (*his fere verbis*, 2.102), so he is clearly trying to be as accurate as possible. What he says is that there are two ways in which one might be said to avoid assent. One might refrain from giving one’s entire assent on any matter²². Or one might refrain even from approving or disapproving anything, so that one gives no affirmative or negative answers to any questions. According to Clitomachus, Carneades held that the person of good sense (the “wise person”) will withhold assent in the first sense

²² The Latin is *omnino eum rei nulli adsentiri*. I follow Reid 1885 and Thorsrud 2012 and 2018 (and myself in Bett 1990) in taking *omnino* to modify the verb *adsentiri* – “he does not *entirely* assent” – rather than the noun phrase *rei nulli*, which would give the sense “he assents to *absolutely* nothing” (as LS 69I and Brittain 2006 read it). Since we have just heard that there are two ways of withholding assent, the distinction is naturally understood in terms of *levels* or *degrees* of assent; by contrast, assenting to nothing at all would need to be contrasted with assenting to some things but not others, which is not how the text continues. It is true that the remainder of the passage uses the term *adsensus* only to refer to the stronger attitude of full-scale assent, which the Academic avoids; but given Carneades’ reported opposition to assent (which must mean full-scale assent), that is understandable. There is some awkwardness in the passage however one reads it, and dispute about the details stretches back to Victorian times; see Reid 1885 *ad loc.* versus Hirzel 1883, 168. Regardless of the issue above, the central idea of an attitude of approval that falls short of full-scale assent (and that Clitomachus sanctions) is not in doubt.

but not the second; it is possible to approve, or “follow”, or “use”, impressions in deciding how to act, or in responding to questions, without at any point giving full-scale assent. Cicero ends the report by saying that one does not of course approve all impressions, but only the ones that are not impeded by anything, which is surely a reference to the higher level of persuasiveness where one has compared multiple impressions with one another to see if they are consistent²³.

The question now is what this distinction amounts to. What is the lesser form of acceptance of impressions, which does not amount to full-scale assent but is sufficient for action and debate? One common way of reading this is that one allows the impressions to affect one’s actions, including one’s speech acts, without taking them to be true. This is how Sextus explains the impressions that he says are the skeptic’s criterion of action (*PH* 1.21-4). But this interpretation does not seem to do justice to the extent to which the account of persuasive impressions stresses their orientation towards the truth²⁴. A persuasive impression, by definition, is one that gives a strong impression of being true. And the whole point of the higher levels of persuasiveness is to make that impression even stronger. The more it feels as if the impression is true, then, the better. This interpretation fits well also with Cicero’s talk of his own goal as finding something “like the truth” (*simile veri*, *Acad.* 2.66), and of the Academics in general as aiming for truth or something as close to it as

²³ Sextus’ term for the impressions that pass this test is “unimpeded” (*aperispastos*).

²⁴ I argued for a version of this interpretation in Bett 1989 and Bett 1990. Among other places, it is also advocated in the introduction and notes to Brittain 2006. In changing my mind on this issue, I have been influenced by more recent scholarship, especially Obdrzalek 2006 and the work of Harald Thorsrud, most recently Thorsrud 2012 and Thorsrud 2018. Where I think my earlier work was on the right track was in insisting on the central role of the distinction between assent and approval.

possible (*Acad.* 2.7). So the impressions on which one can rely in making choices, according to this picture, are those one finds likely – or, if you like, probable.

