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## ACADEMIC PROBABILISM AND STOIC EPISTEMOLOGY

### [1]

Developments in the Academy from the time of Arcesilaus to that of Carneades and his successors tend to be classified under two heads: scepticism and probabilism. Carneades was principally responsible for the Academy's view of the latter subject, and our sources credit him with an elaborate discussion of it. The evidence furnished by those sources is, however, frequently confusing and sometimes self-contradictory. My aim in this paper is to extract a coherent account of Carneades' theory of probability from the testimony with a further end in view, namely to understand better the uses to which that theory was put by the Academy in its debate with the Stoa. Though it is not its principal object, the investigation should also help make clear how the Academy's scepticism and its probabilism were related to each other as parts of a single consistent practice of philosophy.

The debate in which the Academic theory of probability made its first appearance began with the Academy's attack on the cognitive impression, or more precisely, on the Stoics' claim that there is such a thing, an impression which affords a perfectly accurate grasp of its object and does so in a way that allows us to discriminate in its favour. In other words, the principal point of contention between the Academy and the Stoa was the existence of a class of self-evident perceptual impressions, impressions which furnish an unmistakable guarantee of their own truth (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.68, 78). The cognitive impression, for which the Stoics made these claims, played a crucial part in their epistemology; access to the truth of the non-fortuitous kind that gives rise to knowledge ultimately depends, according to them, on the cognitive impression. This is what is meant by calling the cognitive impression the criterion of truth. Thus, as the Stoics were not slow to remark, the abolition of the cognitive impression at which the Academy's arguments aim threatened to open up a very large gap. What, they pressed their Academic opponents, was to play the part which it had seemed only the cognitive impression could play? The first and best understood use to which the Academy put its account of probability was to answer this challenge by showing that we can do perfectly well without the cognitive impression by relying on probable impressions instead. I want eventually to suggest that they put their proposal to a second, less well understood use as well: to show not only that we do not need, but also, again and in a new way, that we cannot have, the cognitive impression. But this suggestion and the argument supporting it will have to wait until we have arrived at a better understanding of the proposal itself. To this end, we must first look at the larger context of debate to which the Academy's probabilism belonged and the first of the purposes it served there.

As is now well understood, the Academics' method of argument was dialectical. Their model was actual face to face discussion of the kind practised by Socrates and depicted by Plato in his early dialogues. In these encounters, one party takes a position which he undertakes to uphold while being examined by the other. The examination takes the form of questions requiring a yes or no answer, and the immediate aim of the questioner is to refute his partner and opponent by leading him through a series of questions to contradict his—the answerer's—thesis; the

immediate aim of the answerer to prevent this. In much the same way, the Academy argued from premises to which its opponents were committed, or could be compelled to commit themselves in the course of argument, rather than premises to which it was necessarily committed itself. Its aim was to uncover difficulties within its opponents' position by drawing conclusions at odds with that position from concessions made by its defenders. In principle, the outcome of dialectical discussion should be clear: either the questioner secures a contradiction or his interlocutor prevents this. Socrates' dialectical examinations, for instance, often do achieve a clear resolution with the refutation of his interlocutor, though the difficulties brought to light in this way may be very far from resolution themselves. But the outcome can be far less clear, and this is especially likely when the opponents are as well matched as the Academics and the Stoics were. The debate between these two schools often reaches a stand-off. Assumptions on which the success of the Academic argument or the Stoic counter-argument depend remain open to continued legitimate dispute themselves; and a stand-off persists as long as issues on whose resolution the successful conclusion of the argument by one side or the other depend continue to be unresolved themselves.

The argument reaches this impasse roughly as follows. The Academy argued, in opposition to the Stoa, that for any actually true impression another impression indiscernible from it could have arisen in circumstances which make that other impression false, in other words, that there are no impressions which are prevented from being false by their own intrinsic character in the way required of the cognitive impression. Good dialecticians that they were, the Academics tried to make their argument turn as much as possible on considerations whose force the Stoa could not fail to acknowledge. To this end, they appealed to the Stoic belief in heaven-sent divinatory dreams to argue that the gods can fashion false impression indistinguishable from true ones (*Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.47). They also argued on grounds which, though not explicitly part of Stoic theory, will have seemed hard for anyone to oppose; for instance, that distinct but precisely similar objects could give rise to impressions which, though perfectly similar in every detail, could nevertheless lead to errors of misidentification (*Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.56–7; 84–5; *SE M* 7.409ff.). And they called on the now familiar arguments that dreams, drunkenness and madness can produce impressions which, though different in character from accurate impressions formed in more favourable conditions, are indistinguishable from such impressions to those who have them (*Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.48; *SE M* 7.403ff.).

From a certain perspective, which may seem natural enough to many of us, these arguments appear decisive. But that perspective is not mandatory, and to each of these arguments, it seems, the Stoics had an answer. According to Stoic physics, the gods could not make false impressions indistinguishable from cognitive impressions, and they would not choose to do so even if they could (*Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.50). The same physics require that any two distinct objects will be qualitatively different and consequently give rise to qualitatively different impressions, and they pointed to the ability of family members to distinguish twins, and of certain farmers to tell from which hen an egg has come, to show that such fine discriminations are possible (*Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.56–7). Their response to arguments based on abnormal states of mind cannot be summarized so easily, but here too the Stoics did not lack for things to say in defence of their position. Thus it was by no means clear that the Academy had shown the Stoics must accept its conclusions on pain of inconsistency or flying in the face of the facts. The Stoics could consistently refuse to concede the points the Academy needed to make its arguments go through. Those points were arguably correct, but so were their denials.

This result is a stand-off rather than a Stoic victory because of the complicated dialectical situation the two schools find themselves in at this stage of the argument. To be sure, the Stoics have prevented their opponents from achieving their maximal objective, so to speak. And they have a response to the most obvious objection: that, in order to preserve consistency, they have paid too high a price in plausibility. Though it is true that the assumptions on which the Stoics' defence of their position rests are not intuitively obvious, the Stoics could respond that a certain amount of implausibility is not too high a price to pay for a position such as theirs, which was arguably the most complete and carefully worked out on offer and did the most justice to the philosophical concerns of the day. What is more, they would have been right to observe that the plausibility of one part of a whole philosophical system, a system which may include epistemological views about, among other things, the proper standing of subjective plausibilities, cannot be judged in isolation; there is no neutral stand-point from which such an evaluation could be conducted. The doubts aroused by the Academics' arguments may depend for their plausibility on erroneous assumptions whose attraction would not survive a closer acquaintance with the truth as described by Stoic theory. But nonetheless the questions raised by the Academy are genuinely troubling, and the doubts they implanted had a tendency to linger. The Stoics could have been content to leave the argument in this condition only if they aimed no higher than to stave off refutation. But they made a much larger claim for their position, namely that it was true and could be shown to be so to an open-minded partner in discussion. Hasty and superficial judgements of plausibility did not matter, but doubts which persisted after long argument and careful reflection did. And it was a stand-off of this kind at which the debate between the Academy and the Stoa had arrived.

Thus a situation in which the doubts raised by the Academy had been neither conclusively vindicated nor satisfactorily resolved was highly unsatisfactory to the Stoa. For its part, the Academy wanted to pursue its inquiries and discover whether the problems it had uncovered were genuine or not. Both parties consequently were strongly motivated to search for ways to push the argument to a resolution. The Stoic challenge which elicited the Academy's theory of probability is best understood as one such effort. Its aim was to show the life called for by the conclusion of the Academy's argument to be impossible. To the extent that the Stoic argument succeeds, those tempted by the Academic case against the cognitive impression will be forced to re-evaluate the assumptions which made that case seem plausible. In this indirect way, the Stoics aimed to bolster the case for their own positive views. And to this end, they exploited the close connection and interrelation of parts for which the Stoic position was famous (cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.74). That position had succeeded admirably in offering a set of systematically connected answers to the full range of problems with which philosophy was then confronted. But the Stoic accounts of wisdom and of virtue, of action and moral responsibility, all depended ultimately on the cognitive impression. The consequence of its abolition, given the Stoic account of these matters, would be the impossibility of not only of wise and virtuous activity, but of a life at all. In effect, the Stoics argued that there is simply no tenable alternative to their position, with its commitment to the cognitive impression.

The Academy chose, however, to take the Stoics' argument as a challenge to produce just such an alternative. This is how the Academy, best known for its sceptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge, came to defend a position, and what is more, one according to which a rational and responsible indeed even a wise life is possible. There is, the Academy argued, a possible position which the

Stoics had overlooked that promises to solve the problems they had set for themselves, but without cognitive impressions and their attendant difficulties. At least in the first instance, their purpose in so arguing was to show the Stoa that it was not in a position to rule out alternatives and so bring the debate to a conclusion favourable to its case. Whether and to what extent the Academics went beyond defending their alternative for these dialectical purposes and endorsed it is another question, one which requires different answers for different Academics.

A full discussion of this question would take us beyond our present scope. But Carneades' successors, in particular the two most prominent among them, Philo of Larissa and Clitomachus, do seem to have come, in different ways, to endorse the position they defended, and it is important to observe that the positions they advocated in this way were different. For in speaking of the alternative Academic position, we have oversimplified. The contrasting positions of Philo and Clitomachus were, in part, the result of a choice between two alternative positions first worked out and offered to the Stoa by Carneades to further the dialectical aims described above (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.59, 78). We need to touch very briefly on these positions, and the features of the Stoic argument to which they respond, to set the stage for the discussion of probability, which was common to both positions.

According to the Stoa, action cannot take place without assent being given to an impression. Universal suspension of judgement would, then, make action impossible (Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.39, 62). But universal suspension of judgement is precisely what is called for by the conclusion of the Academy's argument against the cognitive impression together with the Stoa's proscription of opinion (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.68, 77; SE M 7.155). For on the Stoic view, every act of assent to a non-cognitive impression is an opinion and consequently alien to the perfectly firm and secure cognition of the wise (cf. SE M 7.156–7). The argument is framed in terms of the wise person, the Stoics' conception of what we can and should become, but it would be a mistake to suppose that the issues it raises can be easily dismissed with the observation that those who are not wise seem to get by, however, imperfectly, without unerringly discriminating in favour of the cognitive impression. This objection implies that the blame for our difficulties lies with the Stoa's exaggerated epistemological scruples and the excessively idealized conception of wisdom which they encourage. But though the Stoa does allow that ordinary human beings fail to confine their assent to cognitive impressions, it insists that they do so in a context massively dominated by the acceptance of such impressions, and that without the guidance they afford life of any kind would be impossible. Later we shall see to just how strong a form of this view the Stoics are committed. But we should already be able to see that, on the Stoic view, the condition which makes it fair to hold human beings to the standard of the wise person, and fault them for failing to live up to it, namely the existence of the cognitive impression, has to be fulfilled already for life to be possible at all. This is why the Stoics are able to charge the Academy with threatening to blind us and overturn life completely (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.31, 33, 54, 62, 102–3, 110).

