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Stoics and Skeptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions

The history of Hellenistic philosophy is dominated by the rivalry between Stoics and skeptics, first Academic skeptics and later Pyrrhonian skeptics who tried to revive a more radical form of skepticism when in the second and first centuries B.C. Academic skeptics seemed to have softened their stand to a degree that made it difficult to distinguish them from their Stoic rivals. The debate between Stoics and skeptics primarily concerned the nature and possibility of knowledge. If the skeptics also tried to attack the Stoic position on all other questions, the point of this, at least originally, was in good part to show that the Stoics themselves had failed to attain the knowledge they claimed to be attainable.

Both Stoics and skeptics saw themselves as followers of Socrates, but they took a different view as to the moral to be drawn from Socrates' experience. Socrates by his dialectical practice had shown that, in spite of claims to the contrary, nobody actually possessses the kind of knowledge which would guarantee a rational and happy life, and that, if he himself had any claim to wisdom, it rested only on his ready recognition that he was no less ignorant than anybody else. But Socrates had not resigned himself to his ignorance. And the Stoics seem to have assumed that the reason for this was that Socrates thought that the special kind of knowledge which he had shown people to lack is in fact attainable. They assumed that nature must have constructed human beings in such a way as to make it possible for them to lead a rational and good life. And if this, as Socrates was thought to have shown, is a matter of being wise, nature must also have provided us with the means to gain the kind of knowledge which constitutes wisdom. The skeptics, on the other hand, thought that it remained an open question whether such knowledge could be attained and that hence all one could do meanwhile was go on looking for the truth and subject all claims to the kind of dialectical scrutiny Socrates had subjected them to. Since the Stoa was rapidly developing into the most influential school, it was only natural that the skeptics would turn their dialectical skill in particular against the Stoics who claimed to

be on the way to the kind of knowledge Socrates had searched for in vain.

Now when the Stoics claimed that such knowledge is attainable, they also thought that they had to construct an epistemology in terms of which they could show that and how such knowledge is to be gained. On this account nature has provided us with a firm basis for knowledge by providing us with clear and distinct impressions, the so-called kataleptic or cognitive impressions, which by their very nature cannot be false and hence constitute an unfailing guide to the truths one has to know in order to have the wisdom that guarantees the good life. Thus the Stoic theory of knowledge is based on a doctrine of clear and distinct impressions. Given that the skeptics not only were not persuaded that such knowledge had been attained, but even questioned whether such knowledge was attainable, they naturally focused their attack on the Stoic theory of knowledge and in particular on the Stoic doctrine of clear and distinct impressions by means of which we are supposed to be able to acquire the knowledge in question. As a result a lively debate ensued which lasted for more than two centuries and which attracted the best philosophers of the time.

Tradition, though, has developed a view of the Stoic position which makes it so vulnerable to skeptical attacks that it becomes very difficult to understand how the Stoics, through centuries, were able to sustain the criticism without having to concede defeat. If the Stoics had defended the position that tends to be ascribed to them, their school should have been deserted in no time. That instead it was defended by men of the ingenuity of a Chrysippus should encourage us to take a fresh look at the Stoic position to see whether it might not be more attractive or at least easier to defend than tradition would make us believe.

The Stoic Position

Impressions

Animals and human beings are constructed in such a way that their survival and well-being depends essentially on the adequacy of their cognitions. They have to be able to recognize and to shun what is bad for them, and they have to be in a position to realize and seek out what is conducive to their preservation and well-being. For this purpose they are equipped with a sensory apparatus and a soul which, via the senses, receives impressions of the outside world, and thus provides them with some kind of awareness of the world around them. There is a crucial difference, though, between the impressions of rational beings and the impressions of animals. The impressions of rational beings are called "rational impressions" (D.L. VII 51). Rational impressions have a propositional content, they are impressions to the effect that something is the case very much in the sense in which we might say ordinarily, "the impression which one gets, if one looks at the evidence, is that. . . . " Thus rational impressions are thoughts

(D.L. VII 51; Ps.-Gal. *Def. med.* XIX 381 K.) which present themselves to the mind and which the mind either accepts or refuses to accept. To accept or give assent to a thought or impression is to have the belief that the proposition which forms the content of the impression is true, to refuse to accept a thought is to suspend judgment. Thoughts may present themselves to the mind in all sorts of ways. They may come to mind when one considers the evidence concerning a question in doubt. But many of them are brought about by the causal agency of an external object which, through the sense organs, gives rise to an impression in us. Thus to see something, on this view, is to have a certain kind of thought generated in a certain way. But thoughts may also be generated in all sorts of other ways.

Now the Stoics follow Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the view that it is a mark of moral knowledge that one never has a mistaken view in moral matters. The Stoics even take the stronger view that the wise man will never have any false beliefs at all (Stob. *Ecl.* II 111, 18 W.), because, for reasons we shall see later, any false belief might stand in the way of one's acquiring the kind of knowledge we are after. One way in which nature could construct a mind which has the ability to avoid any false beliefs whatsoever would be to endow the mind with the ability unfailingly to sort the true impressions from the false ones. But such a mind would be superhuman; nothing like the human physiology would be able to support such a powerful mind. Instead nature provided human beings with the ability unfailingly to distinguish true impressions of a certain kind – namely, clear and distinct impressions – from all other impressions whether they are true or not. In this way human beings are not in a position to know all truths but only those whose truth is guaranteed by clear and distinct impressions. But then we do not need to know all truths to lead a good life, and the clear and distinct impressions we receive in the ordinary course of events provide an ample basis for what we need to know. If our ability to know is restricted this way, our ability to avoid false belief is unlimited: all we need to do is not to accept as true any impression that is not guaranteed to be true by clear and distinct impressions. Thus there will be many true impressions which we nevertheless will not give assent to, but there will be no false impressions which we accept as true.

All this presupposes that there is a class of impressions which by their very nature cannot be false and that the mind can discriminate between these and other impressions. Our main task in the following will be to explain how the Stoics could make these assumptions. To understand this, we first have to have a closer look at the Stoic doctrine of rational impressions quite generally.

On the one hand, rational impressions are not mere sensory affections. This distinguishes them from the impressions of irrational animals. There are several passages according to which the Stoics distinguish rational impressions from mere sense-impressions (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 21; SE *M* VII 345). Even the most primitive rational impression, like the impression that this is white, already in-

volves the representation of the object by means of a concept, in this case the concept "white." It is in this way that they require a rational mind and manage to be thoughts and to have a definite propositional content. Sometimes commentators talk as if we applied concepts to objects on the basis of impressions which in themselves are preconceptual. But this cannot be the way the Stoics think of rational impressions. For given an impression which does not yet involve the conceptualization of the object, we could have any number of beliefs about the objects on the basis of such an impression. Hence there would not be any one definite proposition that forms the content of the impression, and assent to the impression would not constitute a definite belief. It may be objected that impressions are supposed to be passive affections of the mind, whereas the mind's conceptualization of an object would be an active contribution of the mind to the impression. But it has to be kept in mind that the Stoics characterize an impression as a passive affection of the mind to contrast it with the act of assent and not to deny that the mind has any part in the formation of a thought. As we shall see, the Stoics think that the kind of impression which we have very much depends on whether our mind is in normal working order; and part of what an object does, when it gives rise to an impression in a rational mind that is in working order, is that it makes the mind conceptualize the object in a certain way. In this sense the rational impression is a passive affection of the mind, though it does involve the operation of the mind. It will also be objected that impressions only give rise to concepts and hence cannot themselves already presuppose concepts. This objection overlooks the developmental character of the Stoic account. Human beings, according to the Stoics, start out as irrational animals. As such they have the kind of sense-impressions which animals have. But in the case of human beings these impressions give rise to concepts of very simple perceptual features like colors, shapes, tastes, and the like, and thus reason slowly starts to grow. Once we have these simple concepts, we can have corresponding rational impressions and, what is more important, corresponding cognitive impressions. These will naturally give rise to more complex concepts, like that of a man or a tree, which in turn will enable us to have more complex rational and in particular cognitive impressions (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 21). Thus these common notions that arise in us naturally on the basis of more primitive impressions turn out to be truly anticipations (Cic. *nd* I 44; *prolēpseis*); for they are needed to form the impressions that afford us a grasp on things (*katalēpsis*); it is in terms of them that the mind has a grasp on things. Thus rational impressions and in particular cognitive impressions do presuppose concepts, but these arise from more primitive impressions that do not presuppose these concepts, and ultimately from sense-impressions that do not presuppose any concepts whatsoever but that are not rational either. Given this developmental account, it is easy to see how the Stoics can claim that concepts only arise from the appropriate impressions and

nevertheless maintain that a rational impression involves the conceptualization of the object.