I do not translate Sextus' term *pithanos* by "probable"²⁵, because I prefer to keep the link with the verb *peithô*, "persuade", from which it derives. But the persuasive impression is in fact one that strikes the subject as probable – that is *why* it is persuasive – and I do not consider Cicero's translation *probabilis*, which does seem to have connotations of likelihood or probability, as fundamentally misleading. To be sure, this is not probability in some mathematical sense²⁶; to speak of an impression as likely or probable is simply to say that one is inclined to regard it as true. This retains a subjective element, in that to call an impression likely or probable is to make an implied allusion to one's judgment or belief. But the judgment or belief in question is about the *truth* of the impression. It is not easy to spell out exactly what this judgment amounts to; but one might do so by saying that it is a counterfactual judgment to the effect that if, for some reason, one had to decide whether or not the impression was true, one *would* decide – with a range of degrees of possible strength, depending on the strength of the probability – that it was true²⁷. And in this respect the persuasive impression is not merely attractive in some purely psychological sense. But in fact, of course, the Academic does not have to decide; and this brings us back to the issue of assent. The discussion of the last

²⁵ As does Obdrzalek 2006, on the basis of considerations similar to those I have just outlined.

²⁶ That there was no theory of probability until modern times was an important part of the argument in the influential unpublished paper "Carneades was no Probabilist" by Myles Burnyeat. For a good case against banishing the notion of probability on that basis, see Obdrzalek 2006, especially section VII.

²⁷ A related, and perhaps more familiar, way of explicating probability judgments is in terms of the relative amounts one would be willing to bet on certain outcomes.

two paragraphs allows us to make sense of the distinction we saw in the Cicero passage, between full-scale assent and a lesser notion of “approval”, which could allow for choice and action, including playing a role in discussions, but without assent of the full-scale kind²⁸. To assent in the full-scale fashion to some impression, or to a proposition that spells out the content of an impression, is to commit oneself to its truth. But one can very well consider an impression *likely* to be true, and rely on it for that reason in one’s actions and speech, without making any such commitment. And the fact that persuasive impressions never reach the point of guaranteeing their truth makes that uncommitted attitude quite understandable. So the Academics can have an orientation towards the truth – which Cicero says they do – without ever coming down decisively in favor of anything being true. This, then, is what approval amounts to. It is not simply letting oneself be carried passively along by a subjective feeling, for it can involve active investigation in the service of improving one’s chances of being correct. But it remains content with reflecting on the *chances* of being correct, rather than making a final ruling on the truth of things. This seems to me the best way of combining the various clues about Carneades, primarily from Sextus and Cicero, into a single coherent picture.

Notice that this picture allows an Academic to hold views, even philosophical views, provided that one does not claim to be sure about them. As we saw, the attitude of approval can be applied to things one says as well as to things one does; it allows one to answer yes or no to questions, and if that is the case, there is no

²⁸ Though one might, if speaking carelessly, call it a kind of assent, and perhaps this is what Sextus or his source was doing when using the term “assent” (*sugkatathesis*) at *Math.* 7.188.

reason why it should not also allow one to advance theories, supported by the most persuasive considerations one can find in their favor. The crucial thing is just that one must advance them as *truth-like* rather than as the truth. And among the views the Academic might put forward in this tentative way might be the view that there is no such thing as the Stoic cognitive impression, or any other criterion of truth (of the strong kind that is supposed to *guarantee* truth). As we saw, Cicero seems to attribute this view to Carneades, while also making clear that he insisted that it was not itself to be taken as something he claimed to have apprehended (*Acad.* 2.28).

Sextus, too, says that Carneades claimed that nothing could be apprehended (*PH* 1.1-3, 226); he also says that the Academics of Carneades' time maintained many things as persuasive (*PH* 1.226-30). Sextus is often thought to be unfair to the Academics, and especially to Carneades. There is some truth to this; he omits the crucial distinction in Cicero, between approval and full-scale assent, which makes Carneades looks more dogmatic than, on the reading I have argued for, he really is. Nevertheless, if we correct for this, the picture he gives of Carneades does not seem unwarranted. *What* views Carneades may have held, besides the view that Stoic-style apprehension is impossible, is not easy to say; Sextus suggests that some of them had to do with good and bad (*PH* 1.226), but he does not give any detail. We shall come back to this issue in section V. But if I am right, Sextus has some basis for marking a significant divide between Carneades' Academy and his own brand of Pyrrhonism.