And this is why both alternative positions put forward by the Academy, though framed in terms of the wise person as well, crucially rely on probability to afford both the wise and foolish reliable guidance in the absence of the cognitive impression. In rough outline the two proposals are:

- (1) To retain the link between action and assent, but give up that between assent and the cognitive impression by allowing the wise to form opinions of a certain kind.
- (2) To maintain the proscription of opinion by retaining the link between assent and the cognitive impression, but deny that action requires assent.

Moderate Academic sceptics like Philo were attracted to the first alternative. In effect, following a lead furnished by Carneades (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.78), they modified the Stoic conception of wisdom to permit opinion. On his view, the wise man may legitimately assent to non-cognitive but probable impressions, as long as he realizes that he may be wrong. This view makes the most sense when backed up by a very high estimation of human epistemic powers that nevertheless withholds the last assurance of absolute certainty, precisely what Philo strove to supply it with. On the other hand, Clitomachus and the radical sceptical tendency he represents in the Academy sympathized with the Stoic condemnation of opinion. But they held this consideration apart from the issue of inactivity with which the Stoa had joined it, thus breaking the link between action and (unqualified) assent accepted by both Philo and the Stoa. For once the peculiarly strong links on which the Stoa insists between action and assent on the one hand and between assent and cognition on the other had been brought into the open, the radical sceptics were able to ask: if action is to take place, can it do so solely on the basis of an assent of the kind which is warranted only by, and ought to be given only to, cognitive impressions? The distinction between this kind of assent and a weaker form advocated by Clitomachus (Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.104) is the main part of the negative answer they then returned to this question.<sup>1</sup> They proposed to refrain from assent of the first kind entirely, but to assent to probable impressions in the second way.

## [II]

How, then, did the probabilistic epistemology on which both alternative solutions depend work? In outline, the position is a very simple one. The basic idea is that, in the absence of cognitive impressions, the wise person will be guided by what seems like the truth to him, impressions which are plausible or persuasive; the Greek term most frequently used is *πιθανός* (but cf. SE M 7.174). Cicero's Latin rendering, *probabilis*, emphasizes the feature which makes the probable impression able to serve as a replacement for the Stoics' criterion; because it invites approval or acceptance—the term means 'approvable'—it is able to serve as basis for action and inquiry. The Stoics would not have disagreed that we have impressions which somehow recommend themselves prior to careful consideration. But if the view had been left at that it would hardly have been very satisfying, and the Stoics had an objection lying ready to hand: if we are to get by in life, we cannot be at the mercy of any stray impression which happens to take our fancy; we must discriminate against some initially probable impressions, and if the Academics thought otherwise, theirs was a very frivolous view indeed (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.35).<sup>2</sup>

The basic shape of Carneades' response is clear enough.<sup>3</sup> He begins with the feature of human nature already mentioned: that we are somehow initially struck by

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Bett, 'Carneades' Distinction between Assent and Approval', *Monist* 73 (1990), 3–20; M. Frede, 'The sceptic's two kinds of assent and the question of the possibility of knowledge' in R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, Q. Skinner (edd.) *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1984), 255–78.

<sup>2</sup> And considerations of the same kind are also behind the charge later levelled against the Pyrrhonists that, by adopting the appearance as a standard, they have deprived themselves of the ability to decide between conflicting appearances (cf. D.L. 9.107).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. von Arnim, s.v. 'Carneades', *R.E.* vol. X.2 cols. 1964–85, col. 1969–70; A. Goedeckemeyer, *Die Geschichte des griechischen Skeptizismus* (Leipzig, 1905), pp. 62ff.; G. Striker, 'Sceptical Strategies' in Malcolm Schofield *et al.* (edd.) *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford, 1980), 54–83, p. 70; H. von Staden, 'The Stoic theory of perception and its "Platonic" critics' in P. K. Machamer and R. G. Turnbull (edd.) *Studies in Perception* (Columbus, 1978), 96–136, n. 102; H. Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 14ff.; Richard Bett, 'Carneades' Pithanon: a Reappraisal of its Role and Status', *OSAP* 7 (1989), 59–94.

impressions and find them probable or truth-like. But, as he points out, the matter need not end there: if time permits and the matter at issue warrants it, the impression can be subjected to a number of checks. If the impression comes through this process without incident, i.e., if it is unhindered, the person to whom it belongs will stay with it; if it does not fare well, he will not. Performance of these checks will lead us either to continue accepting or to reject the initially probable impression. Thus if the Academic wise person does not act on the basis of impressions taken to be incontrovertibly certain in the Stoic manner, it is not because he has abdicated his responsibility to discriminate. He will be able to exercise the required discrimination, rejecting some initially probable impressions and choosing between conflicting probable impressions.

If Carneades' proposal is clear in outline, its details are anything but. Sextus Empiricus preserves an elaborate treatment of the topic at M 7.159–89 and a briefer account at PH 1.227–30. He then criticizes the proposal briefly at M 7.435–8. Cicero alludes to it in passing a number of times, though without going into the finer points. But these passages disagree with each other on a number of important points.<sup>4</sup> To cite the most conspicuous example, although the expositions in PH 1 and M 7 both distinguish three stages of probability, they put the last two in a different order. Worse still, the exposition in M 7 appears to disagree with itself by reverting to the order of the PH 1 passage, as does a later passage at M 7.435ff. But if we turn to Cicero for illumination, we are hard put to find the three level scheme that looms so large in Sextus. Instead only two levels appear to be distinguished.

In order to extract a consistent story from the confused testimony, I shall have to pursue a somewhat complicated strategy. The prevailing, and it seems to me the correct, view prefers the M 7 exposition.<sup>5</sup> And I too will concentrate on the M 7 passage and follow its order of presentation. At a certain point, however, a problem arises that can be dealt with most easily by considering the PH 1 passage. And although I believe that it can be shown that the PH 1 account must be wrong on this point, the lessons to be drawn from its errors have implications for the more accurate, but as I shall argue, still highly imperfect treatment found in M 7.

### [III]

The longer exposition occurs in a section of M 7 devoted to the Academy's answers to the question: 'what is the criterion of truth?'. It follows sections devoted to the answers of the older, immediately post-Platonic Academy (141–9) and of Arcesilaus (150–8), and is itself part of a longer doxographical survey of dogmatic conceptions of the criterion that prefaces a selection of sceptical arguments against the criterion, the relevant portions of which seem to be drawn from the *Canonica* of Antiochus.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Mutschmann, 'Die Stufen der Wahrscheinlichkeit bei Carneades', *Rheinisches Museum*, 66 (1911), pp. 191ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. Weische, s.v. 'Karneades', *R.E. Suppl.* vol. XI, cols. 853–6.

<sup>6</sup> Antiochus is mentioned at M 7.162 and his *Canonica* is quoted at M 7.201–2, which suggests that Sextus is dependent on the *Canonica* for a fair bit of M 7's survey of epistemology, almost certainly for the discussion of the Academy. Cf. R. Hirzel, *Untersuchungen zu Ciceros philosophischen Schriften*, vol. III (Leipzig, 1883), 493ff.; H. Tarrant, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–6. On Sextus' doxographical sources in M 7 also D. N. Sedley, 'Sextus Empiricus and the Atomists' Criteria of Truth', *Elenchos*, 13 (1992). A cautionary note has been sounded by J. Barnes, 'Antiochus of Ascalon' in M. Griffin and J. Barnes (edd.) *Philosophia Togata* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 51–96.

The account of Carneades' contribution begins with a review of background issues justifying an account of the criterion along Stoic lines; the criterion of truth must, it concludes, be a kind of true impression that cannot be false, in other words, what the Stoics call a cognitive impression (M 7.160–4).<sup>7</sup> But if the Stoics appear to have stated the requirements correctly, the Academy has made a powerful case that they cannot be met. And Carneades now appeals to the Academy's familiar argument from indiscernibility: every impression which is in fact true is such that an indistinguishable but false impression could have arisen in its stead, and consequently no impressions satisfying the requirements can be discovered (M 7.164). The criterion must then be a kind of impression with false as well as true members, an impression common to truth and falsity as it is put (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.33). But such impressions will not be cognitive, and, failing to be cognitive, they will not be criterial.

At this point, Carneades' grades or stages of probability, are first introduced as the answer he was all but forced to give in defence of the possibility of life and the achievement of happiness (M 7.166). But before expounding his proposal, Carneades first makes a few general points about the nature of impressions (M 7.161–7). Although the text poses some problems,<sup>8</sup> the main thrust of Carneades' review of the background issues is clear enough: to concentrate attention on the probable impression as the only possible candidate to serve as a substitute criterion. But not every such impression will do. Because they indicate neither themselves nor their objects clearly, we are informed, dim or weak examples are not by nature likely to persuade us or lead us into assent (M 7.172). This leaves the impression which appears true and is sufficiently vivid (*ἐμφαινομένη*) to serve as a criterion. At this point, the stages of probability, which are to occupy the rest of the exposition, are again introduced (M 7.173ff.). The probable impression, we are told, has a sufficient breadth, sufficient, presumably, for the purposes which the theory is introduced to serve. For some probable impressions have a more persuasive and compelling effect on us than others; and this feature of theirs enables the wise person who lives by the Academy's precepts to exercise the required discrimination.

What kind of ordering, then, is Carneades driving at with his remark about breadth? Without agreeing on the details, our sources seem to offer a clear answer about the overall structure of probability, nowhere more so than in the abbreviated treatment of the subject at PH 1.227ff. As I have already remarked, I think it can be shown that the order of stages favoured by the PH 1 account must be wrong. But in arguing this point, I want to implant some doubts about the correctness of the structure itself. This is the crucial passage (PH 1.227):

... And [the Academics] say that there are differences among probable impressions:

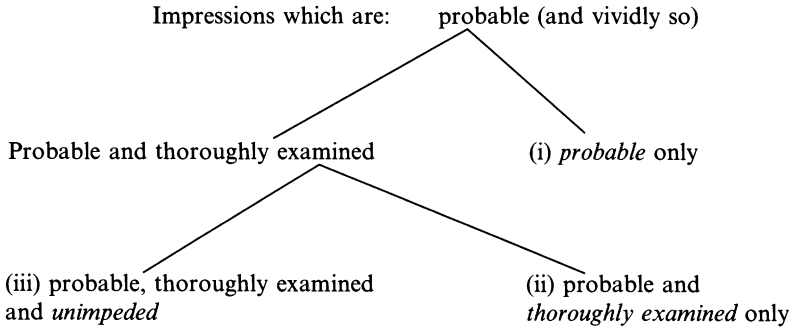
- (i) they hold that some are only persuasive,
- (ii) some are persuasive and thoroughly examined (*διεξωδευμένοι*) and
- (iii) some are persuasive, examined thoroughly (*περιωδευμένοι*) and unimpeded (*ἀπερίσπαστοι*).

