

13 Academic Justifications of Assent

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We know that the Philonian/Metrodorians prevailed over the Clitomachians in a dispute within the Academy that arose as the Academics tried to understand and defend their reaction to Stoic claims in epistemology, but the evidence for the two views themselves is less clear.¹ Charles Brittain (2001, 2006b; see also 2005, 2006a) gives the now standard interpretation. He conceives of these views as ‘radical’ and ‘mitigated scepticism’ (2001: 11; cf. 2006b: xxvii, xxviii), but the ‘radical scepticism’ he attributes to the Clitomachians is implausible enough on philosophical grounds that it is worth considering an interpretation of the textual evidence that makes the disagreement less one-sided.² On this interpretation, the dispute between the Stoics and the Academics is an instance of a type of epistemological dispute that Hartry Field (1998, 2000, 2009, 2018) discusses.³

Field argues that disagreements in epistemology often proceed against the presupposition that the justification – or what he calls the ‘reasonableness’ (2000: 118–199, 119n5; 2009: 250n2; 2018: 3) – of a method for belief formation and revision is a ‘purely factual’ matter (1998: 6; cf. 2000: 124; 2009: 249–50; 2018: 1). Field discusses disagreements in contemporary epistemology (2009: 286–9; see also 2018: 1–2), but given the continuities between ancient and contemporary epistemology, it is natural to wonder whether this kind of dispute occurs in ancient epistemology and, if so, whether in a dispute of this sort there are philosophers who understand justification in the general way that Field does.

I think that in both cases the answer is ‘yes’. The Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians respond in different ways to the challenge the Stoic epistemology poses for the Academic method of assenting to impressions.⁴ The Philonian/Metrodorians respond in terms of the Stoic framework, according to which the justification of assent is a factual matter. The Clitomachians do not. On their view, the justification of assent is what Field calls an ‘evaluative property’.⁵

To see the argument for this interpretation, it is necessary to see how the Clitomachian and Metrodorian/Philonian views arose within the Academy. Stoicism begins with Zeno of Citium (c. 344–c. 262 BCE). He introduced what Cicero describes as ‘new pronouncements’ in epistemology (*Academica* I.40). Arcesilaus (who became head of the Academy around 268 BCE) countered

these pronouncements.⁶ In opposition to the Stoic position, he seems to have said that ‘there is nothing that can be known’ and that therefore ‘we should not assert or affirm anything, or approve it with assent’ (*Academica* I.45). Given that Arcesilaus did say this, and that in saying this he did not straightforwardly contradict himself, he cannot be understood to have assented to the view that no one should assent to any view.⁷ Still, because it remained unclear exactly how he should be understood, it became a problem within the Academy to understand his opposition to the Stoic pronouncements in epistemology. This opposition had become a defining feature of the Academy, and there was the worry that the integrity of the school would be undermined if the problem went unsolved.

To understand the response to this problem within the Academy, the first step is to set out the Stoic pronouncements themselves. The Stoics and Academics looked back to Socrates, but they saw different things. His questioning seemed to show that nobody had the knowledge necessary for living a good life, but Socrates did not stop questioning. Moreover, according to the Stoics, he was right not to stop because, although knowledge is difficult to obtain, it is not impossible. Knowledge is possible, according to Zeno and the Stoics, because there are ‘cognitive impressions’.⁸ Their idea, briefly, is this. Impressions function as representations. In adults, the contents of impressions are propositions.⁹ A cognitive impression can only have a true proposition as its content. The Stoics thought that nature in its providence constructs human beings with the ability to assent to these impressions and thus makes it possible for them to have the knowledge necessary for living good lives. The beliefs they form in assenting to cognitive impressions are true. Moreover, in the absence of false beliefs, Socratic questioning cannot force assent to a cognitive impression to be withdrawn. If the premises are true and the conclusion is the **negative** of the proposition that is the content of a cognitive impression, then the argument is not valid.

Given this much, the problem of understanding the Academic opposition becomes the problem of understanding what the Academics think they are doing in arguing against these Stoic views in epistemology. The Academics argue that no impression is cognitive because for every true impression, there is a false impression indistinguishable from it (*Academica* II.40–2). On the basis of this premise, the Academics invite the Stoics to admit that it is necessary to withhold assent (*Academica* II.66–7). More formally, the argument is this:

1. For every true impression, there is a false impression indistinguishable from it.
2. If (1) is true, then no impression is cognitive.
3.  no impression is cognitive, then it is necessary to withhold assent.
4.  is necessary to withhold assent.