The interpretation of Carneades that I have offered may seem to have brought him too close to the late Academy of Philo of Larissa. There is good reason to think that Philo allowed the holding of views, and this may well have been part of what led Aenesidemus to have regarded the Academy of his own day, in the words of a report by Photius, as “Stoics fighting Stoicks” (*Bibl.* 170a12-15, LS 71C9), and to have abandoned the Academy to found his own new Pyrrhonist skeptical movement. But it is usually thought that this represents a backing down from a more rigorously suspensive attitude adhered to by Carneades and his immediate successor Clitomachus. It is also often thought to represent a new reading – more specifically, a misreading – of what Carneades himself was up to, as compared with the original, more accurate reading of Clitomachus²⁹.

While the idea that Philo was less skeptical than his Academic predecessors seems well attested³⁰, the idea of a split within the Academy *on how to understand Carneades* has a narrow basis³¹. That is, the evidence for such a split is not insignificant, but it centers around one specific point: whether the wise person would hold opinions. Cicero several times mentions this as something that Carneades is said to have accepted (*Acad.* 2.59, 78, 148). But he never endorses this understanding of Carneades. And in one of these places (2.78) he distinguishes between Clitomachus’ and Philo’s (and Metrodorus’) views of Carneades, saying that

²⁹ This picture is well summarized in the introduction to Brittain 2006. An influential paper for this line of interpretation was Frede 1984.

³⁰ Most importantly Sextus, *PH* 1.235. A detailed account of Philo is Brittain 2001; the central points are summarized in the introduction to Brittain 2006. (Brittain distinguishes two stages of Philo’s anti-Clitomachean views, but that need not concern us here.) On Philo, see also Lévy 2010, Tarrant 2018.

³¹ Here I am in general agreement with Obdrzalek 2006, 270-3.

while Carneades did indeed *argue for* the conclusion that the wise person would have opinions, that is not the same as saying that he approved it. Philo thought that he did approve it, but Clitomachus took him to be merely advancing it for argument's sake – and he, Cicero, sides with Clitomachus on this question. While Cicero does not elaborate, it is easy enough to imagine the kind of context in which Carneades might have argued for this conclusion without accepting it³². Suppose Antipater insisted on the necessity of assent for action (as we have seen that he did); Carneades might have responded, “Well in that case, since your cognitive impression is a fiction, your vaunted wise person will have to end up holding opinions”.

Now opinion, as we noted earlier, is assent to a non-cognitive impression, and the Stoics wanted nothing to do with it. What the dispute between Clitomachus and Philo comes down to, then, is whether – according to Carneades (whom each of them claimed to be following) – assenting to a non-cognitive impression was ever acceptable. And a crucial element in answering that question is the distinction between assent and the more non-committal attitude of “approval” that we examined in the previous section. To repeat, Antipater continued to press the point that action without assent was impossible (*Sto. rep.* 1057A, LS 53S), and Carneades counted it a great achievement to have banished assent (*Acad.* 2.108). And this means that developing the alternative attitude of approval was important to him – important because it allowed him to vindicate the possibility of choice, action and

³² And it is worth noting that, at least in Cicero's judgment, this is a matter of context. Cicero makes clear that Carneades only *sometimes* argued in this way (*Acad.* 2.67, cf. 2.59), suggesting that there may have been other occasions when he deliberately avoiding doing so, or even argued for the opposite conclusion.

debate without assent, and hence to avoid opinion. All this seems to support Clitomachus' understanding of Carneades, and Cicero's endorsement of it, and to undermine Philo's (again, as a reading of Carneades – his adoption of it as his own view is another matter).

