

*The
Cambridge Companion
to*

Ancient Scepticism



EDITED BY
RICHARD BETT

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
ANCIENT SCEPTICISM

This volume offers a comprehensive survey of the main periods, schools, and individual proponents of scepticism in the ancient Greek and Roman world. The contributors examine the major developments chronologically and historically, ranging from the early antecedents of scepticism to the Pyrrhonist tradition. They address the central philosophical and interpretive problems surrounding the sceptics' ideas on subjects including belief, action, and ethics. Finally, they explore the effects which these forms of scepticism had beyond the ancient period, and the ways in which ancient scepticism differs from scepticism as it has been understood since Descartes. The volume will serve as an accessible and wide-ranging introduction to the subject for non-specialists, while also offering considerable depth and detail for more advanced readers.

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3 Arcesilaus and Carneades

Arcesilaus initiated a sceptical phase in the Academy after taking over in c. 268 BCE. He was motivated in part by an innovative reading of Plato's dialogues. Where his predecessors found positive doctrines to be systematically developed, he found a dialectical method of arguing and the sceptical view that nothing can be known (*akatalêpsia*, *De Or.* 3.67, see DL 4.28, 4.32). He also advanced this conclusion in opposition to the ambitious system of the Stoics, claiming further that the appropriate response to the pervasive uncertainty generated by his method is the suspension of judgement (*epochê*).

Arcesilaus' dialectical method was practiced without significant modification in the Academy until Carneades, who became head sometime before 155 BCE.¹ Carneades both continued and strengthened Arcesilaus' method (*ND* 1.11, *Acad.* 2.16, see also *Acad.* 1.46, and Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.7.15). Sextus marks the change by referring to Plato's Academy as Old, Arcesilaus' as Middle, and Carneades' as New (*PH* 1.220).

Since the main interpretative issues regarding both Arcesilaus and Carneades depend on the concepts of *akatalêpsia* and *epochê*, we must try to determine what they mean, how they are related, and what attitude the Academics take towards them – i.e. in what sense, if any, are these their sceptical doctrines?

I ARCESILAUS

The view that Arcesilaus derived from Plato's dialogues might have taken one of two very different forms. He might have discovered some arguments that show knowledge is not possible. Or he might

have been impressed by the fact that none of Socrates' interlocutors were able to justify their beliefs. In the latter case he will not have come away with a firm conclusion but rather the impression or suspicion that knowledge is not possible.²

The central move on the first account is to assemble arguments against the existence of transcendent Forms, as Plato does in the *Parmenides*. The argument then proceeds straightforwardly: if the only proper object of knowledge is what invariably is what it is (*Rep.* 477a, *Tim.* 51d–e), and if we have good reason to doubt the existence of transcendent Forms, we are left with the flux and uncertainty of this world.³

A similar line of thinking is evident in Arcesilaus' claim that the Presocratics were led to a confession of ignorance because of the obscurity of things, the limitations of our minds and senses, and the brevity of life (*Acad.* 1.44–45). There is no reason to suppose Arcesilaus thought there was a common sceptical argument endorsed by all of the Presocratics. The important point is that, for a variety of reasons, they maintained that appearances are not reliable guides to reality.⁴

These sceptical conclusions will only follow, however, if we accept the corresponding accounts of reality and our access to it. For example, Democritus' assertion that the senses are not only dim, but full of darkness (*Acad.* 2.73) presupposes the truth of his atomism: reality is not accessible to the senses. So it seems that Arcesilaus could not avail himself of the sceptical portion of the Presocratics' theorizing without biting off more than he would wish to chew.

Furthermore, the confident conclusion that knowledge is not possible is at odds with both his promotion of *epochê* and his thoroughgoing disavowal of knowledge.⁵ If Arcesilaus had been able to prove that nothing can be known he should have been willing to affirm that he knew at least that much. However, he denies himself even this residual piece of knowledge (*Acad.* 1.45). So he must have regarded these proofs for the impossibility of knowledge as inconclusive.

Rather than discovering some decisive arguments in the dialogues, it is more likely that he discovered a dialectical method. In order to explain this method and how it motivates his confession of ignorance, we need to refer to Plato's Socrates.

In some of his dialogues, Plato highlights the therapeutic nature of Socrates' project. We see him rousing the Athenians from their sluggish dogmatism and helping to remove the obstruction of poorly founded conviction (e.g. *Ap.* 30e, *Tht.* 148e–151d). In pursuit

of these ends, Socrates reveals that his interlocutors are committed to inconsistent views and thus that they are not knowledgeable. Insofar as his examination focuses on what his interlocutors believe, it is irrelevant whether he himself believes any of the propositions examined. The neutrality provided by this dialectical method becomes a key feature in Arcesilaus' appropriation of it.

Even if Socrates remains neutral regarding the views he elicits from his interlocutors, his method appears to commit him to (at least) two importantly substantive claims. First, he implicitly identifies knowledge with virtue, which he takes to be necessary if not also sufficient for a good life (see, e.g. *Ap.* 20c, 21b). And secondly, he supposes that if someone has this knowledge, he cannot be refuted. To know *p* is to know why *p* is true in such a way that no argument can undermine your grasp of that truth (see *Gorg.* 473b, *Meno* 85c). This assumption is evident in Socrates' efforts to determine whether his interlocutors can provide consistent accounts of the virtues.

The upshot is that as long as we lack this knowledge, the only thing worth doing is to earnestly pursue it, whether by looking for someone with irrefutable knowledge, as Socrates did, or by submitting our own views to Socratic examination. We must not rest content with even the most thoroughly defended position as long as it is possible that it might be refuted. As long as that possibility remains, we cannot be confident that we have the knowledge necessary for our flourishing. Hence, the unexamined life is not worth living.

And yet Socrates' examination is never complete. None of his interlocutors are able to defend themselves successfully. It is easy to imagine how this experience could produce the expectation not only that the next interlocutor will fail but that all interlocutors will fail. Insofar as Socrates is sincere and proficient in his refutations, it is likely that he would come to suspect that nothing can be known with certainty.