On the other hand, there is more to a rational impression than just the propositional content. We cannot identify an impression by just specifying the proposition it is a thought of. To have a rational impression is to think a certain proposition in a certain way. The kind of impression we have depends not only on the propositional content, but also on the way in which this content is thought. For the same proposition may be thought in any number of ways, and depending on the way it is thought we get different kinds of impressions. One way they differ is the way in which the subject of the proposition—that is, the object of the thought—is represented in the impression. The thought that this (a book in front of me) is green which I have when I look at the book differs considerably from the thought that this (the very same book) is green which I have when I close my eyes and touch the book, though the propositional content, at least in Stoic logic, is exactly the same. The thought that John's cat is gray is quite different depending on whether I see the cat or whether I am just told that John bought a gray cat, though, again, the propositional content may be exactly the same. But thoughts may also differ in the way in which the feature that is attributed to the object is represented. I may be in the habit of thinking of death as something bad and dreadful, in which case it would be a pain for me to accept the thought that I am dying. If, on the other hand, death is matter of indifference to me, the thought that I am dying would be a rather different kind of thought, whose acceptance would not be a pain. In fact, the Stoics seem to think that all emotions and passions are a matter of accepting thoughts thought in a certain way, and that the way these thoughts are thought is entirely a matter of certain further beliefs we have—in particular, beliefs about what is good and what is bad—which we draw on to represent the object of the impression and the feature attributed to it in the thought. Thus all contents of the mind turn out to be thoughts. And it becomes even more apparent why the Stoics should be so concerned with our ability to distinguish between true and false impressions; for on this view even our feelings and desires turn out to be nothing but a matter of accepting true or false thoughts of a certain kind.

For our purposes one difference in the way objects may be represented in our thoughts deserves special emphasis. If one perceives an object, it tends, at least under normal conditions, to be represented in one's thought in such a way that just on the basis of this very representation one could go on to say lots of things about the object in addition to what one thinks about it, and these things that one could say about it may or may not be things one antecedently believed to be true of the object. In cases in which one neither is perceiving the object nor even has perceived it, the object will be represented in one's thought entirely in terms of what one antecedently believed to be true of it. And thus it will be represented

in terms of general concepts each of which might equally apply to other objects. But if I see the object and think that it is green, the object may not be represented by general concepts at all, except for the concept "green," though it will be represented in such a way that, just on the basis of the impression, we could go on to represent it in terms of a host of concepts.

From what has been said it should be clear that there is some sense in which impressions have parts corresponding to the various features that are represented in the impression—more particularly, a part or parts corresponding to the features in terms of which the object of the thought or the subject of the proposition is represented, and a part or parts corresponding to the feature or features the object is represented as having—that is, a part or parts that correspond to the predicate of the proposition the impression is a thought of. The Stoics seem to be willing to call such parts of impressions "impressions," too. For they call general notions "impressions" (SE *M* VII 246; Plut. *Comm. not.* 1084F; cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 21). But this seems to be misleading, since parts of impressions are not true or false in the way impressions properly speaking are. Hence it might be better to call such parts of impressions "ideas" and to distinguish the way ideas have a propositional content and are true or false from the way impressions properly speaking are propositional and true or false. The Stoics also seem to distinguish between generic, or abstract, and specific, or concrete, ideas (cf. SE *M* VII 246). The idea of man in general, for example, is abstract, whereas the idea of Socrates and the idea of his complection may be specific, or concrete. The fact that we represent an object in an impression by means of a general concept is reflected by the fact that the corresponding part of the impression is an abstract idea. Moreover, we have to assume that the parts of rational impressions are ordered so that their combination in the appropriate order amounts to the thought of a proposition, whereas their combination in a different order might amount to the thought of a different proposition or to no thought at all.

To sum up: impressions are impressions of an object; in the case of rational impressions this impression consists in a thought concerning the object; such a thought involves the conceptualization of the object, but it need not be, and in the case of perception is not, entirely conceptual; nevertheless, the thought is the thought of a proposition; but it is characterized not only by the proposition it is a thought of, but also by the way this proposition is thought; the way a proposition is thought depends on the way the constituents of the proposition are represented in the thought; this representation does not have to be entirely conceptual—that is, it does not have to consist entirely of abstract ideas—in order to represent a constituent of a proposition and in order to be constitutive of a thought; in the case of perception the thought is partly nonconceptual; it nevertheless is a thought, because it does involve the conceptualization of the object, and in particular because it minimally involves the kind of conceptualiza-

tion of its object which gives it a propositional content that is true or false, as a result of which the thought itself can be said to be true or false.

Cognitive Impressions

How could there be impressions that cannot fail to be true, not for the trivial reason that they are true or correspond to the facts, but because of some other feature that is logically independent of their truth? It seems that there could be such a feature, namely the property of having a certain kind of causal history, and that the Stoics are relying on this feature.

Impressions have a certain causal history. In the course of this history all sorts of things can go wrong. The mind, for example, may be defective and hence produce the wrong impression. In the case of vision the light may be wrong, the distance too big or too small, the sensory apparatus malfunctioning, and as a result we may get a false impression. On the other hand, it stands to reason that nature has constructed things in such a way that under normal conditions the impression we receive is true. If under normal conditions something appears to be red or appears to be a human being, then it is red or is a human being. Thus impressions with the right kind of history cannot fail to be true, though the fact that they have this kind of history is logically independent of their truth. Let us call such impressions "normal."

There are different kinds of normal impressions. In particular it seems useful to distinguish two kinds. If, for example, I have the impression that $2 + 2 = 4$ because I have a proof for the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$, my impression will have the right kind of causal history that will guarantee its truth. But it is not a causal history that links the object of the impression, say the number 4, with my impression; the impression, though produced in an appropriate, normal way, is not produced or caused by the object of the impression itself. It is, at least according to the Stoics, only in cases of perception that the normal impression is caused by the object itself. Hence it will be useful to treat normal impressions of this particular kind as a separate class and to call them "perceptual impressions."

That the Stoics think of cognitive impressions as normal is suggested by the following. Sextus Empiricus (*M* VII 247) characterized noncognitive impressions quite generally as those one comes to have because of some abnormal condition (*pathos*). "Abnormal condition" here can hardly refer just to abnormal states of mind; for even in a normal state of mind one will have noncognitive impressions – for example, if one is seeing something from too far away. Hence "abnormal conditions" here has to be understood as referring to a whole set of normal conditions. And in SE *M* VII 424 we are in fact given such a set of conditions for the case of vision. Five conditions have to be met for a visual impression to be cognitive: conditions on the sense organ, on the object of vision, on

how the object is placed, on how the impression comes about, and on the state of mind. And though this is not said explicitly, it is strongly suggested that if these conditions are met, the impression will be cognitive. Similarly Cicero (*Acad.* II 19) refers to such a set of sufficient and necessary conditions for cognitive impressions.