There is a small difficulty created by the switch from *διεξωδευμένοι* in (ii) to *περιωδευμένοι* in (iii), reflected in the slight difference in my rendering. Later I will suggest that the two terms may not have been synonymous, but it is undeniable that throughout much of both expositions they are treated as though they were. But if this problem is put aside, we appear to have a straightforward division into genus and species of a familiar type.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to M. F. Burnyeat's unpublished but widely circulated paper 'Carneades was not Probabilist' for his detailed discussion of this issue and for much else besides.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. W. Heintz, *Studien zu Sextus Empiricus* (Halle, 1932), pp. 100ff.





At each stage, the proximate genus is partitioned into a species of impressions that satisfy a further requirement for membership in a more restrictive species and another of those that satisfy the generic requirement alone. The former becomes the proximate genus for the next division, while the latter is, so to speak, left behind as a species of impressions which can be picked out economically with the name of the genus; as the Stoics put it, they are ‘homonymously so called with the genus’.<sup>9</sup> The potential ambiguity is not a serious difficulty as the context can generally be counted on to make it clear when we intend to refer to impressions which are only probable or only thoroughly examined, instead of impressions which have at least these characteristics and possibly others as well.

What is wrong with the resulting division of generically probable impressions into species of (i) probable, (ii) thoroughly examined and (iii) unimpeded impressions? It will help us to see if we look at how Sextus illustrates the division. He begins with the example of a coil of rope in a dark room that appears at first glance to be a snake. This is a merely probable impression. Subsequent investigation reveals that it is not a snake, as various associated impressions—its colour, lack of movement, and the like—do not agree with the original suspicion that there is a snake in the room. To the person who has thoroughly examined the situation, it now seems that the item in question is a coil of rope. This is not the most straightforward way of illustrating impressions of type (ii)—we are not dealing with a single initially probable impression that acquires additional support by being checked against related impressions—but it does show very nicely how, in the course of being examined, an initially probable impression can be displaced by another impression that enjoys the advantage of agreeing better with the related impressions which bear on the matter at issue.

So far, so good. But what about the unimpeded impression? An obvious question arises at this point: if an initially probable impression has been checked against related impressions and been found to agree with them, isn’t it already, to that extent, unimpeded?<sup>10</sup> Now this question presupposes that *ἀπερίσπαστος* is correctly rendered as ‘unimpeded’, but the Greek will bear a stronger translation, and it is translated accordingly by Bury as ‘irreversible’. A thoroughly examined impression certainly need not be irreversible, and irreversibility would represent an advance over mere careful examination. But ‘irreversible’ will hardly do in the arguably more authoritative M 7 account, where the *φαντασία ἀπερίσπαστος* is only the second of three grades of probable impression, and one explained in terms of the kind of

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D.L. 7.78; Origen, *comment. in Mattaeum* = SVF 3.170.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. von Arnim, *op. cit.*, cols. 1969–70.

possible hindrance here discussed under the head of thorough examination, while the thoroughly examined impression is the third stage, which is reached when not only associated impressions, but the conditions under which the impression at issue arose have been investigated without uncovering an obstacle to belief (cf. M 7.182–3). The further examination envisaged there would only have a point if the impression may still be reversed. What is more, Cicero never renders *ἀπερίσπαστος* as what is *unable* to be impeded, but always as what *is* unimpeded.<sup>11</sup> And finally, the picture implied by the stronger translation is at odds with the spirit of Carneades' project: the possibility of error persists, no matter how many checks to which an impression has been subjected (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.36, 103), and there is no reason to suppose that the possibility of a false impression which could never be discovered to be false is at issue here.

Care is called for here, however. 'To be impeded' cannot *mean* 'not to be accepted'. If it did, the claim that the wise person accepts probable impressions that are unimpeded would tell us nothing. Rather, it must be *because* an impression is impeded that it is not accepted. Impedances prevent impressions from being accepted. But what kind of explanation is the Academy proposing here? Am I prevented from accepting an impression by an impedance because it has given me a reason for taking its acceptance to be unjustified, a reason in whose absence I would have taken myself to be justified in accepting the same impression? Or is it rather that it is just part of my human nature to react, if you like unreflectively, to the items identified as impedances by the Academy in this way? This is a difficult question, among other reasons because it has sometimes been thought that those defending a sceptical position are not entitled to appeal to reasons as they are employed by accounts of the first kind. I do not think this objection is quite right myself, but without entering fully into the issues it raises, I want to suggest that the Academic position should be understood in the same terms as the Stoic position, which was to a certain extent its model. Very roughly speaking, the Stoic account of moral and intellectual development envisages a transition from acting by nature, in some sense instinctively, to acting for reasons; and to a very large extent, what we do at first by nature in this sense is what, if all goes well, we come to do for reasons. If the Academic position did rely on nature in a way something like this, it will have included a large element of the natural, in the sense just contrasted with the rational. But just as in the Stoic account, this did not mean that we cannot reflect on our behaviour. And the result of bringing reason to bear in this way will not be an abandonment of existing patterns of behaviour; indeed, as we shall see in more detail later, this process of rationalization makes us better and more discriminating at doing what we were already doing when we accept and reject impressions.

Given the difficulties mentioned above, then, it is no surprise that Sextus' attempt to explain how the unimpeded impression functions as the third and final stage of probability goes awry. In the example he uses, Alcestis has taken the place of her husband, Admetus, whose time to die has come. Hercules rescues her from the underworld and presents her to Admetus. But although he forms an impression of her which is probable and thoroughly examined (*πιθανή και περιωδευμένη*), Admetus' knowledge that she has died draws or diverts (*περισπάω*) him from assenting that this is indeed Alcestis. Clearly his is an impeded, not an unimpeded impression. Something similar occurs in M 7 when Sextus tries to explain the unimpeded impression with the aid of a very similar example: this time of Menelaus' failure to

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g., *Ac. pr.* 2.33, 59, 99, 105, 107, 109.

recognize the real Helen, who has spent the Trojan war in Egypt, when he meets her there after the war's end (M 7, 180). He too is drawn away (*περισπάσθαι*) from assenting, in this case by his impression that she was accompanying him all along, though in fact, it was an image of Helen. To be sure, the two examples do furnish an indirect illustration of the *ἀπερίσπαστος φαντασία*, by showing what has *not* happened to it. But they do this by means of stories which are far more unusual and complicated than is necessary for that purpose. And, though it is already surprising that they describe the rejection of true impressions, in a context where we expect to see how the method of probability leads to the acceptance of true and the rejection of false impressions, the most striking feature of the examples is that the rejected impressions are not only true, but, it would seem, obviously true. In each a husband is confronted in ideal perceptual conditions with his wife, yet refuses to recognize her. To see why Carneades went to the trouble of constructing convincing cases in which people reject what should have been manifestly true impressions, we will have to look to the broader context of argument. I want eventually to suggest that the at present mysterious and under-used detail of the examples can be seen to have a point when viewed in connection with the second purpose of the Academy's probabilism mentioned at the beginning of this paper. For the present, in view of the fact that the Alcestis example poses so many problems, it is worth noting that the passage reads very smoothly without it. The example appears right after the discussion of the coil of rope (PH 1.228).<sup>12</sup> Of course, the three level scheme is in danger of disappearing, but perhaps that is not such a bad thing after all.<sup>13</sup> But we will have to return to this point after more ground has been covered.

Let us now return to the M 7 account. If we take up where we left off (M 7.175–6), we find Carneades explaining that impressions do not stand on their own, but are connected with each other like the links of a chain. In other words, an impression's value as evidence is sensitive to the other impressions which somehow bear on its chances of being true or false. The point is illustrated with a comparison to the practice of physicians, who draw a conclusion about the feverish condition of a patient not from skin temperature alone, but from a whole syndrome of related symptoms, temperature, pulse, flush and the like (M 7.179). In the same way, the Academic makes his judgement about the matter at issue by considering a syndrome of related impressions: when none of them draws him away or diverts (*περισπάω*) him by seeming false,<sup>14</sup> he says that his impression is true. There seems to be something missing in the next phrase, which introduces the example of Menelaus,<sup>15</sup> but something like the following seems called for: 'that an unimpeded impression is a syndrome which implants belief [or is able to implant belief with the aid of such a syndrome] is clear from the case of Menelaus...' (M 7.180). What follows is, as we have seen, not a case of belief being implanted, however, but of its being hindered; just as in the parallel passage in PH 1, belief is not given to an impression which ought

<sup>12</sup> The example is introduced 'and the impression which is also unimpeded is of such a kind' (*ἣ δὲ καὶ ἀπερίσπαστος φαντασία τοιαύτη ἐστίν*), apparently referring to the example to follow. If we adopt the reading of the Latin translation (T), which omits the *καί*, a perfectly good point is made: because it has been carefully considered in connection with related impressions without encountering opposition, the impression that this is a coil of rope is unimpeded.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. H. von Arnim, *op. cit.*, col. 1970.

<sup>14</sup> Talk of seeming false seem a bit odd here. What one expects is a reference whose apparent truth is somehow in tension with the truth of the impression at issue, but perhaps it is the apparent falsity of what is to be expected that is meant.

<sup>15</sup> See H. J. Mette, 'Weitere Akademiker heute: von Lakydes bis zu Kleitomachus', *Lustrum* 27 (1985), 39–148, p. 76 ad loc.

to be self-evident: a husband's impression, in ideal conditions, of his wife. But once again, if the offending example is simply removed, the train of thought that stands revealed makes perfect sense on its own. After the introduction of the comparison to a medical syndrome, Sextus proceeds (M 7.179–81):

... so also the Academic makes his judgement of the truth by the syndrome of impressions; when none of the impressions in the syndrome draw him away as false, he says what occurs to him is true. [The example of Helen and Menelaus.] Such then is the unimpeded impression too, which itself also seems to have breadth, as one impression is discovered to be more unimpeded than another.

In the immediately following passage we find an ordering of probable impressions far more promising than that in PH 1 (M 7.181–2):

That impression is more believable than the unimpeded impression and most perfect in implanting judgement which, in addition to being unimpeded, is also thoroughly examined (*διεξωδευμένη*). For all that is sought in the case of the unimpeded impression is that none of the impressions in the syndrome draw us away (*περισπάω*) as false, and that they all be true<sup>16</sup> and apparent and not unpersuasive; in the case of the syndrome in accordance with the impression that has been thoroughly examined (*περιωδευμένη*), we carefully test each of the impressions in the syndrome, just as happens in assemblies when the people examine each candidate for public or judicial office to see if he is to be trusted...

There follows a long list of factors we can consider when examining an impression (M 7.183):

Such for example are the matters bearing on the place (*τόπος*)<sup>17</sup> of the person who judges and the thing judged and that through which the judgement is made, e.g., the interval and distance, the place, time, manner, disposition, activity. We classify each of these according to type: with regard to that doing the judging, that the sight is not dulled (for if it is, it is useless for judging); the matter being judged, that it is not too small; that through which it takes place, that the air is not gloomy; the distance, that it is not too great; the interval, that it is not confused; the place, that it is not vast; the time, that it is not swift; the disposition, that it is not seen to be mad; the activity, that it is not somehow inadmissible.