Arcesilaus seems to have modeled himself on just such an interpretation of Socrates.⁶ He revived the Socratic practice of eliciting his interlocutors' views in order to argue against them (*Fin.* 2.2, *ND* 1.11, see also *Fat.* 4, *Acad.* 1.16). On the basis of their own commitments, he drew consequences that they themselves could not accept. He is also credited with counterbalancing his interlocutors' conviction by producing equally powerful arguments in opposition (*DL* 4.28, *Acad.* 1.45). All of this is consistent with the aporetic outcome of the Socratic dialogues. Socrates unintentionally promotes *epochê* insofar

as he offers nothing to replace the views he has refuted; he leaves his interlocutors in a state of *aporia*, that is, puzzled and uncertain as to what they should now think (*Meno* 80a–b).

Like Socrates, Arcesilaus never wrote any philosophical works.⁷ The best explanation of this is that he aimed at helping others remove the obstruction of poorly founded convictions. Discussion is more effective than writing in accomplishing this end since it allows one to fit his arguments to the occasion.⁸ A therapeutic agenda also explains why Arcesilaus thought that particular suspensions of judgement are genuinely good (*PH* 1.233, see also Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.4.15). Suspending judgement is good only insofar as it is preferable to persevering with inadequately justified beliefs. But it is only second-best to the ultimate good of irrefutable knowledge.⁹

On this view, Arcesilaus' arguments for *akatalêpsia* are part of his dialectical strategy. In arguing that knowledge is not possible he would not be advancing his own view, but rather leading his dogmatic interlocutors to admit that they themselves are unwittingly committed to it. Alternatively, he may be showing that the arguments for and against the possibility of knowledge are equally convincing. The result, in either case, is that his interlocutors no longer know what to believe, and so they suspend judgement.

Just as Socrates appears to be puzzled about the nature of knowledge by the end of the *Theaetetus*, it is likely that Arcesilaus suspended judgement himself regarding the possibility of knowledge. Even so, he must have developed the same expectation that Socrates had. The fact that he was so successful in undermining his interlocutors' convictions must have inspired the suspicion that knowledge is not possible. Whether or not this expectation amounts to a belief, the crucial point is that Arcesilaus would not have promoted it as the most rationally defensible position.

If this captures Arcesilaus' attitude towards *akatalêpsia*, we may also appeal to it in explaining the attribution of other beliefs to him. He may have initially accepted the claims that motivate Socrates' philosophical project but then later realized there are equally powerful considerations opposed to them. Even while suspending judgement as to what constitutes wisdom, it may have continued to seem that seeking the irrefutable truth is the only thing worth doing. One may continue to engage in some activity, even philosophical activity, despite having given up one's rational justification for it.

This interpretation is consistent with Arcesilaus' somewhat tenuous connection with Pyrrho. Sextus claims that Arcesilaus' scepticism is virtually identical to Pyrrhonism since they make no assertions about the reality of anything, nor do they prefer one thing to another as being more or less convincing – instead they suspend judgement about everything (*PH* 1.232). Numenius similarly reports that in all but name, Arcesilaus was a follower of Pyrrho, since he overthrew (i.e. refuted) all things, truth, falsehood, and even plausibility (Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.6.5).

Further testimony to the connection comes from a contemporary Stoic, Aristo, who describes Arcesilaus as a philosophical chimera, composed of Plato in front, Diodorus (the dialectician) in the middle, and Pyrrho behind (*DL* 4.33, *PH* 1.234, Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.5.13). Although the significance of this quip is contested, it is likely that Aristo objected to Arcesilaus' sceptical appropriation of Plato and Socrates. On the Stoic account, Socrates was thought to be either a sage or at least well on his way. The insult then would be that Arcesilaus had constructed a monstrous identity for himself by grafting the antithetical figures of Plato and Pyrrho together by means of the subtle dialectical practices of Diodorus (Sedley [71], p.15).

Despite his admiration for Pyrrho, there is no indication that Arcesilaus followed him in linking *epochê* to tranquillity. Had he done so he would have been hard pressed to claim the mantle of Socrates, for whom *aporia* is a spur to further inquiry, not a welcome state of calm as it is for Pyrrho.

II THE ACADEMIC ATTACK ON STOIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Before Arcesilaus' sceptical appropriation of Plato, Zeno of Citium had discovered quite a different Socrates, first in some books and later as a student in Polemo's Academy.¹⁰ Arcesilaus witnessed the development of Zeno's Stoicism and probably saw this vigorous new school as a threat to his sceptical interpretation of Plato and Socrates.¹¹ In any case, the ambitious Stoic view became the main target of the sceptical Academics.

Zeno endorses the presuppositions underwriting Socrates' project: the notion that virtue is a kind of knowledge that is sufficient for happiness (*Fin.* 4.14, *Acad.* 1.42, *DL* 7.127–28, *Fin.* 4.47, *Acad.* 1.35–36), and the

irrefutability of knowledge (DL 7.47, *Acad.* 1.41–42, 2.77). His all-important innovation is an empiricist account of how it is possible to acquire the irrefutable knowledge required for virtue and happiness (Frede [104]).

Between the knowledge of the sage and the ignorance of the fool is a cognitive state that he terms apprehension (*katalêpsis*, *Acad.* 1.42). Apprehension occurs when we assent to a certain kind of impression (*katalêptikê*). Unlike other impressions, a kataleptic one (i) arises from what is, and (ii) is stamped, impressed and molded just as it is (*Acad.* 2.77), not with respect to *every* property, but those that are capable of being grasped (*Acad.* 1.42). The transition from folly to wisdom is accomplished, in part, by learning to see the complex and mutually supportive interrelations among individual kataleptic impressions. The sage assents only to kataleptic impressions, so everything he believes, he knows to be true, and all of these truths are mutually supported and reinforced by everything else he believes. Without apprehension providing the raw material, such a remarkable achievement would not be possible. If no impressions were kataleptic, there would be nothing worthy of the sage's assent.