Moreover, though this is a matter of considerable controversy, it also seems that the Stoics think of cognitive impressions as perceptual. Aetius (*Plac.* IV 8.1) explicitly says that cognitive impressions come about through a sense organ. Cicero talks of cognitive impressions as if they originated in the senses (*Acad.* II 83). And the way the Stoics define cognitive impressions (they are supposed to arise from an object) and what they have to say about the clearness and distinctness of impressions make straightforward sense only for perceptual impressions.

What seems to stand in the way of this assumption is the following. The Stoics clearly assume that there are nonperceptual cognitions, namely, in those cases where we have a proof of a theorem (DL VII 52). But it is also the case that according to the Stoics even nonperceptual cognitions involve impressions. (SE *M* VII 370). Hence, it seems natural to assume that the impressions involved in cognitions, whether they are perceptual or not, are cognitive. Moreover, there are texts which claim that a cognition consists in the assent to a cognitive impression (SE *M* VII 151; VIII 397). Hence, if there are nonperceptual cognitions, there should be nonperceptual cognitive impressions. Finally, cognitive impressions are supposed to be the criterion of truth. Whatever else this may mean, it must mean that the truth of cognitive impressions is the guarantee of the truth of whatever impressions the wise man accepts as true. But if we restrict cognitive impressions to perceptual impressions, it is difficult to see how their truth would suffice as a basis to guarantee the truth of all other impressions the wise man will accept as true.

To deal with the last point first, we have to take into account that the Stoics seem to think that all features of objects—that is, of sensible bodies—are perceptible. Thus they think that we can even learn to see that something or somebody is beautiful, good, or virtuous (Plut. *Comm. not.* 1062C; *Stoic. rep.* 1042E-F; Cic. *ND* II 145), just as we have to learn to see that something is a man or a horse (Cic. *Acad.* II 21). If this at first sight seems strange, we have to remember that according to the Stoics, qualities of bodily objects like virtue are bodies themselves that form a mixture with the bodies they are the qualities of and hence cannot fail to affect our perception of the objects, given that our perception, at least if trained, is extremely discriminatory; a virtuous body must look quite different from a vicious body to a trained eye. Thus perception, as the Stoics understand it, provides a much broader basis than we would assume. And it will also turn out, when we consider the doctrine of the criterion, that the Stoics do in fact think that all other impressions can be accepted as true to

the extent that their truth is guaranteed by the truth of perceptual impressions. Thus Cicero (*Acad.* II 21–22) points out that at some time in our development we come to have the (nonperceptual) cognition that if something is a man, it is a mortal rational animal. But when he explains why this cannot but be true, he does not say that the corresponding impression is cognitive; instead he says that it cannot be false because it is due to impressions that cannot be false, namely, cognitive impressions that are perceptual.

Once we realize that all truths available to us are supposed to be certified by the truth of perceptual impressions, it seems fairly clear that our problem about the scope of cognitive impressions is not so much a problem concerning Stoic doctrine but rather a problem concerning terminology. In fact, it is rather similar, and materially related, to the problem which we have about the scope of "clear" or "evident" and which it seems best to solve by distinguishing between self-evident impressions and impressions whose evidence depends on the evidence of other impressions. Similarly, it seems that the Stoics take the view that only perceptual impressions are cognitive in their own right. Thus other impressions can be called cognitive only to the extent that they have a cognitive content which depends on the cognitive content of impressions which are cognitive in their own right. Thus we may distinguish between self-evident impressions which are cognitive in a narrow sense, and evident impressions which are cognitive in a wider sense. And if we do so, we can say with Sextus Empiricus that a cognition consists in the assent to a cognitive impression, and we can also say that any cognition, whether perceptual or not, involves a cognitive impression, and nevertheless assume that cognitive impressions, strictly speaking, are perceptual.

Perceptual impressions, in addition to being normal and hence true, have certain other features that are of interest for our purposes. In the case of perceptual impressions, the impression represents the object the way it does because the object is this way—that is, all representational features of the impression are due to the object and not to some abnormal condition that would cause the mind to produce an impression different from the one it would produce normally. Thus a perceptual impression in no way misrepresents its object. But considering the purpose for which we have been endowed with cognition, it also stands to reason that nature has constructed things in such a way that under normal conditions we not only have an impression which does not misrepresent things but have one which represents them clearly, that is, affords us a clear answer as to what kinds of objects we are facing. And under normal conditions we do in fact have a clear view of an object we are confronted with, and we can tell without difficulty what its visual features are. Let us call such an impression "clear" or "evident."

The term "evident" has been used, misused, and misunderstood in many ways. To guard against such misunderstanding of the Stoic position some remarks may be in order. The adjective "evident" (*enargēs*) can be used in ordinary Greek to qualify a term "A" to refer to something as being obviously an

A; thus an evident robber is somebody who quite obviously is a robber (Soph. *O.T.* 535). But even in ordinary Greek the term can be used in cases in which appearances are deceptive; the evident ox may not be an ox at all, but Zeus in disguise (cf. Soph. *Tr.* 11). Things also can be said to evidently appear to be a certain way. And hence it is easy for philosophers to move on to talk of evident appearances or evident impressions, though by this they obviously do not mean to suggest that some of our impressions are such that it is evident they are impressions. This move must have been facilitated by the fact that even in ordinary Greek, dream images can be said to be evident (Aesch. *Pers.* 179). Given the ordinary use of the term, evidence suggests but does not guarantee truth. Thus Platonists (cf. SE *M* VII 143) and, of course, Academics (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 34) do not take evidence to be a criterion of truth. Theophrastus, on the other hand, seems to have been the first philosopher to assume that it does guarantee truth (cf. SE *M* VII 218), and in this he was followed by the Epicureans and the Stoics. Since they cannot rely on ordinary usage for this assumption, we have to look for some argument that would justify this restricted use of the term "evident" or the assumption that even given the ordinary use it turns out that only true impressions are evident. The Stoics may have argued along the following lines: we can learn to see whether something is an ox or a robber; and under normal conditions, if nothing impedes our seeing things clearly, we do see whether something is an ox or only an ox in disguise; for the only things that can really look and move like oxen are oxen; thus something cannot be an evident ox without being a real ox. For it could appear to be an ox without being one only if we had not yet learned to see oxen properly or if our view was somehow impeded because one of the normal conditions was not met; but in this case the ox would not be evident. Evidence is an objective feature of impressions which is not to be confused with a subjective feeling of conviction or certainty, however strong that feeling may be, just as having a clear view of something is a matter of objective fact and not of subjective feeling. How we know that an impression is evident is a different matter, to which we will turn later; for this, our "feeling" may very well be relevant, but it seems, even in optimal circumstances, to be no more than a symptom of the evidence of an impression.

To get clearer about the notion of evidence which is in question here, it may be useful to consider the connection between truth and evidence. Impressions are true, because their propositional content is true, and not because of the way this propositional content is thought, that is, represented in the impression. The same propositional content, as we have seen, can be thought in all sorts of different ways, and correspondingly we get different kinds of impressions; but this difference between the impressions is of no relevance of their truth, which entirely depends on the truth of the proposition. Evidence, on the other hand, is primarily a feature of impressions which does depend on the way a proposition is represented by thought. Thus the same proposition that this is octagonal can be

thought by an evident thought when I see an octagonal tower under normal conditions, and by a nonevident thought, if I just know from a book that the tower is octagonal. Propositions only secondarily may be called evident, if there should be any propositions that cannot be thought at all except by evident thoughts. What makes a thought or an impression evident is that it is already part of the representation of the subject of the proposition that the predicate should be true of it and that the representation of the subject is entirely due to the subject itself. Thus evidence is not what makes an impression or a proposition true, but an evident impression cannot but have a true proposition for its content and hence be true itself.