So I accept the prevailing consensus that Clitomachus, and not Philo, got Carneades right. Clitomachus was historically and personally much closer to Carneades; he is said to have written more than four hundred books³³, in which elucidation of Carneades was a central purpose (Diogenes Laertius 4.67); and according to another work of Cicero (*Orator* 51), Carneades is said to have stated that Clitomachus shared his own mind-set. All this tends to boost his credibility, even apart from the argument I have just offered. But the distinction between the two ways of understanding Carneades, as I am proposing it, is a subtle one. On the reading that I have pursued, following Clitomachus via Cicero, Carneades does allow the holding of views, provided they are only approved and not assented to. On Philo's reading, one may assent to the views one holds, and hence have opinions. Of course, in calling them opinions, one would be admitting that they are not apprehended, and that one could be wrong; and this is emphasized in one of the passages of Cicero where this reading is mentioned (*Acad.* 2.148). The only difference, then, is in whether one declares these views to be true (while allowing for the possibility that one is mistaken), or whether one merely considers them likely – where this includes an aspiration towards truth, but no claim, even

³³ The new translation of Diogenes Laertius (Mensch & Miller 2018) says “forty”. This is either a misreading of the Greek, or an unacknowledged alteration of the Greek text. But even forty would be a lot.

provisionally, to have achieved it. This is indeed much less of an interpretive divide between the two sides than is often supposed³⁴.

The matter is further complicated by a surprising admission on Cicero's own part. Having said, as we saw earlier, that he hopes to find something "like the truth" (*Acad.* 2.66), he goes on to say that, not being a wise person, he cannot claim never to hold opinions; in fact, he says, he is a great "opinionator" (*opinator*, a word coined for this very purpose, 2.66). He also says "I yield to impressions and cannot resist them", even while not pretending to have apprehended them (2.66). Some scholars have taken Cicero to be expressing pride in his adoption of opinions³⁵, but the passage I just quoted, in addition to the repeated emphasis on the fact that he is not wise, seem to me clear indications of the opposite: he is showing regret at his inability to live up to the ideal he professes³⁶. "Cannot resist" is a confession of weakness, and "great opinionator" is ironic³⁷. Now, so far there is nothing to upset the picture I have laid out. However, some confusion is introduced by the language Cicero uses to lead up to his confession of opinion. He says "I am not someone who never approves [*adprobem*] anything false, who never assents, who never holds an opinion" (2.66). And just before this, he says "But just as I judge this most beautiful,

³⁴ The difference may seem so slender as to raise the question why Clitomachus and Philo could have found it important. The answer, I take it, lies in the long history of Academic opposition to assent; how to position oneself in relation to this opposition, and especially whether to break with it, would have been momentous decisions affecting one's self-conception as an Academic.

³⁵ This is the one significant point on which I part ways with the reading of Harald Thorsrud; on this point see Thorsrud 2010, 77, Thorsrud 2012, 140. Thorsrud draws inspiration here from Görler 1997, 37-8.

³⁶ So Wynne 2018, 96.

³⁷ Not ironic self-depreciation, as the Loeb translator (H. Rackham) maintains *ad loc.*, but ironic self-aggrandizement.

seeing the truth, so it is most disgraceful to accept [*probare*] falsehoods in place of truths".

The trouble here is that he is running together the terminology that, if my interpretation is correct, he should be scrupulously keeping distinct. Assent and opinion are the attitudes that Carneades (as I understand him) insists on avoiding. But *approval* (*adprobari*) was precisely the attitude that, in contrast to those, he was willing to adopt, according to the crucial report from Clitomachus (*Acad.* 2.104); and "accept" (*probari*) sounds (here and elsewhere) like a minor variant of this. For someone who has that attitude, accepting or approving a falsehood in place of a truth is nothing disgraceful; while one should of course do one's best to avoid this (and the higher levels of persuasiveness, as we saw, can help in that respect), occasional falsehood, as Sextus' report made clear, was no problem (*Math.* 7.175). It is *assenting* to a falsehood (which would be holding an opinion) that is the thing to be avoided at all costs. In starting with the language of approval and shifting to the language of assent and opinion, Cicero seems to be blurring this vital distinction.