In Cicero's account, Arcesilaus opens his challenge by asking for clarification: What if a true impression were of the same sort as a false one? Zeno flatly rejects this possibility, further stipulating that (iii) the kataleptic impression is of such a kind as could not arise from what is not (*Acad.* 2.77, *M* 7.252). Arcesilaus agrees that this is a suitable addition and then goes on to develop the objection implicit in his initial question: for any true impression, we can imagine a false one that is indistinguishable from it.

Zeno's definition seems to set out the causal conditions an impression must meet to be kataleptic: it must be formed in the right way, stamped and impressed precisely in accordance with what it represents. And Arcesilaus' objection seems to be that we can never confidently verify that an impression has met these conditions. But if so, they are arguing at cross-purposes. If Arcesilaus takes "kataleptic" to mean "exhibiting some mark that certifies to the subject the truth of the impression," and Zeno takes it to mean "being formed in the appropriate way," then there is no real disagreement. (We may refer to these as internalist and externalist interpretations respectively insofar as the distinguishing features of kataleptic impressions are internal or external to the agent's awareness.)

Furthermore, it is plausible to claim that lots of impressions are as a matter of fact properly formed, and just as plausible to claim that we can never be entirely certain of that fact. We may be in possession of many true beliefs without being able to identify which they are. Something like this appears to have been the position adopted by Philo of Larissa at the end of the long debate between the Stoics and Academics (*PH* 1.235, see Hankinson [203], Brittain [195]).

But even if the debate was finally resolved in such a compromise position, it probably did not arise from a simple misunderstanding. If Zeno and later Stoics had been defending an externalist account, surely someone would have noticed that the Academic's internalist objections were missing the point. Yet Carneades and other Academics continued to press this sort of objection for many years. Also, because of the role that kataleptic impressions are supposed to play in the Stoic system, it must be possible to learn to differentiate them from non-kataleptic impressions. Otherwise, it is not clear how they could facilitate the transformation from folly to wisdom. The sage is irrefutable because he is aware of the reasons and evidence that justify the truth of what he assents to. On the other hand, if the Stoics did not move towards some sort of externalism, Arcesilaus' objection seems conclusive. Surely the Stoics would not have continued to defend a position that is so vulnerable to refutation. Charity requires that we find some genuine disagreement along with strong enough considerations on both sides to sustain it (Reed [116]).

Given this goal, we will examine the details of the Academic objections and Stoic replies. Arcesilaus' objection is meant to show that there is no distinct type of impression that satisfies all three of Zeno's conditions. In one version of the objection, we focus on vacuous impressions, the kind that arise from what is not, to make the point that they are indistinguishable from those that satisfy the first two conditions (*Acad.* 2.88–90, *M* 7.403–8). When one is dreaming, for example, his vacuous impressions may be just as vivid and convincing as impressions that (i) arise from what is, and (ii) are stamped and impressed precisely in accordance with what is. This is even more evident in cases of madness where one is moved to do things that should require a great deal of confidence. Hercules, for example, in a fit of madness, shot his own children, taking them to be his enemy's. The fact that these vacuous impressions no longer seem true after one wakes up, or recovers his sanity, is beside the point. At the time, they

are as compelling as true impressions. And that indicates that at the time they are indistinguishable from true impressions.

In another version of the objection we may imagine that an impression satisfies the first two conditions in order to show that, contrary to (iii), it is still of such a kind as *could* arise from what is not. For example, even if an impression of my close friend arises from, and is stamped and impressed precisely in accordance with, that person, it remains a distinct possibility that the impression arose from someone else who bears a remarkable similarity to my friend. Cast in this way we can see the objection is not meant to be limited to impressions of people who actually have a twin, or of objects that are produced by the same process, e.g. grains of sand, eggs, or imprints in wax made by the same ring (*Acad.* 2.85–87). The objection points to the general, counterfactual possibility that the causal history of an impression could always have been different from what appears to be the case (Perin [187]). Consequently, there *are* no impressions of such a kind as could not have come about from some state of affairs other than what is represented.

The Stoic response to both types of objection relies on the principle of the identity of indiscernibles along with the notion that all distinct entities are at least in principle discernible (*Acad.* 2.57–58, 2.85–86, *M* 7.252). The Stoics insist that each existing thing has its own unique, individuating properties. No two things are identical in every respect. This applies to impressions as well. So all impressions formed in the abnormal conditions of dreaming or insanity differ in some way from allegedly indistinguishable impressions. Similarly, in normal conditions, impressions of any objects, no matter how similar, will differ in some ways.

The sage is always so attuned to his mental condition that he will be aware when he is in abnormal conditions and withhold his assent. But what will enable him in practice to eliminate the counterfactual possibility that even in optimal conditions the causal history of an impression could be different from what appears to be the case? The Stoics insist that when the agent has his rational and sensory organs in the proper state, and other relevant conditions are optimal, his impressions are formed in a craftsmanlike way (*M* 7.250–51). Differences between very similar objects will not be apparent to the untrained eye. The expert's impression, however, will precisely

report the unique, individuating properties of the object. The process by which the craftsmanlike impression is formed ends with the agent's awareness of the unique, individuating properties. If we can make sense of such a process, the Stoics will have bridged the divide between internalism and externalism and provided a plausible response to Arcesilaus' objection.

Even so, as long as the Stoics acknowledge the internalist requirement that the agent be aware of something distinctive about kataleptic impressions, the counterfactual possibility remains problematic. In other words, it remains the case that two impressions might exhibit a higher degree of similarity than any actual human being is able to differentiate. The Stoic account succeeds in establishing that it is logically possible to develop our cognitive and sensory equipment to such an extent that only kataleptic impressions appear convincing. But in practice, the skill necessary to infallibly grasp an impression as kataleptic remains elusive (see *Acad.* 2.85).