So far it would seem that for the impression that S is P to be evident, the representation of S already has to represent S as being P. But it seems that under normal conditions, when we have a clear view of an object, more than one of its features is clearly represented. And, in fact, Sextus (*M* VII 248, 250, 251) talks as if a cognitive impression captured all the characteristics of the object in precise manner. Cicero, on the other hand, explains that a cognitive impression does not pick up all the features of an object, but only all those features which are appropriate for its kind, visual features in the case of vision, auditory features in the case of hearing, etc. (*Acad.* I 42). Since even the weaker claim is extraordinarily strong, it will be safer to follow Cicero. In this case a cognitive impression will be evident in that it involves a representation of the object which clearly represents all the features of the object that are appropriate for the kind of impression it is; and since it represents all the features of the object in question, it will also represent the particular feature which it represents it as having, that is, the feature attributed to it in the proposition.

Cognitive impressions are not only clear, as opposed to obscure (*amudros;* cf. Alex. Aphrod. *De an.* 71.5ff.), they also are distinct (*ektupos;* cf. DL VII 46), as opposed to confused (sugkechumenos; cf. SE *M* VII 171). To see what their distinctness is supposed to consist in, it will be useful to refer to a doctrine which is never explicitly attributed to the Stoics but which we do find in Hellenistic dogmatic medicine and of which we have some reason to believe that it is in part of Stoic origin. According to this doctrine, the discriminatory power of the senses far outruns the ability of the mind to conceptualize the object. Thus, if under normal conditions we see an object clearly, its features are represented in the impression in such detail that our concepts do not capture them in all their detail. Hence, though a normal impression, as a rational impression, has a propositional content, the way it represents the subject of the proposition cannot be exhausted by any number of propositions (cf. Gal. *De loc. aff.* VIII 86.12ff., 87.4, 117.6 339.13, 355; *De praesag. ex puls.* IX 366.10K; *De sanit. tuenda,* CMG V 4.1, p. 185, 16). Now the Stoics assume that the properties of bodies themselves are particular (Cic. *Acad.* II 56). Hence they are called "*idiōmata,*" that is, properties (SE *M* VII 248). And they seem to be particular not in the

sense that Socrates' wisdom is Socrates' wisdom rather than Plato's wisdom, but in the sense that they are qualitatively different individuals. After all, on the Stoic theory, Plato's wisdom and Socrates' wisdom quite literally are two particular bodies, which, by the law of the identity of indistinguishables which the Stoics adhere to, should be internally distinct and not just differ in their relational properties. A property, given its intimate connection and interdependence with the whole body it is the property of, cannot but take a certain form reflecting the idiosyncrasy of the object and hence be peculiar to it. Moreover, both Sextus and Cicero emphasize the artistic precision with which the features of the object are represented in a cognitive impression down to their last detail (SE *M* VII 248, 250–251; cf. "*subtiliter impressa*" in Cic. *Acad.* II 34). Hence a cognitive impression of an object will involve a representation of this object which is so articulate that the only object which will fit this representation is the very object the impression has its origin in (cf. SE *M* VII 252). This feature of cognitive impressions, that they represent their objects in such detail as to fit only them, is their distinctness. Since the Stoics assume that clear impressions represent all the relevant features of an object, cognitive impressions will be highly distinct.

Now normal impressions in general and perceptual impressions in particular have been characterized in such a way that their normality or perceptuality is a relational feature of these impressions, a feature which these impressions do not have by themselves, but only in virtue of the fact that they stand in a certain relation to the world. Hence it would seem that to determine whether an impression is cognitive or perceptual it will not suffice just to consider the impression by itself; we also have to consider its relation to the world.

But the Stoics also seem to assume that cognitive impressions by themselves differ from all other impressions, that there is some internal characteristic that serves to mark them off from other kinds of impressions and allows the mind to discriminate between cognitive and noncognitive impressions without having to consider their relation to the world (Cic. *Acad.* I 41). Cognitive impressions are supposed to differ from noncognitive impressions in the way in which horned serpents differ from all other kinds of snakes, that is, by some internal differentiating mark (SE *M* VII 252). The reason the Stoics postulate such a mark is easy to see. All the mind has to go by is its thoughts or impressions. If there is not a privileged set of impressions which we can rely on to be true, we shall be reduced to considerations of plausibility and coherence, to inferences to the best available explanation for our impressions, to decide which of them to accept as true and which to reject as false or to suspend judgment on. But even in the best of all circumstances such considerations could not fail to occasionally produce wrong conclusions, and there is nothing to guard us against the possibility that they generate conclusions which are so much off the mark that they would disrupt our life radically. But the Stoics want to argue that we are entirely responsible for our life and for that reason nature has put us into the position to avoid

any false beliefs at all. And the only way to do this, it seems, is to provide us with impressions which cannot but be true and which we can discriminate.

Most of us will be thoroughly disinclined to believe that there is such a qualitative difference between our impressions. But one has to keep in mind that its postulation fits in with Stoic physics without any difficulty. Given that according to Stoic physics all states of the world and all parts of a state of the world are closely interdependent, any variation of the conditions under which an impression arises should affect the impression itself. Thus the assumption that normal impressions have a distinctive character seems not to be ad hoc but to be required by Stoic physics anyway. Even if this were not so, it would not be much of a problem for an omniscient nature to ensure that only impressions which have a normal history have a certain distinctive character which is the effect of the kind of history they have. Moreover, we have to take into account that it is part of the Stoic position that we are so corrupted that we tend to give assent to and to act on cognitive and noncognitive impressions rather indiscriminately. Hence our awareness of their difference is not just seriously retarded but also very distorted. And in any case it does not follow from the fact that we have such difficulties in telling whether an impression is cognitive or not, that there is no clear difference between them. Finally it has to be kept in mind that Plato and Aristotle had already made very strong claims regarding the power of the knowledge they attributed to the wise man; the man of practical wisdom is always right in practical matters. The Stoics explicitly refer to this Aristotelian doctrine (Pap. Herc. 1020, col. 1 n., *SVF* II, p. 41, 25), and they just seem to try to provide a theory that would explain how the wise man might manage to invariably get things right. If one gives up this conception of the wise man, one will, of course, not have the motivation the Stoics had to resort to such a strong assumption. But this conception of wisdom was too firmly embedded to be given up lightly in the face of epistemological difficulties.

Stoic Definitions of Cognitive Impressions

On the basis of what has been said, it should be relatively easy to understand the force of the Stoic definitions of cognitive impressions. These come in basically two versions. In a shorter version, which we find in DL VII 46 and SE *M* XI 183, cognitive impressions are defined by two clauses, whereas on the other, more common, version a further clause is added to the two clauses of the shorter version. There may be some truth in Cicero's claim (*Acad.* II 77) that the shorter definition is the one Zeno originally gave, before he went on to add a third clause to avoid an Academic objection, especially since this notice gets some support from Sextus's remark (*M* VII 252) that the Stoics added the third clause only to block an Academic objection based on an assumption which the Stoics did not share.