Though not as well organized as they might be, these passages set out clearly enough a distinction between two kinds of check to which an initially probable impression can be subjected, and with reference to which two corresponding grades of impression beyond the merely probable can be distinguished. First, we can check to see whether associated impressions agree with the impression in question; at issue at this stage is whether the *content* of the impression is not somehow in tension with that of associated impressions. But if we have the opportunity, we may go on to a closer examination of the impressions arrived at in this way in order to form an idea of the *conditions* in which the syndrome arose. The potential hindrance is now no longer an inconsistency between the circumstances apparently disclosed by the impression under examination and those revealed by other related impressions, but rather something about the conditions in which they were formed that may give us cause for suspicion. We may well, e.g., be disinclined to place much confidence in the impression that a friend has just boarded a railway carriage, if the impression is formed on the basis of a brief glance from a long way down the platform. If the first kind of check is a necessary pre-condition for the second, as the passage suggests, it seems we have good grounds for accepting the three-stage picture apparently advocated in M 7.

<sup>16</sup> This is an overstatement; what is sought is that they be *apparently* true.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps 'manner' (*τρόπος*) would be better. This is not the only place in Sextus where the sense of a passage would apparently be improved by the substitution of *τρόπος* for *τόπος* (cf. M 7.424–5, 437).

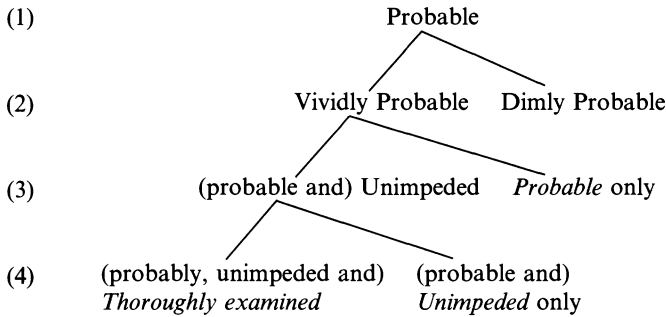


Fig. 1.

Nonetheless, I want to raise some questions about the division apparently advocated in M 7. My objections will be easier to state if we divide the probable impression by genus and species in the manner suggested by the passage (Fig. 1).

Suppose we ask what happens to an impression which, though initially probable, encounters an obstacle when considered in relation to a syndrome of associated impressions. It can be regarded as a merely probable impression which has, however, been impeded. Probability is an intrinsic dispositional feature of an impression, a tendency to induce belief or persuade whether or not it actually succeeds in winning assent. This account is not unproblematic,<sup>18</sup> but the main point is clear enough. Though we often intend to recommend an impression by calling it plausible or persuasive, we also refer in this way to impressions that we do not accept, but which might have persuaded us if we had not known better. This is how 'probable' is used in dismissals of the merely probable (cf. M 7.174). So for instance, the Stoics give as an example of a probable impression 'if someone has given birth to something, she is its mother' (D.L. 7.75), which though probable is false because a hen is not the mother of an egg. But consider what happens if we try to take account of the corresponding possibility at the next stage of the division, from (3) to (4). Surely an impression can undergo check of the first kind without encountering an obstacle, but meet with opposition when a check of the second kind is performed. How will such an impression be classified by our division? Though it may still be probable, it seems no longer to belong to the proximate genus unimpeded, for it looks very much as though it has been impeded. But this appearance depends on understanding the description 'impeded', applied to impressions, to mean that the impression has met with an obstacle sufficient to prevent its acceptance. If this is right, a non-vacuously unimpeded impression should be one that has not met with such an obstacle after undergoing some amount of checking, and is assured of acceptance, thus far, because the presumption in its favour owed to its initial plausibility still stands, and may have been enhanced. But is this the right way to understand the term 'unimpeded'?

'Unimpeded' is Cicero's preferred rendering of ἀπερίσπαστος. The verb from which that term is formed, περισπᾶω, means to draw or drag away. An ἀπερίσπαστος

<sup>18</sup> E.g., does the impression that there is a snake in the room change from being probable to improbable? Or would it be better to require a great deal more than sameness of propositional content if impressions are to count as identical and say that the observer no longer has the same impression, his first probable impression having been displaced by another? Can one have a perceptual impression which is not at all probable? It may be significant that none of the Stoa's examples of improbable or non-probable impressions is perceptual (cf. M 7.243).

*φαντασία* should then be an impression which is not or cannot be drawn away or diverted.<sup>19</sup> But as we have seen, Admetus and Menelaus are described as being drawn away from the impressions that this is Alcestis or this is Helen respectively (PH 1.228; M 7.180, cf. 182, 189). This strongly suggests that the drawing away of an impression and the drawing away of a person from the acceptance of an impression amount to the same thing, so that an *ἀπερίσπαστος φαντασία* is, in effect, one from which one has not been drawn away. I want to argue that this is the right way of understanding talk of unimpededness. But these considerations do not decide the issue, and it is not impossible that ‘unimpeded’ was used by Carneades and the Academics in a restricted sense to apply to impressions whose acceptance was not impeded by a *conflicting* impression, though acceptance of it might be hindered in another way. So for instance, an impression that one refrains from accepting because the light is not very good is not properly speaking impeded, and indeed might qualify as unimpeded. If such a restricted sense of ‘unimpeded’ is in force, the difficulty presented by the division of M 7 is only apparent.

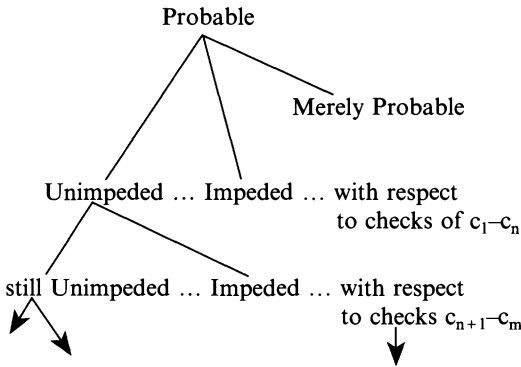
The case of the opposite position that the sense of ‘unimpeded’ is not restricted and that the difficulties presented by the division of M 7 are genuine is in part based on ancient testimony that counts against the other view. Cicero’s evidence, which has the advantage of consistency, shows no signs of a restricted sense of impedance: he tells us repeatedly that the Academic wise person follows probable impressions as long as they are unimpeded, not impressions which are unimpeded and sometimes unhindered in other ways also (cf. *Ac. pr.* 2.33, 59, 99, 101, 104, 107, 108). There is not a hint, in other words, of a notion of hindrance more generic than impedance. The attractions of the picture suggested by Cicero are enhanced by the inconsistencies of Sextus’ testimony. As we have already seen, in the PH 1 passage, the terms for thorough examination, *διεξοδεύω* and *περιοδεύω*, which should, according to the account of M 7, be reserved for the further inquiry into the conditions under which an impression has arisen, are used in connection with the checking of an impression against related impressions which should fall under the head of unimpededness understood in the restricted sense. But as we shall see presently, even the M 7 passage is not consistent on this point and does not make consistent use of a restricted sense of ‘unimpeded’ (cf. M 7.189).

But there is a deeper problem with the division of the probable impression suggested in M 7. It is, I want to argue, out of keeping with the spirit of the Academy’s argument. One of the implications of the Stoic doctrine of the cognitive impression with which the Academics most strongly disagreed was that there is a natural point for inquiry to stop, a point at which one can rest secure that the issue has been resolved once and for all (cf. *Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.26). Whereas the position defended by the Academy implies that there is no such point at which one can, with absolute security, cease examining and adopt even a clear perceptual impression; the possibility that one has stopped checking too soon can never be entirely eliminated (cf. *Cic. Ac. pr.* 2.36, 103; M 7.174). The problem with the division by genus and species for which M 7 seems to call, then, is its rigidity; it suggests that once an impression is unimpeded it will remain so though it may go on to acquire further characteristics influencing our attitude towards it. But what the Academy’s argument requires, I have argued, is an open-ended and provisional picture of what makes us continue to accept impressions initially recommended to us by their probability. Like

<sup>19</sup> The latter is the preferred rendering of A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 452–60 *passim*.

the Stoics, Carneades begins his quest for a criterion by considering large classes of impressions distinguished by an intrinsic feature of their nature. The Stoics hold that there is a subclass of true impression, the cognitive impression, distinguished by a feature of this kind that we can somehow grasp. For Carneades, however, the last class of impressions that we can identify with any confidence is the probable impression. Being unimpeded, then, should not be a feature of an impression fixed at a certain point, a feature for which we check so to speak, but the condition of an impression which has not met with opposition so far relative to the possible obstacles against which it has been checked up to now. And this condition should surely be highly insecure and provisional, liable to be revoked at any time; nor should there be any suggestion that further checks might not have turned up a decisive obstacle. And it appears that at least one point of the examples of Alcestis and Menelaus may have been to drive this point home. For they describe circumstances in which one would have thought assent will surely be given, but is not because of very unusual circumstances. Though not spelled out in detail comparable to that of the M 7 account, this is the picture we find in Cicero, who distinguishes only two features which determine whether an impression is accepted: probability and unimpededness.

To avoid the misleading implications of the division by genus and species and do justice to the radically provisional character of the unimpeded impression, a division something like the following is called for.



But if this is right, what are we to make of the thoroughly examined impression about which so much is said? Here I should like once again to follow a lead provided by Cicero. If the question what impressions will the sceptic accept is answered by referring to probability and unimpededness, the next task Carneades will have faced is to say what the potential impedances he has in mind are. He responded, I suggest, by describing two types of check a probable impression can undergo. And Cicero appears to distinguish unimpededness from the ways in which an impression comes to be unimpeded just as we would expect if this were true in a passage we have already partially cited (*Ac. pr.* 2.35 [Lucullus is speaking]):

Quod est igitur istuc vestrum probabile? nam si quod cuique occurrit et primo quasi aspectu probabile videtur id confirmatur, quid eo levius; sin ex *circumspectione* aliqua et *accurata consideratione* quod visum sit id se dicent sequi...

It is very likely that *circumspection* and *accurate consideration* are Cicero's renderings of *περιοδεύω* and *διεξοδεύω* respectively. And it is worth considering the

possibility that the two kinds of check were originally distinguished in Academic vocabulary by these terms. What Cicero elsewhere refers to as an unimpeded or unimpeded impression will, then, be a probable impression which has survived some amount of one or both of these forms of examination without incident.