In response to the Academic attack, the Stoics were forced to distinguish the requirements that an impression must meet to be kataleptic from the conditions that we must be in if we are to recognize them as such. It is precisely this separation of the conditions that make an impression true from the conditions that enable us to grasp that truth that sustains the sceptical attack. And it is precisely this separation that Zeno tried to resist in issuing his third condition. By stating that a kataleptic impression is such that it could not arise from what is not, Zeno insists that the causal conditions that produce kataleptic impressions include the conditions that enable us to grasp them as such, but without guaranteeing that we will do so – at best, kataleptic impressions can *practically* drag us to assent (*M* 7.257, see also *Acad.* 2.38).

As long as the Stoics retain the internalist requirement they are vulnerable to the Academic objection. If the causal history of an impression could always have been different from what appears to be the case, even those with the most highly developed skill of discernment may still err.

Arcesilaus' objection is clearly not meant to show that knowledge is not possible. All it can show is that there are no impressions that meet the Stoic definition of apprehension. But if his aim is to undermine the Stoics' confidence and lead them to suspend judgement, this is all the argument needs to show.

III ARCESILAUS' PRACTICAL CRITERION¹²

In addition to defending themselves by developing their epistemology, the Stoics also went on the attack. Suppose we were to suspend judgement about everything, as Arcesilaus urges. In that case, they claimed, we will be left in a state of inaction (*apraxia*), since action requires assent. According to the Stoics, human action involves three elements: impression, impulse, and assent. An impulse towards or away from an object is the necessary antecedent to any intentional action. And impulse itself cannot occur unless the agent assents to the evaluative proposition embodied in the relevant impression. An impression alone is not supposed to be enough to induce action. Not only do I need to receive the impression, say of a hot bath, I must also see that bath in a way that will lead to action. Only if I assent to it as, for example, something to be enjoyed, will I have an impulse to get into the bath.¹³

Arcesilaus' response is that impression and impulse can occur without assent (*Col.* 1122A–D). The result seems to be a crude stimulus-response model: we are moved automatically by impulsive impressions without any intervention or adjudication. In that case, Arcesilaus is vulnerable to the further objection that those who suspend judgement are not able to *decide* to do anything (*Col.* 1122E, Striker [190]). They may be able to navigate through the world, but their actions will be no different in kind from the actions of non-rational animals. If universal *epochê* involves the rejection of what is distinctively human, it will also preclude the possibility of a good human life.

This is the objection that Sextus has in mind when he remarks that it was necessary for Arcesilaus to offer some criterion of action to explain how one might attain happiness. According to Sextus:

Arcesilaus says that one who suspends judgement¹⁴ about everything will regulate choice and avoidance and actions in general by "the reasonable" [*to eulogon*]; and that happiness is acquired through prudence, and prudence resides in right actions, and right action is whatever, once it has been done, has a reasonable justification; therefore one who attends to the reasonable will act rightly and be happy. (*M* 7.158, translation LS 69B)

It is difficult to understand why one would bother to provide a reasonable justification for the kind of action that Arcesilaus thinks is

consistent with *epochê*. Typically, a justification for an action explains *why* we did something. But if my action is not the result of any judgement or decision, there appears to be very little to say about why I did it.

Perhaps a reasonable justification is simply a matter of saying that whatever I did seemed reasonable or appropriate given the situation: without assenting I was moved to act because of my desire and the way things seemed. In particular, I will not have reflected on my desire and endorsed it as worthwhile. In that case, the “justification” cannot show that I was right to act as I did. Consequently, it is also difficult to see how it could lead one to act rightly and be happy.

On the other hand, the very issue at stake might be whether right actions are right only insofar as they are justified, and more generally, whether happiness depends on having justified beliefs. Arcesilaus might be offering, in stark contrast to the Stoic view, an account of happiness that is relatively easy to attain and consistent with *epochê*. Perhaps we are mistaken to rest our conception of happiness on what we take to be distinctively human, and perhaps it is not such a rare and spectacular achievement after all.

Whether Arcesilaus himself endorses this account of action and happiness is controversial. If he does, we must explain how his endorsement is consistent with *epochê*. And if he does not, we must explain why he would respond to an objection with an account he does not approve of.

Taking up the latter option first, some have seen the account as part of a dialectical strategy (Couissin [179], Striker [190]). Arcesilaus remains uncommitted while leading his Stoic interlocutors to conclusions that they find unacceptable. In particular, he shows the Stoics what sort of life would be possible in the absence of kataleptic impressions, given their other commitments. For the Stoics, only the sage performs right actions because only he has firm, irrefutable knowledge enabling him to properly evaluate all the things he encounters. The rest of us are able to perform appropriate actions, which may not differ outwardly from the sage’s actions, but will differ in the cognitive and dispositional states that give rise to it. The Stoics define these appropriate actions as those that have a reasonable justification (DL 7.107, *Fin.* 3.58).

Arcesilaus seems to have vandalized the Stoic system by defining right actions as they define appropriate actions. Having shown that

there are no kataleptic impressions, it follows that there are no right actions, as defined by the Stoics. Consequently, if any actions are right, they must require something less demanding – not irrefutable knowledge, but a reasonable justification.

However, Arcesilaus is clearly not using the Stoic notion of reasonable justification. His account is meant to show how life is possible for one who suspends judgement. So acting in accordance with reasonable justifications involves no beliefs. By contrast, for the Stoics, a reasonable justification shows why a proposition is more likely to be true than false, and is meant to warrant the belief that this is so (see DL 7.76). So if Arcesilaus had appropriated the Stoic view of reasonable justification it would not explain how one can act while suspending judgement.

On the other hand, we may suppose that Arcesilaus is adjusting the notion of reasonable justification in accordance with his sceptical attack. If we are unable to identify which impressions are true, we will not be able to identify which impressions are more likely to be true either.