Let us, then, first consider the definition in its shorter version. To follow the formulation in DL VII 46, an impression is cognitive exactly if (i) it comes about from what is (*apo huparchontos*) and (ii) it is imprinted and impressed in exact accordance with what is. Though this is by no means obvious from the formulation of the second clause by itself, Sextus's comments on this clause in *M* VII 250–251 show that it is supposed to amount to the requirement that the impression be clear and distinct. And this interpretation is borne out by the characterization of noncognitive impressions which in DL follows immediately on the definition of cognitive impressions. According to this definition an impression is noncognitive if "it either is not from what is or, though it is from what is, is not in exact accordance with what is; one which is not clear nor distinct." Here the phrase "one which is not clear nor distinct" looks like a gloss on "is not in exact accordance with what is," that is, the negative counterpart to the second clause in the definition of cognitive impressions. And if this is correct, the second clause of the definition of a cognitive impression should amount to the requirement that cognitive impressions be clear and distinct.

It is tempting to think that the first clause amounts to the requirement that a cognitive impression have its origin in a real object rather than some disturbance or affection of the mind, that the object the impression presents itself as an impression of be a real object rather than a mere figment of the mind. And this seems to be the way Sextus interprets the clause, as one can see from his comments on the first part of the second clause in *M* VII 249. Nevertheless the interpretation of the first clause has been the subject of considerable controversy, which mainly turns around the force of the term "what is" (*huparchon*). It has been pointed out that Cicero in this context again and again renders "*huparchon*" by "what is true," that is, understands "what is" in the sense of "what is the case" (cf. *Acad.* II 42, 112), and that the Stoics do use "*to huparchon*" for a true proposition. Against this it has to be remembered that there is a great number of examples in which Sextus talks of impressions that have their origin in something or other, and that in his examples the something or other in question never is a proposition but always a real or a fictional object.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to think that Cicero's rendering is not a mere mistranslation or due to misinterpretation, but rests on the correct assumption that the first clause was not meant to amount to the requirement that the impression should have its origin in a real object, but to the stronger requirement that it be altogether true. That this assumption may be correct is suggested by *M* VII 402ff. There Sextus, following Carneades, argues that there are impressions which have their origin in what is not, but which present themselves as impressions which have their origin in what is just as much as purportedly cognitive impressions do. And as an example of such an impression Sextus adduces the case of Heracles who in his madness took his own children to be those of Eurystheus. Heracles here is explicitly said to have an impression that has its

origin in his own children who are standing in front of him, that is, in a real external object. And nevertheless this impression, too, is supposed to be an example of an impression that has its origin in what is not. The reason for this must be that the impression is false in that it represents Heracles' children as being Eurystheus's children. In what sense could such an impression be said to have its origin in what is not? The answer seems to be that the impression does not as a whole have its origin in what is; part of it—namely, the part that represents Heracles' children as being Eurystheus's children—is made up by the mind and is not due to the object. We saw earlier that it is characteristic of perceptual impressions that all their representational features are due to the object. In this sense, only true impressions, and more particularly impressions that are true not by accident, have their origin in what is. If we interpret the first clause in this way, not only do we not have to assume that Cicero has misunderstood the Stoic definition, it will also be easy to explain why the third clause of the longer version of the definition—which runs, "it is such that it could not come about from what is not"—is standardly interpreted as meaning that a cognitive impression has to be such that it could not be false (cf. SE *M* VII 152, 252; Cic. *Acad.* II 42, 112). But even a confused and obscure impression may be entirely true and true not by accident but because all of its representational features are due to the object that has given rise to it. Hence, to single out cognitive impressions, the second clause is added. So much about the shorter version of the Stoic definition of cognitive impressions.

Standardly, though, the Stoics define cognitive impressions by adding a third clause. A cognitive impression is supposed to satisfy the further requirement that it be "such that an impression of this character could not come about from what is not" (SE *M* VII 248, 252; DL VII 50). This, as we noted above, is taken to imply that an impression of this character could not be false (cf. SE *M* VII 152, 252). Given the strong reading of "has its origin in what is," it is easy to see how the clause would have this implication. The main question concerning the third clause is the identity of the character referred to. Is this a further characteristic of cognitive impressions which is postulated, but not specified by the definition, or is it the property of satisfying the first two conditions, or is it perhaps just the property of being clear and distinct? The phrase "of this character" (*hoia*) is ambiguous in this respect.

Given what we said earlier about cognitive impressions, it seems most plausible to take this to refer to the distinctive inherent feature that cognitive impressions are supposd to have. And this seems to be confirmed by remarks in Sextus (*M* VII 252) and in Cicero (*Acad.* II 77) which suggest that the Stoics think that any impression which satisfies the first two conditions will in fact also satisfy the third condition, but that they add the third clause because this implication is denied by the Academics, though both agree that cognitive impressions, in order to play the role assigned to them by the Stoics, would have to satisfy the

third condition, too. And this dispute about the third clause turns out to be a dispute about whether cognitive impressions have an internal differentiating feature (cf. SE *M* VII 252). Hence, it would seem that the third clause refers to this distinctive feature of cognitive impressions, which is postulated, but not specified.

The Criterion

To get a clearer notion of this feature and of the role it is supposed to play in cognition, it will be useful to briefly consider in which way cognitive impressions are supposed to constitute the criterion or canon of truth. We have already seen that they are not a criterion of truth in the sense that they put us in a position to determine the truth of any proposition whatsoever. There are lots of propositions that cannot be certified by them. Nor are they the criterion of truth in the sense that whenever the truth of a proposition is in question, we at least consider the corresponding impression and try to determine by introspection whether it has the distinctive mark of a cognitive impression. There are several reasons why this can hardly be the Stoic view of the matter.

First of all, cognitive impressions will directly guarantee only the truth of their own propositional content. And if it is true that cognitive impressions are perceptual, the only propositions whose truth they can guarantee directly are propositions that attribute a perceptual feature to a particular object. If they nevertheless are called *the* criterion of truth, it is because in an indirect way they also guarantee the truth of all other propositions that are known to be true by human beings. And they do this in the following way. They give rise to general ideas, the so-called common notions which the mind forms naturally on the basis of cognitive impressions and which in turn allow us to have further cognitive impressions. And since cognitive impressions do represent things as they are, the common notions based on them will represent things as they are. Thus if the common notion of a man represents a man as a biped rational animal, the proposition that man is a biped rational animal will be certified not by an impression that man is a biped rational animal, which is cognitive in its own right, but by the common notion, and this in turn will be certified by the cognitive impressions which give rise to it and which it gives rise to, and these will be cognitive in their own right (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 22). And the truth of propositions certified by cognitive impressions and of propositions certified by common notions in turn will guarantee the truth of further propositions derived by deductive inference from the former propositions. It is for this reason that Chrysippus sometimes can say that perceptions and common notions constitute the criterion (DL VII 54). Cognitive impressions, then, are the criterion of truth in the sense that their truth guarantees the truth of whatever can be known by human beings. It is only through them that we have any knowledge of what is true and what is not true.

Second, we have to remember that there is no such thing as the impression that corresponds to a given proposition, and, therefore, when the truth of a prop-

osition is in question, we may have to go through a number of impressions all of which have the proposition in question as their propositional content till we hit upon a cognitive impression. Thus we may not be certain of the color of an object we see in the distance. As we move nearer we have a series of different impressions which all may be impressions that the object is blue. Similarly in the case of a theoretical problem our impression of the proposition in question will change as we consider the matter. The impression we have when we have a proof for a proposition is quite different from the impression that we had to start with. Thus cognitive impressions cannot be the criterion in the sense that we just have to look at our impressions to determine whether a proposition is true. It is, rather, by considering the proposition that we may get a clearer and clearer impression.