If a distinction between checking to see whether an impression agrees with related impressions and scrutinizing the conditions in which it arose has to be made, the prefixes *περι-* and *διεξ-* are well suited to the task. The first term nicely captures the idea that we check impressions by a process of circumspection—looking around at surrounding and related impressions.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, *διεξοδεύω* is better suited to the careful consideration or working through of the conditions in which impressions are formed. When, in the long passage discussed above, the second, more searching kind of check is introduced, the further stage it makes possible is first designated as the *διεξωδευμένη φαντασία* (M 7.181), while the coil-of-rope example—which describes what sounds very much like the process of checking an impression against a syndrome of associated impressions (M 7.176–9)—is cited in both expositions to illustrate the *περιωδευμένη φαντασία* (PH 1.227–8; M 7.187–8). According to the picture now taking shape, being unimpeded, then, would not be distinct from being *περιωδευμένη*, but rather what an impression is after undergoing a certain amount of circumspection without incident, a characteristic which an impression can maintain when subjected to a more searching inquiry into the conditions in which it arose, however, only if that examination turns up nothing casting suspicion on it.

But this way of regarding the matter still incorporates an assumption taken over from the division by genus and species, namely that checking to see whether an impression agrees with related impressions, which determines whether it is unimpeded, and the inquiry into the conditions in which it arose, which determines whether it qualifies as thoroughly examined, must occur in this order. But need this be so? Might one not check to see if one is drowsy or the light is poor in order to discover if there is any point in consulting further impressions to see whether they agree? Though it is by no means absolutely clear, this seems to be the suggestion of M 7.188–9, where to be sure accurate consideration is expounded after circumspection, but, as it seems, in parallel with it, with no suggestion the one must follow the other. Indeed, as we shall see, the passage ends with the confusing suggestion that unimpededness is something different from both circumspection and accurate consideration and is still to be explained.

#### [IV]

I do not wish to deny that a way of saving the division to which I have objected can be found. If the testimony consistently supported it, the alternative view of the stages of probability I have defended would be no more than a view Carneades and his successors could and arguably should have advocated rather than the one they did defend. But as we have seen, that testimony is not consistent, and the plausibility of the alternative view's claim to be the Academic's view depends on how well it makes sense of the evidence.

Let us now look a little more closely at that evidence. The clearest and most authoritative portion of Sextus' exposition seems to furnish an argument against the alternative I have proposed. In the long passage we have already discussed, it is

<sup>20</sup> Sextus gives *περισκοπέω* as an alternative for *περιοδεύω* at PH 1.228.



claimed that for an impression to be unimpeded it is only required that none of the impressions in the associated syndrome divert or draw us away by seeming false (M 7.182). This implies that it is only necessary and already sufficient that an impression agree with other impressions to count as unimpeded, in other words, that a restricted sense of ‘unimpeded’ is in force. The claim being made, however, need amount to no more than that, in order to qualify as unimpeded, it is sufficient for an impression to agree with the syndrome of impressions somehow related to it. But it may still be true that it remains sufficient only so long as further checks have not been undertaken; so that sufficient conditions for being unimpeded are not fixed at a point, but grow in relation to the type and amount of checking to which an impression is subject.

But the second and more powerful objection to my reading is simply the insistence on a division by genus and species that we seem to find throughout both expositions. Three considerations speak against this objection, however. (i) The contested division is not as prominent a feature of Sextus’ exposition as is usually assumed. (ii) The one passage which comes closest to committing us to the division is undermined by its context. And (iii) these confusions can be explained most easily on the assumption that an original account along the lines Cicero implies was misunderstood; Carneades’ original point made in terms of breadth was mistakenly taken to imply a division by genus and species. And the careless application of this conception may well be the culprit responsible for the difficulties and inconsistencies we have uncovered.

Let us then see how strong the evidence is. A division of the contested type is clearly called for at PH 1.227; but that division, with the unimpeded impressions in last place, turned out to be untenable. The question before us now is whether a division of the same type, but with the order of the unimpeded and thoroughly examined stages reversed, should be accepted as part of Carneades’ original account. If we look carefully at the passages at M 7.166ff. that might be thought to favour this view, only one seems to force it on us unambiguously, and doubts can be raised even about that one. At M 7.166 where the variety of probable impressions is first introduced we are informed that, since he was virtually compelled to come up with a criterion, Carneades responded by enlisting the aid of:

both the persuasive impression and the persuasive and at the same time unimpeded and carefully examined impression.

Kochalsky proposes a supplement to give us a clean division into three types of probable impression.<sup>21</sup>

...προσλαμβάνων

- (i) τὴν τε πιθανὴν φαντασίαν
- (ii) καὶ τὴν πιθανὴν ἄμα καὶ ἀπερίσπαστον <καὶ
- (iii) τὴν πιθανὴν ἄμα καὶ ἀπερίσπαστον> καὶ διεξωδευμένην.

He proposes another supplement at M 7.436–7 in the same spirit, but this time with the unfortunate result that Sextus has now reverted to the discredited order of

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Kochalsky, *De Sexti Empirici adversus logicos libris quaestiones criticae* (Marburg, 1911), p. 62; cf. on M 7.437, p. 73. Kochalsky’s supplement is strongly endorsed by Werner Heintz, p. 100 ad loc. and adopted by the text’s latest editor, H. J. Mette, op. cit., p. 73, but not by Mutschmann, who, however, believes this is what Sextus ought to have said though he carelessly neglected to do so.

PH 1.227.<sup>22</sup> One passage, with better textual support, which does appear to require a true division into three species is M 7.184. It comes right after the distinction between two kinds of checking, circumspection and accurate consideration, expounded with reference to the notion of a syndrome (M 7.176–83).

For all these come to be with reference to one criterion, both the probable impression and the probable and unimpeded [and in addition to these the probable and at the same time unimpeded] and thoroughly examined (*διεξοδευμένη*) impression.

But the words enclosed by square brackets, essentially what Kochalsky restores at M 7.166, are missing from one of the two families of manuscripts (N) on which the text depends. Without the bracketed words, M 7.184 agrees with M 7.166 un-emended. Of course, Kochalsky and those who have followed him on this point are right that it is more likely that the words in question dropped out of M 7.166 by haplography than that they were inserted at M 7.184; though the third possibility, namely that the text should stand as it is in both passages, is perhaps the most likely. For the exposition that follows seems to support the full tri-partition, but in a way which is in the end unhelpful.

After M 7.184, two kinds of considerations that determine whether and how much we examine an initially probable impression are distinguished and discussed, namely how important the matter at issue is and how much time is available (M 7.184–5):

... For which reason just as in life when we are investigating a minor matter we question one witness, but when we are investigating a more important matter we question more, and when we are concerned with a matter which is still more compelling we examine each of the witnesses on the basis of the mutual agreement of the others, in this way, claim the followers of Carneades, in chance matters we use as a criterion (a) the merely probable impression, but in matters of some importance we employ (b) the unhindered impression, and in matters that bear on happiness (c) the thoroughly examined impression (*περιωδευμένη*). Yet just as they say we enlist different impressions depending on differences in the matters at issue, so too they do not follow the same kind of impression in different circumstances.

This passage does undoubtedly speak in favour of the full tri-partition of the probable impression at M 7.184. But the way in which the point is developed in the examples which follow undermines this impression. The influence of circumstance is illustrated by two examples. A soldier fleeing enemies will swerve away from a ditch if he has a probable impression that enemy soldiers are lying in ambush there. He will not pause to consider the matter further: reliance on the merely probable impression (a) is clearly called for. But when circumstances permit a judgement to be made after a more thorough examination of the situation, it is possible to rely on (c) the probable impression that has undergone circumspection (*ἢ πιθανὴ καὶ περιωδευμένη*). The point is then illustrated by the example of the coil of rope that appears to be a snake, this time spelled out in more detail than in PH 1 (M 7.187ff.; cf. PH 1.277–8). A man entering a dark room and seeing what looks to be a snake will prudently jump over it; this corresponds to the action of the soldier who suspects an ambush. But in his case, it is possible to do some more checking. So he will first observe the snake to see whether it moves. If it does not, this will incline him to the view that it is not a snake,

<sup>22</sup> Galen's brief allusion to the Academic view does not require a division of the contested type, though it could be emended to do so, albeit with more effort (*De placitis Hipp. et Plat.* 586, 16ff., De Lacy): 'the more recent Academics refer judgement to the impression which is not only probable, but also thoroughly examined (*περιωδευμένη*) and unimpeded as well.' The result of emendation would, unfortunately, align the present passage with PH 1.227–8.

i.e., to another probable impression opposed to the first. Just in case, since snakes are known to be very still in the cold, he may intervene in the situation by prodding the suspected snake with a stick; but if it fails to respond, he is confident that it is not a snake (M 7.188).

Two observations need to be made about the example and its context. First, it moves right from (a) to (c).<sup>23</sup> Second, the transition from (a) to (c) is perfectly natural. We move straight from a situation in which a merely probable impression is acted on to one in which it is supplanted by a probable impression that has survived circumspection. It is hard to see how a merely unimpeded impression could be wedged in between (a) and (c). If there is a third grade of probability, it should come after the *φαντασία περιωδευμένη*. And indeed Sextus continues (M 7.188–9):

... and again, as I've said before, when we see something very clearly, we assent that this is true having first established by careful examination (*προδιεξοδεύσαντες*) that our senses are in good order, that we are looking while awake and not asleep and that the air is clear, the interval suitable and the object motionless. So that by these means an impression is trustworthy when we have had sufficient time for the careful examination (*διέξοδος*) of the items seen in connection with its place.

The whole passage from M 7.186–9, then, is parallel to M 7.176–83, where the two kinds of checking that an impression can undergo are expounded by analogy with a medical syndrome, though it approaches the issues from a different angle, dwelling on the conditions that make possible and recommend different amounts of examination, and as we have noted, does not appear to insist that the types of check be performed in a special order. Otherwise the main difference is in terminology: the second state is the *περιωδευμένη*, not the *ἀπερίσπαστος, φαντασία*. Nevertheless, if I am right, the same distinction between two ways in which an impression becomes and remains unimpeded can be discerned in both passages. True, the distinction is not consistently observed by Sextus' vocabulary: *περιωδεύω* and *διεξοδεύω* are interchanged freely. But this need not be a crushing objection. Both terms are well suited to the activities of checking, examining and testing, and if it served Carneades' expository purposes to draw a distinction by means of them, for most ordinary purposes there would be no such need. The specification of two kinds of examination is a refinement of the basic point and easily lost sight of. But if the distinction between the two features of an impression that determine whether it is accepted—probability and unimpededness—and the ways in which the latter is acquired and maintained was not carefully observed, it would have been all too easy to conflate circumspection with accurate investigation, since the place of the former is apparently already occupied by unimpededness.

And the remark that follows immediately on the last passage quoted reflects a certain puzzlement (M 7.189):

But the same account also applies to the unimpeded impression; for they accept this when there is nothing to draw them away, as was said before in the case of Menelaus.