 The Stoics accept premises (2) and (3). The Academics argue for premise (1) on the basis of the impressions of apparently indistinguishable objects (such as identical twins), and on the basis of states of mind such as dreaming or madness in which false impressions are indistinguishable from the true impressions that

one has when one is not dreaming or not suffering a fit of madness (*Academica* II.84ff.).

The question is what the Academics are doing with this argument, and given their relation to Socrates, part of the answer is that they thought of themselves as applying the method that he invented. Socrates, in an ‘investigation’ of the gods and the meaning of the oracle’s response to Chaerephon, searched for someone with the knowledge necessary to live a good life.¹⁰ Because he thought he lacked this knowledge, he needed a way to determine whether others had it. His method was to question them and to use their answers as premises in an argument for a conclusion they themselves thought was contrary to something they had said. If his interlocutors were refuted in this way, it seems Socrates could plausibly conclude that they lacked the knowledge and that they were not counterexamples to the oracle’s response to Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates. It is this Socratic method the Academics use to investigate the Stoics and their epistemology. The Stoics assert that it is unnecessary to withhold assent from all impressions because some are cognitive, and the Academics examine and test them with an argument whose conclusion is in conflict with this view about assent.

Although Socrates may or may not have been correct that he was not wise, the use of the Socratic method itself does not prevent the Academics from having beliefs or even knowledge. Neither does it prevent some of their beliefs from being about the force of the argument that they press against the Stoics. The Socratic method does not prevent the Academics from believing, or even from knowing, that the Stoics should accept the argument and that the Stoics should withhold assent.

One might try to resist this possibility by insisting that the Academics need not be understood to accept the Stoic framework of impression, assent, and belief as assent to an impression. It is hard, though, to see the motivation for this resistance. It is true that the Academics do not need to accept the Stoic framework, but insofar as it is part of the ordinary way of describing human beings to say that they think about and believe various things about themselves and the world, it is extremely natural to think that the Academics have beliefs.¹¹

Moreover, there appears to be no good reason for this resistance because Carneades (who became head of the Academy at some time before he was part of the Athenian embassy to Rome in 155 BCE) seems to have tried to understand and defend the rationality of assent.¹² He seems to have thought that assent is permitted to ‘persuasive impressions’ (*Academica* II.32–4, II.99–100). In this, he seems to have in mind the ordinary way in which human beings think about things and form beliefs once they have sufficient evidence relative to the importance that they attribute to the matter.¹³ Unless something intervenes to stop them, they ordinarily consider the matter in question until they have sufficient evidence to decide it one way or another, given the importance that they attach to it. Once they have this evidence, they ordinarily accept that the issue is as their thinking has revealed it to be.¹⁴

This is how Sextus Empiricus understands Carneades. He takes Carneades to think that his description of assent in terms of persuasive impressions is a

formal way to describe how people behave in everyday situations when they are thinking about things and forming beliefs:¹⁵

[J]ust as in ordinary life when we are investigating a small matter we question a single witness, but in a greater matter several, and when the matter investigated is still more important we cross-question each of the witnesses on the testimony of the others, – so likewise, says Carneades, in trivial matters we employ as criterion only the persuasive (*πιθανῆ*) impression, but in greater matters the irreversible, and in matters which contribute to happiness the tested impression.

(*Against the Logicians* 1 (M 7).184)

Sextus Empiricus takes Carneades to have thought that, as the importance of the matter increases, the evidence must first be enough for the impression to be ‘persuasive’, next enough for the impression to remain persuasive after one has considered related matters, and, lastly, enough for the impression to remain persuasive after one has considered related matters and completed certain tests.¹⁶

For understanding the disagreement within the Academy between the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians, the details about degrees of evidence and importance do not matter. The crucial point is that, in opposition to the ‘new’ Stoic method of assent in terms of cognitive impressions, Carneades describes a method of assent in terms of the following ordinary fact about human beings that unless something prevents them, they assent to their impressions once they have the evidence dictated by the importance that they attach to the matter and that if the importance increases, they withdraw their assent unless their evidence is sufficient relative to the increased degree of importance.¹⁷

One might still wonder whether his discussion of ‘persuasive impressions’ expresses a view that Carneades himself advocated. We know that the Stoics replied to the Academics with an argument of their own: namely, that life would be impossible to live if no impression were cognitive because impulse, and thus action and life itself, requires assent (*Academica* II.24–5). So one might wonder whether Carneades did anything more than put forward the view about persuasive impressions as part of a counterargument.