I can think of three possible explanations for this, consistent with the interpretation I have offered. First, this is a lapse on his part, a failure to maintain the clarity that he elsewhere seems to show about the distinction between assent and approval. Second, since this passage comes very early in his speech, and the distinction and much else connected with it have not yet been explained, he is not overly concerned about exact terminology. And third, since he is here confessing a failure to live up to an ideal, he deliberately blurs the distinction, because a slide from approval – which Carneades would allow – into assent and opinion – which he

would not – is precisely the error that he is confessing. As I said, the distinction is a subtle one, and in admitting his own weakness, he is perhaps drawing attention to how hard it is to maintain. This last explanation is the most charitable to Cicero, since it gives him the most credit for knowing exactly what he is doing. But if it is correct, of course, the reader cannot be expected to understand what he is doing on a first reading; only after reading the whole work, and coming to see the distinction between assent and approval, could one be expected to go back and appreciate how carefully Cicero has portrayed his own failure. This would be an exquisite touch on his part; while “charitable” is not always the same as “correct”, I certainly hope this is the right way to understand him. In any case, this passage, which is telling us how *not* to behave, need not be seen as undermining the reading I have put forward.

V

Recent scholarship on Carneades has been much occupied with the question whether his philosophical activity is purely “dialectical”. That is, is he merely showing the Stoics, or other philosophers with whom he may engage in debate, the consequences of *their* views, or offering counter-arguments to their arguments with a view to driving *them* to suspension of judgment, rather than offering any views of his own? On that interpretation, we would know nothing at all about what, if anything, Carneades himself accepted; all we would see him doing is reacting to the ideas of others.

Now, it is safe to say that much of Carneades’ argumentative activity was indeed dialectical. We saw in the previous section that Carneades gave arguments to the effect that the wise person might hold opinions, but that, at least as Clitomachus

saw it, these were part of a strategy of counter-argument against the Stoics, rather than being accepted by Carneades himself. It looks as if the same is true of Carneades' arguments about the highest good. We are told that he argued for a view of the highest good as the enjoyment of the primary things recommended by nature – as opposed to the state of aiming for these things, as the Stoics had proposed – but that he did so as a counter-balance to the Stoics, not because he held it himself (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.131, *Fin.* 5.20). We are also told that he argued enthusiastically for a different view, Calliphon's view of the highest good as pleasure along with the honorable – so much so that he even seemed to approve it (*Acad.* 2.139)³⁸. The “seemed” suggests that he was not forthcoming about his intentions (more on this in a moment); and it is at least natural to wonder whether this too was something he argued for with a motivation other than simply wishing to promote the view on its own merits..³⁹ Another apparent case of dialectical activity are Carneades' arguments on fate and free will; as Cicero reports in *On Fate*, he takes on various aspects of both the Epicurean and the Stoic views on this subject, playing them off against one another and introducing his own philosophically fruitful alternatives: agent causation (in preference to the Epicurean swerve) and rejection of the link, assumed by both schools, between determinism and bivalence (*Fat.* 23-6, 31-3). Finally, we should note that even Carneades' account of persuasive impressions has a clear anti-Stoic aspect to it. The Stoics themselves categorized impressions as persuasive or unpersuasive (Sextus, *Math.* 7.242-3) – without, of course, regarding the persuasive ones as any kind of criterion. And when the later Stoics, as reported

³⁸ Nothing more is known of this Calliphon.

³⁹ CROSSREF Wynne

by Sextus, modified their account of the cognitive impression to say that it served as a criterion of truth only “when it has no obstacle” (*Math.* 7.253), it looks as if they are borrowing from Carneades’ notion of the impression that is more persuasive because “unimpeded”⁴⁰, which gives us good reason to think that Carneades used this notion in the course of debate with the Stoics.