Whether or not Arcesilaus depends exclusively on Stoic commitments in developing his account of action and happiness, it is clearly antithetical to the Stoic view. As long as he is able to defend it with arguments that are as compelling as the arguments advanced in support of the Stoic view, he will have achieved his dialectical aim – he will have left his interlocutors with no better reason to believe one view than the other.

Some have objected, however, that Arcesilaus could have more easily discomfited the Stoics by pointing out that *apraxia* is actually their problem. The Stoics themselves are unwittingly committed to the notion that it is rational to suspend judgement, since there is nothing worthy of the sage's assent. If the *apraxia* objection shows that the Stoics are unable to act, Arcesilaus should applaud rather than respond (Maconi [110]). In responding as he does, Arcesilaus seems to acknowledge that *apraxia* raises a problem that he himself needs to solve (Ioppolo [108], Hankinson [68]). At the very least, as one who suspends judgement and leads others to do the same, he would have found it difficult to attract students if he refused to counter the claim that suspending judgement makes life unlivable.

It would not be necessary, however, for Arcesilaus to endorse the explanation he provides in response to the *apraxia* objection. We may

suppose that he suspended judgement even here. But since his account is supposed to show how those who suspend judgement are able to remain active, he himself will be moved to act in accordance with what seems reasonable. Even if it is not the statement of an account that he believes to be true, it may still be a description of his practice. And in the meantime it admirably serves its dialectical purpose.

IV CARNEADES

Like Arcesilaus, Carneades refrained from writing, engaging instead in live discussion with the therapeutic aim of removing obstacles in the interest of advancing the pursuit of truth (Cicero, *ND* 1.11, *Tusc.* 5.11, but see also Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.7.15).

On his famous embassy to Rome in 156–155 BCE, for example, Carneades defended a certain conception of justice on one day and overturned it the next. He did this not to disparage justice, but rather to show its proponents that they had no firm foundation for their arguments (Lactantius, *Epitome* 55.8, LS 68M). Although it is easy to sympathize with Cato that such a practice might have a corrupting influence on the youth, it would be uncharitable to suppose that Carneades was malicious.¹⁵

Similarly, he argued against Stoic theology not for the sake of doing away with the gods but in order to show the Stoics that their arguments had established nothing (*ND* 3.44). From the Socratic perspective it would be impious *not* to reveal the inadequacies in the Stoics' arguments. And Cicero reports that Carneades did so in a way that inspired the search for the truth (*ND* 1.4).

Carneades employs his ethical arguments to the same end. His target is not virtue itself, but rather the justifications offered in support of competing ethical theories. The lesson to draw is not that virtue does not exist, or even that no one is virtuous, but rather that there are no convincing accounts of what makes a person or an action virtuous, given the naturalistic assumptions informing his contemporaries' theories.¹⁶

This much is a continuation of Arcesilaus' method. On the other hand, two sorts of modifications are attributed to Carneades, one concerning the basic sceptical view that nothing can be known (*akatalêpsia*), and the other concerning the suspension of judgement (*epochê*).

According to Sextus, Carneades asserts that the truth cannot be apprehended. This is supposedly what sets him apart from the Pyrrhonists who neither affirm nor deny that the truth can be discovered (*PH* 1.1–4, 1.226). As far as Sextus is concerned, Carneades had given up on investigation since there is no point in searching for what cannot be found.

If Sextus is right, Carneades will have made a major modification in Arcesilaus' more agnostic stance with respect to the possibility of knowledge. This might have been the result of his expansion of the scope of the Academics' dialectical method. Carneades casts his sceptical net wider than Arcesilaus. With regard to the ethical issue of the highest good, for example, he argued not only against the positions that were actually held, but even against those that could be held (again given certain constraints, *Fin.* 5.16). And with regard to the central epistemological issue of the criterion of truth, he argued quite generally that all of the possible candidates fail since they sometimes deceive us (*M* 7.159).

We might take this expansion of targets to indicate that Carneades was not content with the relatively modest, Socratic conclusion that *so far* no one has successfully defended his view. If he wanted to show that knowledge is not possible, he would have to move beyond the Socratic method.

But this is unlikely. Such a confident conclusion is clearly at odds with his promotion of *epochê* and the spirit of open-ended inquiry. Furthermore, it is generally held that Carneades' students developed his views in two distinct ways, neither of which involves the dogmatic rejection of the possibility of knowledge. On the first, dialectical interpretation, Carneades merely expands the scope of Arcesilaus' method, but continues to promote universal *epochê*. On the second, fallibilist interpretation, Carneades restricts the scope of *epochê*, allowing for some, fallible beliefs.

The dispute regarding Carneades centers on his response to the *apraxia* objection. Carneades' practical criterion, the plausible or convincing impression (*pithanê phantasia*), provides a more detailed and powerful response than Arcesilaus'. As a fallibilist, Carneades would be proposing this view of action as his own. From the dialectical standpoint, it would simply further his project of refuting the Stoics, revealing nothing about his own position.¹⁷

V CARNEADES' PRACTICAL CRITERION

It is important to differentiate the issue of the content of Carneades' account of convincing impressions from the issue of the attitude he takes towards that account (Obdrzalek [186]). Before attempting to determine which attitude Carneades takes, we must clarify what is involved in acting in accordance with convincing impressions. In particular, we need to consider whether it involves the acquisition of beliefs and whether it indicates anything more than a merely subjective plausibility.

The root of Carneades' account is the distinction between impressions that are unclear and those that are inapprehensible (*Acad.* 2.32, Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.7.15). The Academic attack on Stoic epistemology shows only that everything is inapprehensible. But that doesn't mean that everything is unclear. Some sense-impressions strike us as more clear than others, and we are more inclined to act on such impressions – we find them more convincing or plausible (*pithanon*) despite the fact that they lack any distinctive mark that guarantees their truth. So there is nothing really disconcerting about the absence of kataleptic impressions. Life would be completely overturned, as the Stoics objected, only if there were no convincing impressions.