In answer, it seems that Carneades did put forward the view about persuasive impressions as part of a counterargument, but that he also could be understood to think that assenting to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness is the ordinary way to form beliefs which the Stoics wish to replace with their ‘new’ method in terms of cognitive impressions. Cicero provides evidence for this interpretation. In his *Academica* (II.98–9), he says that Clitomachus (who became head of the Academy after Carneades in about 129 BCE) was Carneades’ long-time companion and wrote four books that ‘deal with the withholding [of] assent’. In a discussion † Cicero says that he paraphrases from one of the books that Clitomachus wrote, Clitomachus seems both to refer to Carneades’ view in

the context of a counter to the Stoic argument (*Academica* II.99) and to advocate the rationality of this method of assenting to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness:

After setting out these points, Clitomachus adds that the formula ‘the wise man withholds assent’ is used in two ways (*dupliciter dici adsensus sustinere sapientem*), one when the meaning is that he gives absolute assent to nothing,¹⁸ the other when he restrains himself from replying so as to convey approval or disapproval of something, with the consequence that he neither makes a negation nor an affirmation; and that this being so, he withholds in the first, so that he never assents, but holds on to his assent in the second, so that he is guided by probability,¹⁹ and wherever this confronts him or is wanting he can answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ accordingly. In fact as we hold that he who restrains himself from assent about all things nevertheless does move and does act, the view is that there remain impressions of a sort that arouse us to action, and also answers that we can give in the affirmative or the negative in reply to questions, merely following a corresponding impression, provided that we answer without assent; but that nevertheless not all impressions of this character were actually approved, but those that nothing hindered. (*Academica* II.104)

(Rackham 1951: 501, with minor changes)

Cicero’s report is not as clear as one might hope, but the suggestion is that Clitomachus thought that the practice of giving and withholding assent is rational, and so is permitted to the Academic, on the condition that this practice is only a matter of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in such a way that one is simply following one’s impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. Cicero, though, provides no explanation of the condition that Clitomachus imposes, and this is a problem because to understand what Clitomachus is saying about the assent that he endorses, it is necessary to know what this condition is.

As Brittain interprets the condition that Clitomachus imposes, the key feature is the absence of a certain connection to truth. Brittain states his interpretation in several seemingly different ways, but the emphasis throughout is on whether there is this connection to truth. He says that:

On the Clitomachian view of Carneades, however, while the Academics will ‘follow’ persuasive impressions, or ‘approve’ them, they will not *assent* to them: that is the Academics will act on such impressions, without taking them to be *true*.²⁰

(2001: 16)

Brittain stresses that on ‘the purely subjective Clitomachian interpretation [...] there is no inference from what is persuasive to what is true’.

(*ibid.*)

Further, Brittain (*ibid.*; cf. 2006b: xxix) contrasts the ‘purely subjective Clitomachian interpretation’ with ‘the Philonian/Metrodorians’ quasi-objective use of it (the persuasiveness of an impression) as evidence for the truth. He says that, unlike the Clitomachians, the Philonian/Metrodorians

understood the persuasiveness of their impressions to have objective grounds, and thus to produce (in some cases) provisional or ‘probable’ results.

(2001: 16)

says that, while

the Academic does not hold dogmatic beliefs asserting the truth of a given proposition, it is open to him to ‘follow’ or ‘approve’ impressions which are ‘persuasive’ to him, in the sense that he may act on such impressions *as if* they were true without committing himself to their truth.²¹

(*ibid.*: 74)

He says that, unlike Clitomachus and the ‘radical sceptics’,

the mitigated sceptics will assent to persuasive impressions or claims when the evidence supporting them is sufficiently strong – and they assume that persuasiveness under the appropriate conditions does provide *evidence* for the truth.²²

(2006b: xxix)

He says that, because the Clitomachian Academics

are not committed to the truth [they] do not *believe*, e.g. that nothing can be known, or, at least, they do not believe it in the sense implied by Stoic assent (*ibid.*: xxvii).²³

What Brittain has in mind in these remarks is perhaps not altogether clear, but, as I understand him, his view is that Clitomachus thought that the persuasiveness of an impression is not evidence for the truth of its propositional content. This, on Brittain’s interpretation, or at least on one reading of his interpretation, is how Clitomachus understands what it is for the Academic to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in such a way that one is simply following one’s impressions in terms of their persuasiveness.