So Carneades no doubt spent much of his time engaged in argument with philosophers of other schools. But to say that he devoted much attention to dialectical activity, rather than advancing views of his own, is not to say that he never did anything else, and that everything he is reported as saying was designed to serve as a counterbalance to someone else’s views, or to force on them an unwelcome consequence. In fact, the only reason one would want to insist on an exclusively dialectical reading of Carneades is if one thought that, quite generally, he was not inclined, or not entitled, to hold views of his own, so that the many philosophically interesting things he is reported as saying must *always* be read in this other fashion. And this, for the reasons I have explained, seems a mistake⁴¹. If one draws a distinction between full-scale assent, and the lesser attitude of approval, and allows that a wise person can adopt the latter, there is no reason whatever why one should not hold views, albeit in this less committed fashion; one can accept them as persuasive without definitely declaring them to be correct. The theory of the persuasive impression, and its various degrees and levels, can itself be accepted as persuasive; so can the very distinction between assent and approval; and so can the denial that anything can be apprehended – which, as we saw,

⁴⁰ Cf. n.23 and accompanying text.

⁴¹ The same may not be true of Arcesilaus; see the previous chapter.

Carneades is reported to have accepted, but not in the manner of apprehension (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.28). And all this, of course, can be understood as consistent with a suspension of judgment on his own part – that is, a resolute avoidance of definite claims to truth – that will keep him broadly in the Academic tradition initiated, according to Diogenes Laertius, by Arcesilaus, of “suspending his assertions because of the oppositions of arguments” (4.28).

Which views Carneades accepted is likely to remain something of a mystery. The last case just mentioned is cited as a view Carneades held, and I have referred to a few cases where our sources suggest that he was arguing for a view he did *not* accept. Beyond this, it may be hard to tell. When Cicero says that Carneades argued for Calliphon’s view on the highest good so strongly that he seemed to accept it, he adds immediately that Clitomachus said he could never figure out what Carneades approved (*Acad.* 2.139). If Clitomachus, Carneades’ closest confidant, could not figure this out, it is unlikely that we will. But notice that this at least implies that there were *some* views he accepted; if Carneades’ activity was purely dialectical, Clitomachus would have known the answer – it would have been “none”⁴². And so I suspect Carneades was deliberately somewhat evasive on this issue. If his philosophical energy was frequently spent on arguing with others, specifically on often arguing for things he did not himself accept, it might very well be hard to tell what he accepted and what he did not. It might even have been an advantage to encourage this ambiguity, in so far as views that one merely approved, in the sense

⁴² Here I am in agreement with Thorsrud 2018, n.24.

we have seen, might well be less firmly embraced, and more easily shed in light of new considerations, than those of whose truth one was sure⁴³.

Nonetheless, I strongly suspect that the two connected methodological views – the account of the persuasive impression, and the distinction between assent and approval – *were* views that he accepted. If one resolutely resists assent, but has successfully reached the conclusion that choice, action and philosophical views are possible *without* assent, there would just be no point in not accepting that conclusion oneself⁴⁴. As we saw, Sextus says that Carneades *had to* provide the account of the persuasive impression in order to explain how action was possible (*Math.* 7.166), and this may seem to show that the account was for his own use. I am not sure that this follows; the compulsion might have come from the fact that even in a dialectical context, one has to allow the possibility of action in order for one's arguments to be credible⁴⁵. Nevertheless, that it was meant for his own use seems highly plausible. So Carneades emerges as a philosopher with views of his own. He is cagey about which views he holds, and whatever views he holds, he does so in a specially reserved way. But sometimes, at least, he is giving us his own ideas; he is not *only* responding to the ideas of others⁴⁶.

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⁴³ Cicero also mentions that the Academics conceal their views so that their students will be guided by their own reason rather than by authority (*Acad.* 2.60). This would fit well with the motivation I have just mentioned, but we cannot be sure that it goes back to Carneades himself.

⁴⁴ So Thorsrud 2018, 52.

⁴⁵ On this point, I still think the appendix to Bett 1989 is basically correct.

⁴⁶ I thank Brad Inwood, Susan Sauvé Meyer, and especially James Allen for helpful comments on a previous version, as well as the editors, Nathan Powers and Jacob Klein, for numerous suggested reformulations that made things quite a bit clearer.

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