This is perfectly true as far as it goes, but the same account applies to the unimpeded impression because what has just been described *is* an unimpeded impression. The mistake is to suggest that being unimpeded is something over and above, though very much like, undergoing circumspection and accurate inspection. But an impression which has undergone some amount of one or both of these kinds of examination

<sup>23</sup> I have followed Mette, *op. cit.*, in labelling the three varieties of probable impression distinguished at M 7.184 as (a), (b) and (c). He too can find no place for (b) and proceeds straight to (c).

without encountering an obstacle is, to that extent, unimpeded; there is no need to note a gap in the account and refer the reader to another passage. We can now see how someone looking at a passage like this one could have come up with the erroneous order of the PH 1 account. Because he has not understood that circumspection is a necessary condition if an impression is to be (non-vacuously) unimpeded, but sufficient only as long as further examination in the form of accurate consideration has not been undertaken, it seems that the unimpeded stage is missing. The new order contrived for the account of PH 1 gets the notional order right—first checked, then unimpeded—but goes astray by supposing that something further must happen to the impression examined without incident for it to qualify as unimpeded.

But, as we have seen, the order probable, unhindered and thoroughly examined called for by M 7.184 is also open to question. At the very least, it is misleading when it suggests that these stages are all alike the result of an impression's acquisition of successive distinct characteristics, and it may be a result of a misunderstanding on this score. Someone who fails to keep the two stages of probability apart from the two ways in which an impression first becomes and then remains unimpeded, but retains a grip on the connection between circumspection and unimpededness, will reasonably make the unimpeded impression the second stage, but may have gone on to assume mistakenly that the accurate inspection an impression may then undergo calls for a distinct third species of the probable. If in addition the distinction between circumspection and accurate consideration has been overlooked, as would have been all too easy, the postulated third stage can be designated as the *περιωδευμένη* or the *διεξωδευμένη φαντασία*. The problem will then be that it becomes difficult to see what the difference between the unimpeded and the thoroughly examined impression is when the means of establishing the former are discussed in connection with the latter, as they are at M 7.187ff.

But even if, as is usually assumed, 'circumspection' and 'accurate consideration' are synonymous, just alternative ways of referring to thorough examination, each will embrace both kinds of check. And the unimpeded will not be distinct from the thoroughly examined impression. Reference to 'the unimpeded and at the same time thoroughly examined' (M 7.166, 184) or 'the thoroughly examined and unimpeded' impression (M 7.436) will not, as has usually been assumed, implicitly distinguish two grades of probability; each will designate the same kind of impression with a pair of non-synonymous but co-referential expressions so as to indicate both that it is unimpeded and the manner in which it became so, and to remind us that we are concerned with non-vacuously unimpeded impressions, for merely probable impressions are of course unimpeded but vacuously so.

### [V]

We have good reasons, then, to suspect that the division by genus and species towards which the report transmitted by Sextus seems to point (though not as much as has usually been supposed) is a later, misguided imposition on material for which it was unsuited. The lesson I should like to draw at this point is a simple one. Probability as Carneades conceives of it is open-ended. That is to say, the question whether an impression may not still be impeded can be re-opened at any stage, and the investigation can be drawn out to any length you please. The point at which one ceases examining and adopts an impression depends on the interests one brings to bear on, and the constraints imposed by, the situation, and it will vary accordingly. In the end we have nothing to guide us beyond a sense of when enough is enough, and

this cannot help inviting sceptical scrutiny, for it is always possible to have stopped too soon. When probability is understood in this way, the kind of checks an impression can undergo need not come in any particular order, and the range of considerations it might be useful to consult before accepting an impression cannot, except in the most general way, be specified exhaustively in advance. This is because of the character of the evidence our impressions afford us. According to the Academy, the evidential value an impression has for a person is not an internal feature that belongs to it independently of that person's other impressions; on the contrary, an impression inevitably stands in an enormously complex set of relations to other impressions that can diminish or enhance its value as evidence, and the same is true of these impressions themselves. The point is memorably made by Carneades' comparison of impressions to links in a chain (M 7.176). As we might put it, the Academic account is not only fallibilist, there is an element of holism in it as well.

It is this last feature of the Academics' theory which allows them to use that theory to argue, as I put it earlier, not only that we do not need, but, again and in a new way, that we cannot have, the cognitive impression. But before inquiring how probability was used in this way, we might reasonably ask why it was needed for this purpose: had not the Academy's well known arguments regarding indiscernibility already accomplished this aim? To see why the Academics might have wanted to mount a new argument against the cognitive impression, we should once again consider the stand-off reached by their debate with the Stoics. It is not only that each party seemed unable to make its case conclusive; questions can be raised about how consequential the difference between the two schools really was. A number of ancient observers came to think that the differences between the Academy and the Stoa over the criterion were insignificant. To them it seemed that the Academic wise person will take as probable much the same impressions that his Stoic counterpart accepts as cognitive, though with the proviso that they might after all be false. Thus Academic probable, and the Stoic cognitive, impressions are treated by Sextus as a pair to be criticized together (M 7.401ff.) Indeed, Galen goes so far as to maintain that they are essentially the same (*De placitis Hipp. et Plat.* 9.586, 16ff., De Lacy). Even Cicero sometimes writes in a way that suggests a similar conclusion (cf. *Ac. pr.* 2.8, 105, 128). And of course, Aenesidemus, the reviver of Pyrrhonism, complained that the Academy's position had become little more than an echo of Stoicism, and seemed to think that the difference that remained between them over the cognitive impression was of little consequence (Photius, *Bibliotheca*, 170a14–21).

What is more, this way of reducing the difference between the two schools tended to favour the Stoa. For it seems that the Stoics could plausibly claim to have done justice to the concerns behind the Academy's arguments, while resisting their conclusions. According to them, those arguments do not show that the Stoic wise person cannot exist (because the cognitive impressions in whose favour he must discriminate do not exist), but that the condition of wisdom is very hard to achieve indeed. The proper moral to draw from the cases adduced by the Academy, on this view, is not that it is hard to see how there could be unmistakably true impressions in favour of which unerring discrimination is possible, but rather that we should see how hard such unerring discrimination is. But far from wanting to deny this, the Stoics could not have agreed more. Indeed, so hard was it to become wise according to them, that the condition had yet to be achieved. But the Stoics are able to interpret the debate in this way only by relying on certain assumptions which, though they are not directly confronted by the arguments concerning indiscernibility, can be challenged from the perspective afforded by the Academy's theory of probability.

We shall be better able to see this if we remind ourselves that the probable impression which furnished Carneades with his point of departure also furnished the Stoics with theirs. To be sure, Stoic references to the probable are typically pejorative (cf. D.L. 7.46, 89; Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.42). But this is because cognitive impressions are being contrasted with *merely* probable impressions. The former are probable, but not merely probable. And Sextus preserves a Stoic division that makes the cognitive impression a subdivision of the probable impression (M 7.241ff.). Progress from folly to wisdom, it would seem, is in large part a matter of refining and developing an originally indiscriminating tendency to accept probable impressions, and the issue in dispute between the two schools comes down to whether human powers of discrimination can be refined to the point where we accept only unmistakably true, i.e., cognitive impressions.

Progress towards this goal should take the form of becoming better and better at accepting a continually smaller and better selection of probable impressions until in the end assent is confined to the cognitive impression. The Stoics maintained that it lies in our power to complete this process, though they admit this is an ideal very difficult to achieve. Against this, it seems, the Academy argued that, however refined our discriminatory powers become, we shall never be able to rule out accepting a few probable but false impressions along with a mass of true ones. Viewed in these terms, the debate can make one wonder how significant the difference between the Academy and the Stoa really was in the end. The Academics certainly make it seem as if it would be hard to rule out accepting merely probable and thus potentially false impressions, but then who is to say that the Stoics might not be right to hold that it is not impossible?

But this way of looking at things crucially assumes that the cognitive impression postulated by the Stoa is located securely within the larger mass of probable impressions. That is, if impression A is cognitive, it is probable as well, and if we distinguish stages of probability, as Carneades does, A should be probable at any level no matter how advanced. Indeed, the Stoics seem to have committed themselves to an especially strong form of this assumption. Not only are cognitive impressions more probable than any non-cognitive impression, they are, so to speak, supremely probable, so probable, that is, that they cannot fail to win assent. Thus we are told, the mind can no more help assenting to the evident than a scale can fail to register a weight placed on it (Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.38). And as we have already seen, this same element of the Stoic view is presupposed by the Academics when they argue that the false impressions had by dreamers and mad men do not differ from cognitive impressions as far as their power to command assent is concerned, for they command assent just as surely by being no less striking and evident (cf. Cic. *Ac. pr.* 2.90; M 7.402ff.).<sup>24</sup>

The Stoics take this position for a number of reasons. Some are developmental. Cognitive impressions are, according to the Stoa, the starting points from which we

<sup>24</sup> For the argument in full, see G. Striker, 'The problem of the criterion' in S. Everson (ed.) *Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1990), 143–60, 152–3 with n. 14; also M. Frede, 'Stoics and Skeptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions' in M. Burnyeat (ed.) *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley, 1983), 65–93, 84. For a dissent, see F. H. Sandbach, 'Phantasia kataleptike' in A. A. Long (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism* (London, 1971), 9–21, 15. The younger Stoics' claim that the cognitive impression all but takes us by the hair drawing us to assent is not an innovation of theirs. Rather, they seem to have departed from their predecessors by qualifying this view which had earlier been held in an unqualified form. See W. Görler, 'Ἀσθενῆς συγκατάθεσις, zur stoischen Erkenntnistheorie', *Würzburger Jahrbucher für die Altertumswissenschaft* N.F. 3 (1977), 83–92, 91 with n. 29.

advance towards wisdom (Cic. *Ac. post.* 42). But they can fulfil this function only if we accept them before acquiring abilities whose development depends on their prior acceptance. As the Academics repeatedly observed, perfectly accurate impressions will do us little good if they do not have a feature by means of which they are reliably grasped. But there is a deeper reason having to do with the nature of self-evidence itself. If there are impressions that unmistakably guarantee their own truth, as it is supposed cognitive impressions do, their supreme value as evidence should be entirely independent of other impressions whatever they may be. They will not need, or stand to benefit by, the support of other impressions, nor should any other impression be able to diminish their force.