To get clearer on this interpretation, it is helpful to set aside a certain issue about ‘assent’ that would distract from how Clitomachus is supposed to have understood his position. To understand the disagreement within the Academy, we do not need to understand what Clitomachus has in mind in *Academica* II.104 with his apparent attempt to distinguish kinds of assent or to isolate the senses of certain Greek words.²⁴ Once this difficult issue is put aside, Brittain’s view is

that Clitomachus thinks that ‘assent’ is acceptable just as long as the assenter is only saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in such a way that one is following one’s impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. The important question is about the philosophical content of this condition, and Brittain’s answer seems to be that the condition is that the persuasiveness of the impression is not evidence for the truth of its propositional content.

This answer can be surprising. One might think it is obvious that the persuasiveness of an impression is not evidence for its truth. Think about the example that Sextus Empiricus gives. In ordinary life, when the question is about a small matter, he says that we examine a single witness. Given that the degree of importance we attribute to the matter is small, and that we have no reason to be suspicious, we accept the testimony from the witness that such-and-such happened. This in turn makes the impression that such-and-such happened persuasive, but the evidence for the truth of the propositional content of the persuasive impression is not that the impression is persuasive. The evidence for the truth of the impression that such-and-such happened is that the witness told us that it happened.

This suggests a second reading of Brittain’s interpretation. The issue, on this reading, is not whether the persuasiveness of an impression is itself evidence. It is whether, on the basis of a persuasive impression, the Academic accepts that he has evidence for the truth of the propositional content of this impression. There is, it seems, a reason to believe that the propositional content of an impression is true if the impression is persuasive. Consider the example again. The impression that such-and-such happened is persuasive because we accept the testimony, and so acquire a reason to believe that the propositional content of the impression is true. It seems, then, that if an impression is persuasive, we have a reason to believe in the truth of its propositional content. Yes, on Brittain’s interpretation, the ‘radical sceptics’ do not accept this inference.²⁵

The Philonian/Metrodorian position, when it is understood along these lines, is not ‘radical’. The Philonian/Metrodorians accept the inference, but they qualify their acceptance in a certain way. Just what Brittain has in mind is again perhaps not altogether clear, but he seems to think that the Philonian/Metrodorians take the persuasiveness of an impression as ‘provisional’ evidence for its truth. This seems to be his point in the following passage in which he summarises the three ‘form[s] of assent’ he associates with the Stoics, the Clitomachians, and the Philonian/Metrodorians:

The Stoics conceived of assent as a unitary notion – to assent to an impression (or proposition) is simply to take it to be true. Clitomachus had identified a non-dogmatic form of assent, ‘following’ or ‘approving’ what is persuasive, where to ‘follow’ what is ‘persuasive’ is to act on an impression *as if* it were true, but without any commitment to its truth in reality. The Philonian/Metrodorians in turn recognize a third form of assent: *provisionally* taking the impression to be true.

(2001: 88)

The idea, then, when Brittain's interpretation is understood along the lines I have been suggesting, is that, whereas the Clitomachian does not accept that he has a reason to believe in the truth of the propositional content of an impression if the impression is persuasive for him, the Philonian/Metrodorian accepts the validity of this inference but also 'mitigates' his acceptance in a certain way. The Philonian/Metrodorian accepts that he has a reason to believe in the truth of the propositional content of an impression if the impression is persuasive for him, but he takes the belief that he forms in the truth of this proposition to have the property of being 'defeasible' (ibid.: 87; cf. 85).