Carneades develops his account both in descriptive and normative terms: we *should* trust convincing impressions despite their sometimes being false, since as a matter of fact, our actions and judgements are regulated by what applies for the most part (*M* 7.175). The general tenor of his account, however, suggests that he is merely describing how people act:

just as in ordinary life, when we are investigating a small matter we question one witness, when it is a greater matter, several witnesses, and when it is an even more essential matter we examine each of the witnesses on the basis of the mutual agreement among the others. (*M* 7.184)

In the first level of scrutiny, either not much hangs on whether we act in accordance with the impression, or we simply don't have time to examine it. In the second level, we inspect the impressions that come bundled with the one in question, seeking to falsify the original impression by seeing how well it coheres with the rest. And in the highest level, "on matters that contribute to happiness," we exercise

even more caution, examining the general conditions in which we make the judgement, e.g. our own mental states, the distance of the object, the quality of the light, etc.

Although this description is applicable to everyone, we must remember that Carneades offers it specifically to show how one who suspends judgement is able to live an ordinary, active life. The problem is that ordinarily to find some impression convincing is simply to believe it is true, or probably true; and that appears to violate *epochê*.

Two types of solution are available: we may argue that (1) Carneades reduces the scope of *epochê*, allowing for beliefs that arise from following convincing impressions, or (2) Carneades preserves universal *epochê* by denying that following convincing impressions requires taking those impressions to be true. Either of these solutions may be derived from a distinction Carneades makes between two types of assent: when the sage follows a convincing impression, he assents to it in a sceptically acceptable sense, but withholds assent in a different sense (*Acad.* 2.104).¹⁸

For either interpretation, the sceptically acceptable assent reflects a positive attitude towards convincing impressions that does not involve the error of rash, or dogmatic assent. If we suppose that that error is simply taking the impression to be true, we will favor (2).

It is extremely hard, however, to understand how one can assent to a convincing impression without taking it to be true, or in general to make sense of the convincingness of an impression without appealing to the concept of truth. The examples proposed to make this case take the form of predictions or hypotheses that are merely entertained without, supposedly, accepting them as true.¹⁹ But insofar as a hypothesis involves no commitment to the truth of what is hypothesized, it is not clear what one could find convincing about it. For example, I might hypothesize that a certain chemical compound will turn the litmus paper red. If I neither believe nor disbelieve that it will do so I will not find it convincing either. Contrast this example with my prediction that Big Brown will win the Kentucky Derby. The extent to which I find this convincing, and hence likely to be true, is revealed by the amount of money I'm willing to bet. I wouldn't have put any money on the litmus test since neither outcome seemed convincing.

In order for an impression to be convincing, there must be something about it that either inspires action or at least sets up a genuine

expectation for things to turn out as predicted. This is why we are surprised when a convincing impression turns out false. We decide that things were not as they seemed. But if the approval of these impressions reveals no attitude on my part towards the way the world is, I should never be surprised at how things turn out. Nor is it clear why I should examine my impressions if not to improve the likelihood of getting things right. I don't poke the coiled object on the floor in order to get a more convincing impression, but rather to determine whether it really is the snake that it appears to be.

Consequently, we should suppose that assenting to convincing impressions is a matter of taking them to be true, or at least probably true. In that case, what distinguishes sceptically acceptable from dogmatic assent may be the degree of confidence with which one takes the impression to be true. The error of rash, dogmatic assent would then be to take oneself to know what one does not. To avoid this error we need not suspend judgement about everything; we only need to withhold the dogmatic sort of assent that leads us to believe we know what we do not. On this view (1), Carneades responds to the *apraxia* objection by reducing the scope of *epochê*, allowing for a modest sort of belief.

It is important to note that, as far as we know, Carneades' only examples of convincing impressions (with a few possible exceptions to be discussed below), deal with ordinary if not familiar situations: whether this is Socrates (*M* 7.176–78), whether to flee (*M* 7.186), whether a coiled object is a rope or a snake (*M* 7.187), whether to go on a voyage, get married, sow crops, etc. (*Acad.* 2.100, 109). All of these cases involve predictions of one sort or another, as well as tangible consequences. In deciding to go on a voyage, I predict that the ship will make the journey safely. Even if the ship sinks, I may still defend my choice on the grounds that a successful journey seemed convincing. The crucial point is that I will not have rashly assented with more confidence than the situation warrants.

By allowing for a modest, tentative sort of belief with regard to ordinary, practical matters, Carneades strengthens the Academic response to the *apraxia* objection while retaining what is, arguably, most important about *epochê*. The point of suspending judgement is not to avoid all errors – not even the Stoic sage is supposed to be omniscient – but rather to avoid the epistemic arrogance inherent in rash, dogmatic assent.

VI IS CARNEADES A FALLIBILIST?

Does Carneades personally think it is ever reasonable to form opinions? If, as I have argued above, his proposal is offered as a description of how everyone acts in practical matters, then it will, *a fortiori*, be a description of how he acts. Sextus confirms this point, remarking that the New Academics make use of the plausible in their lives (*PH* 1.231). Furthermore, given the degrees of scrutiny that can be employed, it will also be a description of how the sage acts – his deliberation is simply more thorough and exacting. Insofar as the figure of the sage is a normative ideal, it follows that Carneades thinks we *should* form fallible opinions in accordance with properly tested, convincing impressions. If the sage acts this way, then it is reasonable for all of us to do the same.

Again, Sextus' view can be taken to support this interpretation: Carneades grabs hold of the convincing impression in order to show how one who suspends judgement might attain happiness, since he was compelled, like Arcesilaus, to offer some such account (*M* 7.166). So there is at least *prima facie* evidence in support of Carneades' personal endorsement.