But why, when the acceptance of self-evident impressions is at issue, does the fact that other considerations *should* play no part seem to push us towards supposing that they *can* play no part? Consider what is implied by the Stoics' claim that the cognitive impression is the criterion of truth. It is the measure against which other impressions are to be assessed, but not itself subject to assessment. This means not only that the evidential value of a cognitive impression cannot be sensitive to influence by other impressions, it cannot depend in any way on the outcome of our reflections about it. If it did, it would then be these reflective impressions on which we were ultimately relying (and about whose credentials sceptical questions can be raised). There should be no possibility of getting things right or wrong here; properly speaking, what one does when one accepts a cognitive impression cannot be a matter of assessment or deliberation at all. What is at stake is made clear by contrasting the accounts the two different schools give of how one goes about arriving at clear impressions by rubbing of one's eyes, approaching closer and so on (cf. *Ac. pr.* 2.19; M 7.258). The Academy construes such behaviour as a search for conditions because of our satisfaction with which we incline to the impression at issue. Whereas the Stoics regard the same behaviour as a search for an impression which, in virtue of satisfying these conditions, assures us of its truth all by itself.<sup>25</sup> That is, though these conditions are causally responsible for the features of the impression that command our assent, it is not *because* the impression meets these conditions that we accept it in the sense that they furnish us with our reason for so doing. To have an evident impression that P should, if you will, already amount to being in a condition where it is evident to one that P.<sup>26</sup>

But if this is so, it may be asked: if simply having such an impression is not enough, what further conditions must be fulfilled if it is to be accepted? Here we must be careful to distinguish conditions that might interfere with the having of such an impression in circumstances which are otherwise favourable, as sleepiness or inattention might, and those which prevent such an impression, once had, from being accepted.<sup>27</sup> It is the latter possibility which is in question. Perhaps one must also be

<sup>25</sup> This is especially clear in the passage from Cicero: 'meo autem iudicio [Lucullus is speaking] ita est maxima in sensibus veritas, si et sani sunt ac valentes et omnia remouentur quae obstant et impediunt. itaque et lumen mutari saepe volumus et situs earum rerum quas intuemur, et intervalla aut contrahimus aut diducimus, multaque facimus usque eo dum *aspectus ipse fidem faciat sui iudicii*' (*Ac. pr.* 2.19).

<sup>26</sup> We can see how difficult the relation between reasoning and the cognitive impression was thought to be from Cicero, who reports that some philosophers objected to giving any answer at all to the Academy's arguments because to do so would be to imply that impressions than which nothing can be more evident stand to benefit from support and justification (*Ac. pr.* 2.17). Nonetheless, Cicero maintains that a defence of the evident can be mounted without undermining itself, and he represents Lucullus' speech as just a defence of the evident from the sophistical captions of the Academy (*Ac. pr.* 2.45–6, 105).

<sup>27</sup> As Sextus sometimes fails to do (cf. M 7.424). Cf. J. Annas, 'Stoic Epistemology' in S. Everson, op. cit., 184–203, 201.

in the right condition to *appreciate* the cognitive impression one is having; as we shall see, some Stoics came to think so, albeit grudgingly. But their first position seems to have been that having a self-evident impression is enough by itself to insure acceptance. Thus though the Stoics did allow that assent properly bestowed on a cognitive impression can be withdrawn under the pressure of sophisticated argument, against which only the unshakeably firm grasp that comes with knowledge can protect us, they seem to have held that there is no danger of our not accepting our cognitive impressions when we first have them. According to the Stoa, our fault is that we are too liberal, not too parsimonious with assent.

But it is just this assumption, and the way of viewing the difference between the Academy and the Stoa which it encourages, that the Academics' theory of probability allowed them to challenge. When viewed as an alternative account of human epistemic powers and their potential for improvement, their theory shows that, if we develop the powers of discrimination at our disposal in the ways actually open to us, the result will not be a closer and closer approximation of the Stoic ideal. We will on occasion reject supremely clear impressions, in other words impressions classified by the Stoa as cognitive, and thus supposedly furnished with an unmistakable guarantee of truth which should have ensured their acceptance. This is a consequence of the holism in the Academy's view: we will do this because other impressions, which stand to it in one or another of the evidential relations in which impressions stand to each other, somehow diminish its credibility. What is more, we will do this blamelessly, not because we have failed to proceed with all due care, but precisely because we have. These implications of the Academic position do tend to put the debate in a new light. The Academy's arguments can no longer be construed as showing that the process of development envisaged by the Stoa cannot be completed, however closely its goal is approximated. If successful, they show that that goal cannot serve even as an ideal. For if we make the best use of the powers we actually have according to the Academy, we will not only fall short of but also sometimes overshoot the mark set for us by the Stoa.

Thus the difference between the two schools was of consequence. Indeed, the alternative conception of human epistemic powers advanced by the Academy differed enough from the Stoa's to have different observable consequences. Contrary to some of its critics, it does not lead us to expect precisely the same behaviour as its Stoic rival; in certain conditions, the two theories predict different behaviour. With this in mind, we are now in a position better to understand the examples of Admetus and Alcestis and of Menelaus and Helen which puzzled us earlier. As we have seen, the first appearance of the examples in the exposition of probabilism was somewhat awkward. An Academic, presumably Carneades, had gone to considerable trouble to construct convincing cases in which a person rejects what ought to have been a manifestly self-evident impression. In each, a husband placed in ideal perceptual conditions does not accept that his wife is standing before him when in fact she is. The point the examples make rather well is a crucial implication of Academic probabilism we have already met with, namely that there may be no way to specify in advance all the considerations that might influence our attitude towards an impression; so much so that even a husband's supremely clear impression of his wife is not guaranteed of acceptance. But this moral is not drawn, and the carefully contrived detail of the examples goes unused.

In other words, the examples have all the marks of a philosophical counterexample designed to drive home the lessons of Academic probabilism. I want to suggest that this is the part they were intended to play, and the part they do play when they



reappear as part of Sextus' exposition of Stoic epistemology. Let us look at the crucial passage (M 7.253–7):

The older Stoics maintain that the criterion is the cognitive impression, but the more recent Stoics add: 'when it has no obstacle'. For sometimes a cognitive impression strikes someone, but is not trusted because of an external circumstance. E.g., when Hercules led Alcestis back from beneath the earth and presented her to Admetus, the latter drew a cognitive impression from her, but did not believe it. And Menelaus when he saw the true Helen... drew a cognitive impression, but having left behind an image on his ship, he did not take it to be trustworthy.<sup>28</sup> Consequently the cognitive impression that has no obstacle is the criterion, for these were cognitive impressions, but had obstacles. For Admetus reasoned that Alcestis had died and the dead do not rise again..., and Menelaus saw that he had left Helen on the ship, and it was not improbable (*ἀπιθανόν*) that it was not Helen who was discovered on Pharos, but a phantasm and something daemonic. Thus not without qualification does the cognitive impression come to be the criterion of truth, but when it has no obstacle. For being clear and compelling, they say, it all but takes us by the hair dragging us to assent, in need of nothing further to strike us as such or exhibit its difference from all other impressions.

According to this passage, while the older Stoics make the cognitive impression the criterion of truth, the younger Stoics add the qualification 'when it has no obstacle', because, as they put it, a cognitive impression may strike someone and not be accepted owing to external circumstances. The examples are cited in support of this step. But this account of the modification they introduce into the Stoic view reads very much as if it were an attempt to accept the examples but restrict their damaging implications. For we already know what the Academics will make of cases like this one. On their view, all is as it should be: in the circumstances, Admetus and Menelaus acted quite properly in rejecting their impressions, even though those impressions were as clear and compelling as impressions, taken by themselves, ever are. Cases like these lend support to their view that an impression furnishes us with evidence in the context of other impressions which can enhance or diminish its standing as evidence. An impression such as those had by Admetus and Menelaus will typically be enough. But on Carneades' view, we arrive at our beliefs by assessing our impressions in relation to each other, none of which can speak with an authority which is final and beyond challenge. Thus the clarity and forcefulness of an impression need not have the last word; they are only some, albeit typically the most decisive, of the considerations that determine whether an impression is incorporated into our beliefs.

The Academy was in a strong position to make its case. It will help to see why if we consider how it might have answered some of the objections to its argument. First, we should note that the Stoics, at least the younger Stoics of our passage, acknowledge that impressions such as those of Admetus and Menelaus are possible, that they are cognitive and that they are nevertheless not accepted.<sup>29</sup> And it would have been hard for them not to.<sup>30</sup> All of the conditions necessary for a cognitive impression specified by the Stoa are present (cf. M 7.424). And Admetus and Menelaus have the familiarity with the women they see on which, as we have seen, the

<sup>28</sup> Translated in accordance with Bekker's emendation, *οὐκ εἶχε δὲ αὐτὴν <πιστήν>*. Cf. W. Heintz, *op. cit.*, 118ff.

<sup>29</sup> Those troubled by the supernatural element in the two examples might want to substitute a recognition scene from one of the more implausible but nonetheless remotely possible Shakespeare plays such as the *Winter's Tale* or especially *Pericles*. The wife of its hero has to all appearances died in childbirth in the middle of a storm at sea. She is promptly put overboard in a chest, which, however, quickly washed ashore near the home of a wise and kindly physician who is able to revive her. Many years later, when Pericles is confronted with the wife he thought he had lost, he refuses to believe his eyes until the whole story is laid out for him.

<sup>30</sup> Pace G. Striker, 'The problem of the criterion', (*op. cit.*, n. 24), 152, with n. 14.

Stoics lay so much stress. How, if this is so, when they see their wives in ideal perceptual conditions, could it not seem to them that this is Alcestis or this is Helen, and why should these impressions not be cognitive? It is not that it does not occur to them, but that they refuse to believe their eyes. Since the examples have been constructed in such a way as to exclude all obstacles which might have stood in the way of having a cognitive impression, if there are obstacles they are to the acceptance and not the having of the impression. Nor will it do to object that Admetus and Menelaus are not wise. They are, to be sure, in Stoic terms fools. But if the Stoics want to hold their conception of wisdom up as an ideal and chastise us for failing to live up to it by realizing the potentialities in our nature, it is not enough to stipulate what the condition would be like; there must be a way, however difficult, to advance from folly towards it. But as we have seen, the Stoa's account of the progress seems to have assumed that cognitive impressions are assured of acceptance; the danger, remember, was of being too liberal, not too parsimonious. But the examples we have been considering appear to show that the residue inevitably left behind by previous acts of assent can prevent the cognitive impression from playing its part. What is more, a case can be made that the behaviour of Admetus and Menelaus is not blameworthy, but perfectly reasonable in the circumstances.

But this the Stoics could not accept, and the younger Stoics of the passage seem to have tried to find a way of accepting the examples while resisting the construction Carneades and the Academy want to put upon them. In their view, the hindrances to assent identified by the opponents do not diminish the intrinsic credibility of the cognitive impression; they derail the natural and normal process which should have concluded in its acceptance, while their absence does nothing to enhance its evidential value; it only ensures that a cognitive impression will be accepted as it should be without interference. Hence the vehemence of their conclusion that the cognitive impression all but takes us by the hair dragging us to assent.