The Philonian/Metrodorian thus has beliefs, but he recognises that he may not be able to defend these beliefs against Socratic questioning. This, it seems, is what Brittain has in mind when he says that the belief is 'defeasible'. Socrates seemed to show that relative to any belief about the matters that he discussed, the believer has a reason to withdraw it. The interlocutor would answer an initial question. Socrates would elicit further beliefs from the interlocutor, and the interlocutor would see that these beliefs gave him reason to withdraw his answer to the initial question. The Philonian/Metrodorian, in recognising that his belief is 'defeasible', recognises that this could happen to him.²⁶

The evidence for Brittain's interpretation rests primarily on a handful of passages in Cicero's *Academica*. In *Academica* II.78, Cicero indicates that there was a disagreement between the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians about how to understand Carneades. Carneades was said to have espoused a certain belief in response to the Stoics, and there was a controversy in the Academy over whether he did. Whereas Clitomachus interpreted the remark as part of an argument against the Stoics, Philo and Metrodorus thought that this was also something that Carneades himself believed:

[For the wise man] might perceive²⁷ nothing and yet form an opinion – a view which is said to have been accepted by Carneades;²⁸ although for my own part, trusting Clitomachus more than Philo or Metrodorus, I believe that Carneades did not so much accept this view as advance it in argument. (Rackham 1951: 567)

In *Academica* II.108, Cicero says that he agrees with Clitomachus when he says that Carneades accomplished a 'Herculean' task when he showed how to avoid a certain kind of thinking:

I agree with Clitomachus when he writes that Carneades really did accomplish an almost Herculean labour in ridding our minds of that fierce wild beast, the act of assent, that is of mere opinion and hasty thinking (*adsensionem, id est opinionem et temeritatem*).

(Rackham 1951: 607)

Finally, in *Academica* II.148, Cicero has Catulus set out a view of Academic assent that he says his father attributed to Carneades. This view seems different from saying 'yes' or 'no' in such a way that one is simply following one's

impressions in terms of their persuasiveness, and hence the view Catulus sets out seems to reflect the Philonian/Metrodorian understanding of Carneades:

I am coming round to the view of my father, which indeed he used to say was that of Carneades, and am beginning to think that nothing can be perceived, but to deem that the wise man will assent to something not perceived, that is, will hold an opinion, but with the qualification that he will understand that it is an opinion and will know that there is nothing that can be comprehended and perceived; and therefore although agreeing [in this way] with their rule of *epochē* as to everything, I assent emphatically to that second view, that nothing exists that can be perceived.²⁹

(Rackham 1951: 658–9)

On the view that Catulus is ‘coming round’ to accept, the Academics can have beliefs. What he has in mind is not easy to see, but his idea seems to be that the Academic can have beliefs as long as he understands that the impressions to which he assents are not cognitive impressions.

These passages, although perhaps suggestive, do not demand Brittain’s interpretation. Notice, first of all, that these passages do not show what the two positions themselves are. Instead, Brittain offers his interpretation as an explanation for an alleged difference between the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians on whether the Academic can have beliefs. These passages, however, do not show that this difference exists. The Philonian/Metrodorians allow the Academic to have beliefs. The texts make this much clear, but they do not show that Clitomachus thought that the Academic is not allowed to have beliefs. *Academica* II.78 suggests that Clitomachus was concerned to show that Carneades did not espouse that ‘[the wise man] might perceive nothing and yet form an opinion’, but it does not follow that Clitomachus and the Clitomachians thought that the Academic cannot have beliefs.

The argument otherwise, as I understand it, is that Clitomachus accepted what Carneades accepted about beliefs and that *Academica* II.78 shows that Clitomachus thought that Carneades’ view is that the Academic cannot have beliefs.³⁰ Clitomachus is supposed to have said what Cicero reports him to have said because he is trying to save Carneades from contradiction. Clitomachus realised that Carneades thought that the Academic cannot have beliefs. Hence, although Carneades was said to accept that ‘[the wise man] might perceive nothing and yet form an opinion’, Clitomachus maintained that Carneades really did nothing more than present this view in a counterargument against the Stoics.

At least two immediate problems face this argument. Even if it can be stated without attributing to Carneades and Clitomachus the belief that the Academic cannot have beliefs, the argument is inconsistent with Cicero’s report that Clitomachus was said ‘to declare that he had never been able to understand what Carneades did accept’ (*Academica* II.139; cf. Striker 1996: 93). Secondly, even if Clitomachus was exaggerating, a more straightforward explanation is

possible. Carneades may have thought that nothing necessarily is wrong with having beliefs but that, since his beliefs about assent and persuasive impressions are not essential to the method that the Academics use against the Stoics, it is unhelpful to make them known because this would only take the focus away from the need for the Stoics to defend their epistemology (cf. Frede 2003: 278; see also *Academica* II.60).