Most important, though, we have to avoid thinking of Stoic impressions as pictures or images of the world which can be looked at introspectively, with the mind's eye, as it were, to see whether they have this feature that guarantees their truth. What we see and grasp, according to the Stoics, are objects in the world, and not pictures or images of them, though grasping objects does involve the awareness of their representations in the mind, just as it involves an awareness of the mind itself. For we have to take into account that impressions for the Stoics are mental states that are identified as highly complex physical states, as we can see from the fact that originally they were conceived of quite literally as imprints. When Chrysippus objected to this, it was because he thought that they were much more complex than the term "imprint" suggested; in calling them "alterations" or "modifications" (cf. SE *M* VII 229–230; VIII 400; *PH* II 70; DL VII 50) of the mind instead, he deliberately, it seems, left open what their precise nature consists in. There is no suggestion that we could observe them to find out exactly what they are like. It is, of course, true that the Stoics think that impressions reveal themselves along with the object they are impressions of (Aetius, *Plac.* IV 12.2). But all that this means is we can tell what our impressions are; after all, they are our thoughts. But we do not know our thoughts by introspection, nor is there any reason to believe that the Stoics think so. Moreover, if the Stoics thought that we could see by introspection whether an impression has the distinctive feature of a cognitive impression, we would expect them to say, at least on occasion, that the criterion of truth is this feature. But they never say anything of this sort. Also, if they had taken this view, they would have opened themselves to the charge of an infinite regress. For we would have to ask what is supposed to guarantee the truth of the impression that a given impression has this distinctive feature. Quite generally, the criterion will fulfill its role only if it does not require the judgment that an impression is of a certain kind. For this will always raise the question how this judgment is to be certified.

The Stoic theory, I want to suggest, escapes this difficulty because it assumes that the distinctive feature of cognitive impressions is a causal feature of impres-

sions such that cognitive impressions play their criterial role not through our awareness of their distinctive feature, but through the causal effects they have on our minds in virtue of this feature. The word "to discriminate" is ambiguous. It is used in cases in which one recognizes things to be of different kind and, in virtue of this awareness of the difference, treats them differently. But there are also cases in which somebody reacts differently to things of a different kind not in virtue of an awareness of their difference and perhaps even without knowing that there is such a kind of thing which he systematically reacts to in a distinctive manner; there is a causal link between a feature of the object and the behavior of the person, but the awareness of the feature on the part of the person is not an essential part of the causal chain; and nevertheless such a person can be said to discriminate or to discern the feature. Many forms of discrimination in the pejorative sense are of this kind. The suggestion, then, is that the distinctive mark of cognitive impressions is a causal feature in that it makes the mind react in a distinctive way and that it is in this sense that the mind can discriminate cognitive and noncognitive impressions. It can also learn to tell whether an impression is cognitive or not, but that is a different ability not at issue at this point in our argument.

What reason do we have to think that this is the Stoic position? The Stoics assume that cognitive impressions give rise to common notions. Common notions have their privileged status exactly because the mind forms them naturally on the basis of cognitive impressions. Nobody, so at least the Stoics think, can help but end up with the notion of a tree and the notion of a human being and the notion of the color green if he grows up normally in a normal environment. This formation of common notions is not something we engage in deliberately according to certain rules and precepts; if we did, we could make mistakes and end up with the wrong notions. The Stoics clearly assume that the mind sorts out cognitive impressions to form concepts on the basis of them without our being aware of this at all; we just find ourselves having certain concepts that we did not have to start with. Thus the Stoics also must assume that the mind can discriminate cognitive impressions without our being aware of it.

We also have to find some explanation of the fact that the mind gives assent to some impressions but not to others. As soon as the mind has acquired all sorts of beliefs, it is easy to see how it would accept or reject impressions against the background of the beliefs it already has. But in the beginning, it would seem, the mind has no more reason to accept than not to accept any given impression. This problem would be solved if we assume that cognitive impressions cause the mind to accept them. And there is some evidence, though by no means decisive, that this is in fact the Stoic position (cf. SE *M* VII 405, 407; Cic. *Acad.* II 38; Plut. *Adv. Colot.* 1121E, 1122C). This is perfectly compatible with the further Stoic claim that we are responsible for our acts of assent, for it is explicitly not part of the Stoic doctrine of responsibility that we are responsible only for those

things which we could have done otherwise. But it clearly cannot be the Stoic view that we acquire our first beliefs by scanning our impressions and by being caused to assent to those which we detect to have the distinctive remark of cognitive impressions. It, rather, must be the case that the Stoics assume that the mind does this without our being aware of it.

Moreover, the Stoics point out (SE *M* VII 258; Cic. *Acad.* II 19) that if we do not have a clear impression we take the appropriate steps to receive an evident impression, in case the subject is of any importance to us; that is, not having a clear impression naturally makes us consider the matter further till we have a clear impression. The suggestion does not seem to be that we recognize that our impression is confused and obscure and hence decide to get a clearer one, but, rather, that there is a causal mechanism that sets us going and would naturally make us stop once we had a clear impression. For these reasons, then, it seems that the differentiating mark of cognitive impressions is a causal feature rather than a phenomenological character to be detected by introspection.

But this is not to say that we cannot be aware of the fact that an impression is cognitive or noncognitive, that we cannot learn to tell whether an impression is clear and distinct or obscure and confused. In fact, the Stoic view seems to be that this is a matter of practice and that in principle one can get so good at it that one will never take a noncognitive impression to be cognitive. But to learn this is not to acquire a mysterious sixth sense which, unlike the other senses, is not subject to the possibility of abnormal conditions and hence unfailingly gives us notice of an equally mysterious feature of cognitive impressions. Judgments regarding the evidence of an impression are notoriously as fallible as any other judgments, and there is no reason to saddle the Stoics with the assumption that this is not so. But we can get better and better at seeing how variations in the conditions under which our impressions arise, especially variations in our mental state and the beliefs we have, do affect our impression.

Cognition, Knowledge, and the Wise Man

Whereas their predecessors had distinguished only between knowledge and mere opinion, the Stoics distinguish between knowledge, cognition, and mere belief (SE *M* VII 151ff.). Cognition consists in the assent to, or acceptance of, the appropriate kind of impression, that is, an impression that is at least cognitive in the wider sense. A mere opinion, on the other hand, even if it is true, may or may not involve the appropriate kind of impression; if it does, it is also a cognition; but whether it does or not is not what one focuses on when one calls it an opinion. Knowledge differs from cognition in that it involves not only the appropriate kind of impression but also the appropriate kind of assent—namely, the kind of firm assent that one cannot be persuaded to withdraw by any argument to the contrary. This presumably is one reason why we have to try to avoid having any false beliefs whatsoever. For if we do accept a false premise we

might be led by a chain of reasoning to accept the contradictory of what we had already believed to be true, even if we had accepted it on the basis of a cognitive impression. And as long as one is susceptible to this, one's assent will not be firm. On the other hand, once one has learned to accept true impressions only, no amount of dialectical skill will suffice to make one withdraw one's assent from impressions that are cognitive in the wider sense; and then one's assent will be stable and firm or certain; in this sense of "certain" one will have certain knowledge.

All cases of cognition are cases either of knowledge or of opinion. For though they all involve the appropriate kind of impression, they will be a matter either of opinion or of knowledge depending on whether or not they also involve the appropriate kind of assent. Nevertheless, there is a point to the distinction. It emphasizes the fact that the conditions on knowledge are so strong that only the wise man will have knowledge (SE *M* VII 152, 432). In fact, his wisdom will consist in this kind of knowledge. The ordinary person will have nothing but mere beliefs, for he is not yet able to avoid any false belief and hence his assent is not yet firm. But it is important that many of his beliefs are at least cognitive. For they will afford him a basis to acquire the knowledge that constitutes wisdom.