This does not seem to be an entirely satisfactory response, however. Earlier, we allowed for the possibility that certain negative conditions might have to be satisfied if one is to 'appreciate' a cognitive impression. Perhaps, though as we have seen, the Stoics' account goes a long way towards eliminating some of the more obvious candidates: conditions one might think of as preventing proper appreciation of a cognitive impression are often treated by the Stoa as preventing us from having such an impression in the first place. Still, there may be room for a view along these lines. But it is hard to regard the impediments to belief described in the examples as obstacles of this kind. Rather, they seem to prevent adoption of the beliefs at issue by giving Admetus and Menelaus reasons for taking themselves not to be justified in believing their own eyes, so to speak. Or if this way of putting things is too strongly suggestive of conscious rational reflection, as our previous discussion shows it may sometimes be, the impressions are obstructed by other impressions in a way that could be reconstructed and endorsed as a piece of reasoning about the available evidence. That is to say, it is hard not to interpret the examples as the Academy would have us interpret them.

## [VI]

At this point, it may seem that the Academy's alternative probabilist position has more than held its own. This is the conclusion to which Philo of Larissa and his followers came, and perhaps many of us will not disagree. But can something be said on behalf of the younger Stoics' response? First, we must grant them one point. As we have seen, the Stoic account of human development from non-rational child to adult,

and then from folly to wisdom, depends on the acceptance of cognitive impressions being unproblematic. Obviously, it would be best if such impressions were assured of acceptance every time. The younger Stoics must, however, have thought that it is enough for us to accept the overwhelming majority of our cognitive impressions, so that it is possible for the cognitive impression to play its part even if it occasionally fails to implant belief. The problem is that it is hard to see how, on the basis of the explanation offered, they are entitled to claim that putative cognitive impressions do not stand to gain or lose by the support or opposition offered by other impressions, and consequently difficult to see that there is a class of impressions whose self-guaranteeing character recommends them to us in a way no other impressions can.

If it is to succeed, then, the younger Stoics' account must explain the cognitive impression's failures to secure assent as exceptional departures from the norm. And it must both uphold the Stoic account of what it is to have and assent to a cognitive impression as a process into which reasoning, understood as the weighing and balancing of considerations, does not enter, and explain how reasoning, or the consultation of considerations in a way that can be reconstructed as reasoning, nonetheless may in exceptional conditions interfere with that process. That is to say, the younger Stoics' account must do justice to the fact that the obstacles to assent with which they are concerned work by presenting themselves as grounds counting against assent. This would be hard enough to deny in any case, but the way in which the examples are set out requires it. Admetus is said to have *reasoned* that the dead do not rise. The fact that Menelaus has seen Helen on board ship explains his hesitation, and though it is not explicitly said in what follows, it is strongly implied this gives him the reason because of which he does not believe his senses.

It may help if we remind ourselves that the Stoics did not believe that assent properly bestowed on a cognitive impression cannot be withdrawn. Such an assent is a cognition (cf. M 7.150), but a cognition is not yet a part of knowledge, which alone is, as the Stoics say, secure, firm and unshakeable by argument. Prominent among the additional conditions that a person must satisfy if his cognitions are to count as knowledge is a mastery of dialectic; such a grasp makes possible an understanding of the components of a body of knowledge in systematic interrelation to each other and also equips its possessor to disarm sophistical arguments by which he might otherwise be compelled to relinquish a cognition. Thus the Stoics allow that those who lack these protections can be made to withdraw assent already given to a cognitive impression. The assent they give, even to cognitive impressions is, as the Stoics put it, weak and changeable.<sup>31</sup> The picture the Stoics seem to have had in mind is of a cognition, formed by an act of assent now past, coming under irresistible pressure from sophistical argument. Thus Chrysippus inveighed against the Academy's practice of *argumentatio in utramque partem* because it has this effect, employing, interestingly enough, the same term, 'drawing away' (*περισπάω*), used by Carneades to characterize the unimpeded impression (Plutarch, *De stoic. repugn.* 1036de; cf. 1056f). Thus it is clear that the Stoics envisaged a limit even to the power of cognitive impressions over us. And Admetus and Menelaus are led to disbelieve their own senses by what looks very much like erroneous reasoning of the kind for which the Stoa allows, though they and not others are responsible for it.

<sup>31</sup> I take it that the Stoics' notion of weak assent includes all acts of assent by those who are not wise, even with regard to their cognitions, but the testimony on this point, and on the closely connected issue of the relation between knowledge, ignorance, opinion and cognition, is not uniformly consistent and is subject to controversy. See W. Görler, *op. cit.*, and A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *op. cit.*, 256ff.

But can their behaviour on these occasions be viewed in these terms and still be regarded as exceptional and abnormal? The Academy's answer to this question is easy to predict. As we have seen, the obstacles to assent described by the Stoa must be viewed as grounds for withholding assent. But if there is a place for such grounds on some occasions, why not potentially on all? Once a few examples are admitted, does not the process of accepting an impression begin to seem like what the Stoics deny it can be, namely a matter of consulting a syndrome of related impressions? For it looks as though the clarity and strikingness of an impression do no more than establish an initial presumption in its favour, i.e., make it probable in the Academic sense. And far from needing nothing further to exhibit its difference from all other impressions and command assent, the cognitive impression seems to require that there be no considerations strongly opposing it if it is to implant belief. If this is right, the supposedly normal cases instanced by the Stoa, in which a putatively self-evident impression is accepted straightaway, will not be essentially different from unusual cases like those of Menelaus and Admetus. The requirement that they not be impeded is satisfied either because nothing about the circumstances presents itself as an obstacle, or vacuously because there was no time or reason to search for potentially conflicting considerations. But nothing about the intrinsic character of the impression rules out the possibility that such a consideration might have presented itself or been uncovered.

The Academic case is a strong one, but I want to hazard a suggestion about how the Stoa might have defended itself. Though it is not without difficulties of its own, the suggestion is that the Stoics should assimilate such cases to their account of how sophistry can undermine a cognition. In other words, they should not deny that the impressions Admetus and Menelaus have are cognitive nor that assent is given to them, but should nevertheless insist that they do not implant a settled belief. What is there to recommend such an approach? First we should note that cases like those of Admetus and Menelaus lend themselves to description in terms of an inner conflict. As the stock phrase we have used already has it, one cannot believe one's own eyes. This tendency is at its clearest in Plato's description of sensory illusion in *Republic* 10. According to his account there, when we experience an illusion but are not deceived by it, this is because the judgement by an inferior part of the soul that things are as the illusion would have us believe is opposed by that of a higher, rational part (602D–603A). But the Stoics are prevented from adopting an account along these lines for the same reason that they cannot treat weakness of the will as a conflict between parts of the soul, namely their unitary, rational conception of the soul (more precisely, the *hegemonikon*). They were led by this view to deny the possibility of knowingly doing wrong, just as Socrates had done before them. But as we know, they maintained that weakness of the will is impossible only if construed as a full blown conflict between different elements of the soul. Instead they chose to describe cases of incontinence, which seem to involve such a conflict, as cases of rapid vacillation between two opposed views by reason (Plutarch, *De virtute morali* 446f).

Perhaps the behaviour of Admetus and Menelaus should be construed along these lines as involving a conflict of this kind, an assent which is given only to be immediately withdrawn under self-imposed argumentative pressure. If there is such a process, in the normal course of events assent to a cognitive impression implants or fixes a belief that will persist for some while at least. And because of the exceptionally clear and striking character of the cognitive impression, this will often happen even when it conflicts with a mistaken belief already in place; in such a case one is set right so to speak. But perhaps if this is to happen a further condition beyond the assent

must be satisfied, one that is easily overlooked because almost always satisfied, but is nevertheless on rare occasions not fulfilled. If one is in the grip of a mistaken but extremely plausible pattern of reasoning, whose hidden faults one lacks the skill to detect, as Admetus and Menelaus are, one may be led to repudiate an evident impression.

The advantage of treating the behaviour of Menelaus and Admetus as involving an inner conflict mistakenly resolved in favour of a faulty but plausible train of thought is that it in effect insulates the process of having and assenting to a cognitive impression from any process of reasoning about or assessing such an impression by confining these activities to a later stage. And such an account may make it easier to see problematic cases like those of Admetus and Menelaus as exceptional and abnormal. For if this approach is right, the process of having and assenting to cognitive impressions implants belief in the overwhelming majority of cases, and impressions accepted in this way are not normally the occasions for reasoning at all, implicit or explicit, let alone the kind of reasoning operative in the cases of Admetus and Menelaus. What is more, according to this way of looking at the matter, the behaviour of Admetus and Menelaus, though perhaps understandable, is not blameless. They have failed to adopt a belief for which they have the best possible evidence because they allowed themselves to be deceived by a merely plausible train of thought, a mistake against which better and more scrupulous reasoning would have protected them. That is to say, they have not, contrary to the Academy, made the best possible use of evidence at their disposal and behaved as reasonably as one has a right to expect in the circumstances.

But is this the defence the younger Stoics intended? First appearances suggest otherwise, perhaps rightly. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are certain tensions in the description of their position that an account along these lines would do much to reduce. As things stand, the claim that the cognitive impression all but takes us by the hair drawing us to assent sits rather oddly with the position as a whole, especially as it is given as a reason (*γάρ*) for the younger Stoics' view that the cognitive impression is not the criterion unqualifiedly but only when it has no obstacle. The implication, to be sure, is that assent to the cognitive impression is blocked in the first place, but this is not ever said. Instead, we are told that Admetus distrusted his impression of Alcestis, and that Menelaus did not take his impression of Helen to be trustworthy (M 7.254–5).<sup>32</sup> And this is compatible with the view that, though the cognitive impression secures assent, it may nonetheless fail to implant belief. What is lacking, of course, is an explicit indication that assenting to an impression and coming to hold a settled belief may differ. The view I advocate has the advantage of allowing the younger Stoics to take account of unusual cases like those of Admetus and Menelaus while continuing to insist on the overwhelmingly compelling character of the cognitive impression. Its weaknesses should be equally obvious, for it requires us to accept that erroneous reasoning can not only lead us to relinquish an assent properly conferred on a cognitive impression in the past, but that it can do so while such an impression is being had.

In effect, then, this approach escapes the difficulties presented by the notion of self-evidence only to fall prey to another having to do with inner conflict. The Stoics' epistemology and theory of action in terms of which the debate has been conducted are of great simplicity and elegance, and possess enormous explanatory power, so much so that subsequent generations of philosophers have often taken on large parts

<sup>32</sup> See n. 28.

of the position uncritically. But their claims can be quite breathtakingly bold, for instance that all of our beliefs are formed by acts of assent for which we are responsible and which can consequently be brought under our control. The Stoics insist on this point and in general are not bothered by the extent to which their views depart from what we take our experience to be. But it seems to me that the two sets of difficulties just mentioned may impose too great a strain even for the Stoics. Certainly they will have provided the Academy with ample opportunity for argument. We have seen how the difficulties with self-evidence were exploited. But it also seems that the Stoics' account of inner conflict was vulnerable; the notion of assent it employs seems to be in danger of losing touch with the pre-theoretical notion of opinion which it was introduced to explain. But perhaps it would be fitting to end our account of the Academy's debate with the Stoa without having reached an absolutely conclusive resolution of these issues.<sup>33</sup>

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