Given this, *Academica* II.108 does not confirm what *Academic* II.78 shows. The ‘almost Herculean labour’ that Carneades accomplished was not to rid the mind of belief. What he did was to set out procedures for assenting to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. This is why Clitomachus thought that Carneades showed how to avoid the ‘hasty thinking’ that results in mere opinion.

Further, the position that Brittain attributes to the Clitomachian on the basis of these passages is implausible on philosophical grounds. The Clitomachian represents the world in terms of the propositional contents of persuasive impressions. He ‘does move and does act’, and it is against the background of the representations that he accepts by assenting to the impressions he finds persuasive that he ‘does move and does act’ in one way rather than another. Yet, according to Brittain’s interpretation, the Clitomachian does not accept that he has reason to believe in the truth of a proposition if it is the content of an impression that is persuasive for him. It is not that he has not thought about the matter. He has thought about it, and he rejects the validity of this inference as part of his explanation for why giving and withholding assent by only saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in such a way that one is simply following his impressions in terms of their persuasiveness is assent that is acceptable to the Academic.

Since the text does not spell out in complete detail either the Clitomachian or the Philonian/Metrodorian position, the historian is left with a problem of interpretation. There is a disagreement between the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians, and the problem for the historian is to reconstruct the two positions so that it is understandable how they could arise in the Academy as part of the Academic attempt to understand their opposition to the Stoic epistemology. It is true that the Philonian/Metrodorian position won out within the Academy, but it is also true that the dispute itself was real. If Brittain’s interpretation is correct, it becomes difficult to see why there was any dispute at all and how Clitomachus, with such a view, could ever have become head of the Academy.

I think that it is possible to reconstruct the two positions within the Academy in reaction to the Stoics so that the position associated with Clitomachus is not so straightforwardly implausible. An important part of the evidence for this interpretation is *Academica* II.35–6, where Lucullus challenges the Academics to reveal the justification for their assent to persuasive impressions.³¹ In the build-up to the challenge, Lucullus sets out the Stoic view that nature in its providence arranges things so that human beings, as they live out their lives, have cognitive impressions because this is how nature ensures that human beings can attain the knowledge on which the good life depends.

Against the background of this justification of the Stoic assent to cognitive impressions, Lucullus challenges the reasonableness of the Academic assent to persuasive impressions:

[W]hat do you mean by your ‘persuasive impressions’? [or: ‘What then is the probability that your school talk about?’ (Rackham 1951: 513)] [...] [T]hey allow that after the wise person has played his part thoroughly by subjecting everything to a meticulous examination, it’s still possible for his impression to be truth-like (*veri simile*) and yet very far from being true. So even if they do approach the truth for the most part or its closest approximation, as they say they do, they still won’t be able to be confident in their claims [or ‘they will be unable to trust themselves’ (ibid.)].

(Brittain 2006b: 23)

The Academics that Lucullus seems to have specifically in mind are the Philonian/Metrodorians.³² He seems to take them to think that the justification of their method of assent consists in the fact that the beliefs so formed are ‘truth-like’. To Lucullus, however, this justification is insufficient because beliefs so formed can be ‘truth-like’ even though they are ‘very far from being true’.

The association of the ‘truth-like’ with the Academic method of assent occurs in several places in Cicero’s *Academica*. For example, in *Academica* II.32, Lucullus says of the Academics that:

[t]heir idea is – and I noticed that you were particularly moved by this – that there are ‘persuasive’ or, as it were, ‘truth-like’ impressions (*probabile aliquid esse et quasi veri simile*) [or ‘that something is “probable”, or as it were resembling the truth’ (Rackham 1951: 509)], and this is what they use as their guiding rule both for conducting their lives and in investigation and argument.³³

(Brittain 2006b: 21)

His use of ‘as it were’ suggests that *veri simile* is not a synonym of *probabile* in this context and that *veri simile* is not an explicit part of the way that Carneades himself described persuasive impressions (cf. Fuhrer 1993). If this is right, it remains to know who introduced this understanding.³⁴

One possibility is that the Philonian/Metrodorians introduced this understanding of persuasive impressions. This is Brittain’s view, but he takes the association of ‘truth-like’ and ‘persuasive’ as confirmation for his interpretation (2001: 108, 112) that the Philonian/Metrodorians take persuasiveness as ‘provisional’ evidence for truth. Instead, I suggest, they are justifying their method of assenting to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. Their view is that the justification of this methodology consists in the fact that the beliefs so formed, although not always true, are ‘truth-like’. The Philonian/Metrodorians, following Carneades, think that human beings should assent to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. In addition, they have a view about why this

Academic method of assent is rational. They identify the factual property that the beliefs formed in this way are ‘truth-like’ as the justification of the Academic method of assent to impressions.