This is not to deny that Carneades promotes a fallible sage as part of a dialectical strategy as well. Having argued that there are no kataleptic impressions, Carneades presents the Stoics with a dilemma: either the Stoic sage suspends judgement (since nothing is worthy of his assent), or he assents to a non-kataleptic impression and thereby holds a mere opinion (*Acad.* 2.67). Of course, the Stoics would not agree with the initial arguments against kataleptic impressions, so the point of the dilemma is to emphasize just how much hangs on this fundamental issue. Suppose Carneades is able to show there are no kataleptic impressions. Since the Stoics believe that action requires assent, and that the sage would not assent in the absence of kataleptic impressions, they would be left with an inactive sage. So, in order for the sage to be active, he must assent. In that case he will assent to non-kataleptic impressions, i.e. he will form a mere opinion. But since the Stoics held that having a mere opinion is a moral and epistemic failing (let us refer to this as opinion_s), they would be left with an immoral sage.

It is only within the context of Stoic theory that opinions become such awful transgressions. Ordinarily, no one thinks it a sin to hold an

opinion, especially a carefully examined one. So when Carneades speaks of the Academic sage following convincing impressions, and thus cautiously holding opinions, he must be referring to this more ordinary sense of opinion (let us refer to this as opinion_A). Although both types of opinion are fallible judgements of truth, opinion_S must be understood as a deficient mental state in comparison to the firm grasp characterized by the sage's assent to kataleptic impressions.

It is clear that Carneades does not endorse the notion that the Stoic sage will ever have an opinion_S – this would be incompatible with the very conception of the Stoic sage. So our question is whether Carneades endorses the notion that the Academic sage (or any other flesh and blood sage) will ever have an opinion_A; and by implication, whether it is ever reasonable for any of us to form an opinion_A.

The strongest evidence against such an endorsement comes from Cicero's report of a disagreement among Carneades' students.²⁰ Philo and Metrodorus took him to be sincere when he allowed that the sage would form opinions in the absence of kataleptic impressions. Clitomachus, on the other hand, took him to be advancing this view strictly for the sake of investigation, as part of his dialectical attack on the Stoics (*Acad.* 2.78, see also 2.59, 2.67, 2.148). Cicero sides decisively with Clitomachus on this issue, apparently rejecting the view that Carneades ever endorsed a fallible sage. Cicero even makes a point of affirming his belief that the sage will have no opinions – it is never reasonable, as long as one is in a state of uncertainty, to form opinions (*Acad.* 2.113). He also acknowledges that approving of falsehoods as truths is the worst thing one can do, and admits his weakness in being a great opinion-holder (*Acad.* 2.66), despite Carneades' Herculean labor of casting rash assent and opinion from our minds (*Acad.* 2.108). On this interpretation, Philo misunderstands Carneades, whether intentionally or not.

The problem with this reading of the *Academica* is that it forces us to attribute a fundamentally incoherent view of Academic methodology to Cicero. For in every other philosophical work, and even in portions of the *Academica* itself, Cicero unequivocally promotes the Academic method as a mitigated scepticism: by arguing pro and contra, Academics aim to draw out and give shape to the truth or its nearest approximation (*Acad.* 2.7–9).²¹ Cicero frequently expresses and displays his view that it is reasonable to make fallible judgements of truth in accordance with a thorough and careful examination of the

best arguments that can be found on both sides. It is equally clear that he thinks he is doing the state a great service in encouraging his fellow Romans to engage in this practice.

Since Cicero points his readers to the Academic books for an explanation of his allegiance,²² it would be confusing, to say the least, if he were defending a view of the Academic method in the *Academica* that he fundamentally disagrees with elsewhere. It is therefore preferable to find an interpretation of Cicero's position in the *Academica* that is consistent with his overall view.²³ By doing so we will undermine the main support for the exclusively dialectical reading of Carneades.

The major obstacle is the reported disagreement between Philo and Clitomachus, along with the handful of passages in which Cicero appears to reject the claim that it is ever reasonable to form opinions. The resolution I propose is that Cicero is not sufficiently careful about differentiating the various senses of opinion and assent that are in play. So, for example, we may understand Carneades' Herculean labor as casting out the overly confident, dogmatic sort of assent – again, this is not merely a matter of taking something to be true, but also taking oneself to know that it is true. Cicero makes precisely this point when he says that nothing is more shameful than approving of falsehoods as truths, i.e. approving of falsehoods as if they were truths, or in the manner one would approve of something he knew to be true (*Acad.* 2.66). This is assenting *entirely*, and is the kind Carneades would have us withhold (*Acad.* 2.104). Philo would happily agree with this.

When Cicero proclaims himself a great opinion-holder, we should take him to be referring to the plausible truths he has drawn out by way of his cherished Academic method. Given his high estimation of himself, this remark should be taken as ironic self-deprecation (Görler [201], pp. 37–38). He is a great opinion_A-holder. He would hardly have accused himself of the reckless transgression involved in holding opinions_S.

His bold affirmation that the sage will have no opinions (*Acad.* 2.113) should be understood as part of the Academics' standard dialectical maneuver. What he means is that the Stoic sage will have no opinions_S. Similarly, when he agrees that the Stoics should not allow that the sage sometimes assents to what is uncertain, he is agreeing that this makes no sense on the Stoic view (*Acad.* 2.67).

Finally, we may see the disagreement between Philo and Clitomachus as the result of an undiagnosed equivocation on “opinion.” Philo is right that Carneades sincerely proposed that the sage will form opinions_A. The passages from Clitomachus’ books on Carneades (*Acad.* 2.99–104) may easily be read as confirmation of this sincerity since we have seen that sceptically acceptable assent to a convincing impression produces a fallible belief. On the other hand, Clitomachus is right that Carneades’ claim that the Stoic sage sometimes forms opinions_S is purely dialectical.

The benefit of reading the “disagreement” this way is that it preserves the coherence of Cicero’s defense of the Academy. The cost is relatively minor: the equivocation I have hypothesized is the sort of error Cicero could have made given the speed with which he wrote the *Academica*. It is far less likely that, in the very dialogue in which he is defending his allegiance, he defends a view of the Academy that he fundamentally disagrees with everywhere else.