This view has one consequence that hardly seems to have been noticed, but which is highly relevant to our topic. For the Stoics also assume that there are no wise men or at least that not even the members of their own school have attained the blissful state of wisdom (SE *M* VII 432–33). It immediately follows that there is no knowledge or at least that the Stoics do not have any knowledge. And once we realize this, all sorts of Stoic texts with a strong skeptical flavor come to mind. Thus Seneca (*De ben.* IV 33.2) says: "We never expect completely certain cognition of things, since the exploration of truth is extremely difficult; we follow where likelihood guides us." The Stoic claim is not that they have attained the knowledge Socrates tried to find, but rather that the knowledge Socrates was after is attainable by human beings.

The Skeptical Attack

It should be clear, then, that skepticism did not arise as a reaction to overly confident claims to knowledge on the part of the Stoics. The Stoics were in no mood to make such claims. But the Stoics did claim some expertise, and on the authority of this expertise tried to put forth views on the nature and the material content of the knowledge Socrates had been looking for in vain. Hence the central role of the notion of a dogma and the charges of dogmatism in skeptical attacks on Stoicism. Moreover, the view the Stoics did adopt turned out to be extremely revisionist and literally paradoxical. Thus it would easily occur to one to subject the Stoic claims to exactly the kind of dialectic that Socrates had used

to test and expose unfounded claims to expertise. And this is precisely what the skeptics did.

Now there are some crucial features of Socratic dialectic which it is worthwhile to recall if we want to understand the skeptical position. The Socratic method allows one to test expertise in a subject without being oneself an expert in this subject—in fact, without committing oneself to or even having any views on the subject. All one has to do is to show that the person who claims expertise or makes statements with the air of authority involves himself in contradictions concerning the very subject he claims to be an expert in or that he is unable to discard a thesis which is the contradictory of a thesis he has put forth with the air of expertise. For if he were an expert, he should be able to defend his position against theses to the contrary, and he certainly should not involve himself in contradictions. Hence such dialectical arguments are not meant to establish the truth or falsehood of some thesis. All they are meant to show is that the opponent is no authority on the matters in question.

It is important to keep this in mind, because otherwise one might be misled into thinking that the skeptics themselves accept either the premises or the conclusions of their arguments. Thus one might think that the ancient Academic skeptic fits the prevailing modern notion of what a skeptic is, in that he believes that all that is given to us are our impressions and that he tries to convince us that since this is so, there is no way in which we ever can have certain knowledge of what the world that gives rise to these impressions really is like. The skeptic may argue this way, but if he does so, it is just another *ad hominem* argument against those who believe that all that is given to us immediately are our impressions. There is no reason why the skeptic himself should feel committed to this very dogmatic, speculative, unskeptical assumption and the dualism between the mental and the physical, the subject and the object which tends to go with it. Thus it is not surprising that in other contexts the skeptic is quite willing to challenge the dogma of the impression as a given (Gal. *De diff. puls.* VIII 710, 18ff. K.; *De praenot.* XIV 628, 14ff.). He is quite willing to say that some things evidently appear to be the case, as we ordinarily do, but he does not think that this commits him to the view that there are such entities as impressions, assents, and evidence. Nor are the skeptics committed to the conclusions of their arguments—for example, the conclusion that there is no knowledge or the conclusion that nothing can be known, or the conclusion that the wise man will suspend judgment on all questions. He is not even committed to the view that the conclusions of his arguments follow from their premises. For, as he will emphasize, he does not subscribe to the canons of logic worked out by his opponents, either (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 91ff.). He is just prepared, for the sake of argument, to meet whatever standards of logic are met or required by his opponents. For otherwise his arguments will not have the desired effect on them.

What is the envisaged effect of such arguments? Reporting his experience the skeptic might say that they tend to leave one with the impression that the Stoics have not successfully argued their case concerning the nature and the attainability of knowledge. They may also tend to leave one with the impression that it is doubtful whether such a case can be made at all. More generally, it will appear doubtful whether the case for any revisionist conception of knowledge can be made; we might just have to accept the fact that all that is available to us is the kind of everyday knowledge the vulgar have. Even more generally, it may appear doubtful whether the case for any position can be made. On the other hand, it would not be desirable, from the skeptic's point of view, if one was left with the impression that the positions attacked by him are false, or that, even if they are true, there is no way to definitively establish them as true. This would lead to a dogmatic pseudoskepticism quite alien to true Academic or Pyrrhonean skepticism (cf. SE *PH* I 200, 226, 236; Gal. *De subf. emp.* 84, 22 D.).

Given the central position of the doctrine of cognitive impressions in Stoic epistemology, it is not surprising that the skeptics focused their attack on this doctrine. And here the main point at issue was whether cognitive impressions differ qualitatively from all other impressions. This, as we saw, is an assumption so central to the Stoic position that Zeno already added it to his definition of cognitive impressions. The skeptics were quite willing, at least for the sake of argument, to accept the first part of the definition and to grant that there may be impressions that have their origin in what is and that represent their object faithfully and clearly (SE *M* VII 402). But they took issue with the added assumption that such an impression, just given its internal characteristics, could have no other origin than the object it faithfully represented, that there could not be an impression exactly like it which was nevertheless false. Already Arcesilaus attacked the further assumption (Cic. *Acad.* II 77; SE *M* VII 154), Carneades pursued the same line of attack (SE *M* VII 164, 402ff.), and it was to remain the main point of contention throughout the debate (Cic. *Acad.* II 33, 78; SE *M* VII 252).

We have only a rather general idea of the form this debate took, since its details have not been studied with the care they deserve. Apparently, the skeptics adopted the strategy of arguing for the more general thesis that for any true impression there could be another impression exactly like it which is false (Cic. *Acad.* II 40, 41, 42; 44, 84, 90; SE *M* VII 154, 164, 252, 402, 415, 428), or at least one which differs so minimally from the true one that we cannot distinguish between it and the true one and which, nevertheless, is false (Cic. *Acad.* II 40, 85). More particularly, they seem to have argued the matter for the various kinds of true impressions, kind by kind (Cic. *Acad.* II 42). In the case of cognitive impressions, they did so in at least two ways. To start with, they tried to show that there are impressions which, as far as their representational features are concerned, differ in no way, or at least in no discriminable way, from cognitive impressions, though they themselves are not true. But then they also tried

to show that there are impressions which have all the supposed characteristics of cognitive impressions – which, for example, are vivid or striking, or which at least could not be distinguished from a cognitive impression by the person who has the impression at the time he has them, and which nevertheless are false (SE *M* VII 408).

Let us first turn to the impressions that are supposed to be exactly like, or at least indistinguishable from, cognitive impressions in the way in which they represent their object (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 84ff.; SE *M* VII 408ff.). Suppose that Socrates is standing in full view in front of one; in this case one may have the cognitive impression that this is pale or that this is a man or even that this is Socrates, if one has learned to grasp his Socraticity and has a corresponding idea of Socrates. Now also suppose that Socrates has a twin brother, whom we do not know anything about, but who is exactly like Socrates, or who at least looks exactly like Socrates. In this case, the skeptic rightly claims, the impression one would have of Socrates' twin brother under identical normal conditions would be exactly like the cognitive impression one has of Socrates. Hence, he goes on to argue, it is not the case, as the Stoics claim, that an impression which has all the characteristics of a cognitive impression can have its origin only in the object which gives rise to it and that there could not be another impression exactly like it which does not have its origin in this object. Moreover, suppose (i) that we first see Socrates and have the cognitive impression that this is Socrates and (ii) that then Socrates disappears and his twin brother takes his place. We would have an impression exactly like our first impression and on the basis of it judge again that this is Socrates. But this impression and the corresponding judgment would be false.