An additional benefit is that this interpretation allows Carneades to preserve the consistency of his view: like the Academic sage, he may hold the opinion_A that nothing can be apprehended in the Stoic sense (*Acad.* 2.110). That is clearly the opinion that Cicero is driving his readers towards in the *Academica* as well. It would also be open to Carneades to hold the opinion_A that the Academic sage will responsibly make fallible judgements of truth in the absence of certainty.

Whether or not Carneades availed himself of these philosophical applications of his practical criterion, it is clear that his successors did. But it appears that Carneades was indeed a fallibilist, at least with regard to practical matters.

NOTES

- 1 Fragments and testimonia for Arcesilaus and Carneades are collected in Mette [12] and [13] respectively. The most important texts are Sextus Empiricus *PH* 1.220–34 and *M* 7.150–89, 7.402–38, and scattered throughout Cicero’s *Academica*. In this chapter I make use of the excellent translations of Annas and Barnes [40], Bett [42] and Brittain [56] respectively (with slight modifications). Next in importance are Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 4.28–66, Numenius’ remarks reported by Eusebius in *Preparations for the Gospel* 14.6–8, and various remarks in Plutarch’s works. A good place to start is LS 68–69, which contains many of the central texts in translation.

For the bibliographical references, see P. Pellegrin, Sextus Empiricus.

- 2 See Schofield [188] for the former, Cooper [178] for the latter. I follow Cooper's interpretation closely in this section.
- 3 See Bett [143], pp. 132–40 for discussion of the similar hypothesis that Pyrrho's indeterminacy thesis derives from, or at least bears a striking resemblance to, Plato's account of Heraclitean flux in the *Theaetetus*, as well as the account of the indeterminacy of sensible things in *Republic* 5.
- 4 See also *Col.* 1121F–22A, *Acad.* 2.13–15, 2.72–75, and Brittain and Palmer [177].
- 5 See Lactantius *Div. Inst.* 3.6.7–15 for the charge of inconsistency.
- 6 They both attracted a large following by publicly deflating their interlocutors' intellectual pretences (*Ap.* 23c, DL 4.37, respectively).
- 7 Plutarch, *Alex. Fort.* 328A–B, DL 4.32, 1.16. In sharp contrast, Arcesilaus' contemporaries and predecessors were quite prolific, with the notable exception of Pyrrho who also wrote nothing (see DL 4.11–14, 5.42–50, 7.189–202, 10.26–28).
- 8 Compare Plato's criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus* (274c–278d). Arcesilaus is described as profusely inventive, able to meet objections and fit his discourse to every occasion (DL 4.37, see also *Acad.* 2.60). He is even supposed to have said that what is most distinctive of philosophy is knowing the fitting time (*to kairon*) for each thing (DL 4.42).
- 9 Consequently, Sextus is mistaken in attributing to Arcesilaus the view that *epochê* is the aim (*telos*) of inquiry, if that is supposed to mean the ultimate goal (*PH* 1.232). Alternatively, we might read the term *telos* in this remark to refer only to the outcome and not the goal, in which case Sextus would be right (see Hankinson [288] for a discussion of Sextus' use of the term *telos*).
- 10 DL 7. 31–32, 7.2–3, *Acad.* 1.35, Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.5.11–12, 14.6.7. Themistius remarks (*SVF* 1.9) that Zeno was lured to the painted colonnade (*stoa poikilê*) at Athens and presumably to philosophy by reading an account of Socrates' defense speech.
- 11 Dillon [100], pp. 235–7 suggests that Arcesilaus was driven to his sceptical interpretation by the success of Zeno's new Stoicism, understood as an improved Platonism. It seems more likely, however, that Arcesilaus first found his sceptical interpretation of Plato's dialogues and then set his sights on the dogmatic claims of competing schools. See Long [184].
- 12 For a different perspective on the issues in this section and section V, see Katja Vogt, Chapter 8 "Scepticism and Action."
- 13 See Inwood [107], pp. 42–102 and Brennan [98], pp. 51–110.
- 14 This translation requires a slight emendation in the manuscripts, see Bett [42], p. 34.
- 15 Cato invokes Socrates as an example of this sort of corrupting influence (Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder*, pp. 22–23). Numenius retails an

uncharitable view of Carneades' character (*Praep. Ev.* 14.7). It is clear that Carneades was regarded by some as a sophist (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, p. 486).

16 See Annas [172], Algra [168].

17 Following Couissin [179], the majority of recent scholars have taken the dialectical view: Striker [190], Bett [174], [175], Allen [169], [170], Brittain [195]. Görler [83] is a notable exception. See also Obdrzalek [186] who argues that Carneades' theory is fallibilist, but his attitude towards it is not determinable from the evidence we have.

18 The distinction remains controversial, but see Frede [278] for one particularly influential view.

19 See Bett [175], 10 and Striker [190], p. 78.

20 For more on this disagreement in the interpretation of Carneades, see Carlos Lévy, Chapter 4 "The Sceptical Academy: Decline and Afterlife."

21 See also *Inv.* 2.9–10, *ND* 1.12, *Tusc.* 1.8, 2.9, 5.11, *Off.* 2.7, 3.20, *Div.* 2.150. In each of the passages Cicero uses his Latin terms *probabile* and *veri simile* for Carneades' *pithanon* to indicate the quality of a *belief* that has been tested dialectically, found to be more convincing, and accepted as probably true. Although Brittain [195], p. 200 n. 45 acknowledges that Cicero generally characterizes Academic philosophy as a modest fallibilism, he does not consider how odd it is for Cicero to espouse an utterly incompatible account in the *Academica*. See Görler [201] for defense of the view that Cicero's allegiance remained unchanged throughout his life.

22 *ND* 1.11, *Tusc.* 2.4, *Div.* 2.1, *Off.* 2.8.

23 For a more detailed defense of this interpretation see Thorsrud [193].