The Stoic answer to this relies on the assumption that no two objects are exactly alike (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 85). Thus Socrates and his twin brother will differ from each other at least minimally. Hence, a cognitive impression of Socrates, being by definition distinct, could not be exactly like an impression that had its origin in his twin brother. If the impression one received of Socrates were exactly like the one which one received of his twin brother, both impressions would be confused and hence not cognitive. But the impressions we receive of Socrates and his twin brother do not need to be indistinguishable and hence confused. For, the Stoics assume, the two brothers do differ from each other at least minimally, and by sufficient training we can learn to distinguish perceptually any two perceptible objects (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II 20; 56; 57; 86). Thus we can learn to distinguish Socrates and his twin brother however much they may look alike, and only if we have learned this can we have the cognitive impression that this is Socrates. Hence, it cannot happen that we first have a cognitive impression of Socrates and then a false impression exactly like it that this (Socrates' twin brother) is Socrates.

The crucial issue here is the metaphysical principle of the internal distinctness

of different objects or the identity of indistinguishables. Since this principle is firmly embedded in Stoic metaphysics, their reliance on it here cannot be discounted as an *ad hoc* move. And once this principle is granted, the claim that for any object there could be another object so much like it that we could not possibly discriminate the two is considerably weakened. For though the skeptics can point to many cases in which we could find it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish different objects from each other because of their similarity, the Stoics point out, not without plausibility, that if we just put our mind to it we would also learn to tell these objects apart (Cic. *Acad.* II 56, 57). It also may be mentioned that according to Stoic logic the two impressions one receives when one sees Socrates and his twin brother would differ in one crucial respect even if the two brothers were exactly alike: if they are impressions that this is Socrates, they would differ in propositional content since the demonstrative has a different reference.

Now one may think that the skeptic's case gets a good deal of its force from the fact that it seems to show that even under normal conditions we do not know whether our impression is cognitive, since we do not know whether it is an impression of the object it presents itself as an impression of, or whether it is in fact an impression of an object very much like it which we have not yet learned to distinguish from it. But we have to keep in mind that the Stoics do not deny that we can make the mistake of thinking that an impression is cognitive when it is not. They are committed only to the view that under normal conditions we shall have a cognitive impression of the object in view, that the mind can discriminate the impression as cognitive, and that we could not have the cognitive impression that this is Socrates without being able to distinguish Socrates from all other objects. But this does not mean that we cannot have all sorts of other cognitive impressions of Socrates without being able to distinguish him from all other objects. Similarly, we shall have a cognitive impression of Socrates' twin brother if we see him under normal conditions, even if we do not know him at all, let alone are able to distinguish him from all other objects. But this impression, whichever it is, will be quite different from the cognitive impression that this is Socrates. There is also nothing to prevent us from having the impression, concerning Socrates' twin brother, with him in full view, that this is Socrates. But this impression will not be any of the *cognitive* impressions we have when we have the brother in full view, though we may make the mistake of thinking that it is.

The other line of attack the skeptics choose seems more promising. They point out that even the patently false impressions of dreamers, madmen, and drunkards all seem to have the features supposed to be characteristic of cognitive impressions, or that they at least seem to be indistinguishable from them for the person who has them.

The first thing to notice is that these impressions are due to nonnormal or abnormal states of mind; and it does seem far from obvious that such states of mind

do not have an effect on the internal character of the impressions they produce; in fact, often it seems obvious enough that an abnormal state of mind systematically changes the character of our impressions. And, for reasons indicated above, Stoic physics would seem to require that the internal character of impressions implies a certain state of mind. Second, it needs to be noticed that even if it were the case that in certain abnormal states a person is not in a position to tell whether his impressions are cognitive or not, because the noncognitive ones seem to him to have all the features of cognitive ones, this would not show that he does not have cognitive and noncognitive impressions which differ from each other qualitatively and which his mind discriminates accordingly. And correspondingly we do not find the Stoics arguing that even dreamers and madmen can tell that their dreams and hallucinations are noncognitive, but that even dreamers and madmen react differently to cognitive and noncognitive impressions (cf. SE *M* VII 247). And this seems true enough, if we consider the matter in general. The Stoics are, of course, committed to the view that the mind in each case manages to discriminate between cognitive and noncognitive impressions, but their theory also seems to allow them to explain apparent counterexamples. It is exactly a sign of a severely abnormal state of mind, if the mind treats cognitive and noncognitive impressions almost indiscriminately so that in particular cases there may seem to be no difference in observable behavior.

Thus, it seems that the skeptics fail to show that cognitive and noncognitive impressions do not differ from each other qualitatively and that, hence, the mind cannot discriminate between them on the basis of their inherent difference. They even fail to show that it is impossible to tell absolutely reliably whether one's impression is cognitive or not. What they perhaps do show is that we, in our present state, cannot invariably tell whether an impression is cognitive or not. But then the Stoics would be the last to deny that.

Conclusion

Academic skepticism is not characterized by a certain philosophical position, by a set of philosophical views Academics are expected to subscribe to, but by a certain dialectical practice and the impression the purusit of this dialectical practice left on them. Now it seems that earlier Academic skeptics like Arcesilaus and Carneades were left with the impression that they had no reason to accept philosophical beliefs. Whatever reasons they may have had when they started out had been neutralized by arguments to the contrary. Later Academic skeptics, though, starting with Metrodorus and Philo, seem to have had the impression that however much one argued on both sides of any philosophical or theoretical question, one still may find in the end that, as a matter of fact, one is still inclined toward one side of the matter, that there is no reason to think that this is just due to the fact that one is lacking in dialectical skill or has not considered the

matter carefully enough, and that there is no reason not to report which view one feels inclined to, at least as long as one is among one's peers and there is no danger that one's report is mistaken for an authoritative statement, as it might be, for example, by young students. As a result many Academic skeptics came to articulate quite elaborate philosophical beliefs. And given the dominance of Stoicism and the syncretism of the time, these often hardly differed from the views of their Stoic rivals. And since the Stoics did not claim knowledge for their views either, the two positions became more and more difficult to distinguish, as soon as one left the field of epistemology. But given that both sides now tended to have more or less the same beliefs on the basis of the same considerations anyway, the epistemological debate must have started to look somewhat academic and futile, especially since it seemed to have ended in a deadlock. Galen (*De dogm. Plat: et Hipp.* 796, 8ff. M) could even claim the following: the younger Academics say that everything should be judged by means of plausible, tested, incontrovertible impressions (the Carneadean "criterion"), Chrysippus maintains that matters should be judged by cognitive impressions, and common sense tells us that it is all a matter of perception and evident thought; but their disagreement is only verbal: if one considers the matter more closely, Galen says, one will see that they all advocate the same epistemic practice.

Thus it is not surprising that some skeptics thought that the Academy had become unfaithful to its skeptical tradition and that they tried to revive the radical skepticism of the early Academics, but now under the name of "Pyrrhonism" to distinguish themselves from their Academic contemporaries. But by this time, it seems, the Stoics were no longer inclined to engage in a real debate on the matter and to refine their position accordingly. And thus orthodox Stoicism itself was soon a matter of the past, whose views only lived on in the more or less distorted form in which they were assimilated into other systems. And in this distorted form the Stoics' views on cognitive impressions and their clarity and distinctness, in fact the whole Stoic epistemology, have exercised, through surviving Greek and Latin authors like Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, an enormous influence well into modern times.