On this interpretation, the Philonian/Metrodorians follow the Stoics in thinking that the justification of assent is a factual property. Against the background of their view that nature in its providence fixes the point of assenting to impressions, the Stoics take the reliability of assent to cognitive impressions to justify this method of assent (cf. Field 2009: 252, 2018: 14). For the Stoics, nature in its providence constructs human beings with the ability to assent to impressions because this is how human beings attain the knowledge on which the good life depends. It is from within this framework that the Philonian/Metrodorians try to meet the challenge the Stoic epistemology poses. They do not think that nature fixes the point of assenting to impressions, but they take the justification of assent to be a factual matter and think that assent to persuasive impressions is rational because this assent results in beliefs that are ‘truth-like’.

In contrast to the Philonian/Metrodorians, the Clitomachians do not take the justification of the Academic practice of assent to be a factual matter.³⁵ They do, of course, think that the practice is justified. Following Carneades, both the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians think that assent to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness is justified. The Clitomachians, however, do not think that the justification of this method of assent consists in the factual property that the beliefs formed in this way are ‘truth-like’. In fact, they do not think that it consists in a factual property at all. The Clitomachians think that this assent is rational. They positively evaluate their practice of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to their impressions in such a way that they are following their impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. Further, in their opposition to Zeno’s ‘new pronouncements’ in epistemology, the Clitomachians understand the question to be whether the Stoic method of assent in terms of cognitive impressions is better than their method of assent in terms of persuasive impressions. Since it seems persuasive to them that the method of assent that the Stoics propose is unusable, the Clitomachians’ answer is that this ‘new’ Stoic method is not better than theirs. Hence, they see no reason not to continue to have ‘confidence’ in, and to positively evaluate, their practice of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to their impressions in such a way that they are following their impressions in terms of the impressions’ persuasiveness.

On this interpretation, contrary to Brittain’s interpretation of the dispute with the Philonian/Metrodorians, the Clitomachians do not in some way or in some sense fail to have beliefs when they say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to their impressions because they do not accept that they have reason to believe in the truth of the propositional contents of the impressions that are persuasive for them:

[W]hen the Academics draw their notorious conclusions about the unattainability of knowledge and the irrationality of forming beliefs [because no impression is cognitive], they are maintaining only that these conclusions are currently ‘persuasive’: they are not committed to the truth

of these views or of the arguments that support them. But in that case, the Clitomachian Academics do not *believe*, e.g., that nothing can be known, or, at least, they do not believe it in the sense implied by Stoic assent.

(Brittain 2006b: xxvii)

The Clitomachians have beliefs. Everyone has beliefs. What divides the Stoics, the Clitomachians, and the Philonian/Metrodorians is how they understand the justification of assent. The Stoics and the Philonian/Metrodorians take it to consist in a factual property. The Clitomachians do not.

This interpretation makes the dispute between the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians less one-sided, but it remains possible to understand how the Philonian/Metrodorian position could have turned out to be the more popular position within the Academy. The view in the background is the Stoic view that human beings should restrict assent to cognitive impressions because nature in its providence ensures that this is the objectively correct way to assent and thus to form beliefs. The Academics do not think that there are any cognitive impressions. They assent to impressions in terms of the impressions' persuasiveness, but, given the background of the Stoic view, it could appear to some Academics that a method of assent is justified in virtue of some factual property and hence that, to justify a given method of assent, it is necessary to identify this property. The Clitomachians, however, did not go along with this. Their view, which they might not have articulated very clearly, does not have them think that the way to meet the Stoic challenge carries this presupposition. The Clitomachians recognise the need to meet the challenge, and hence they argue that cognitive impressions do not exist, but they offer no factual property as the justification of their assent to impressions in terms of their persuasiveness. This might have seemed inadequate within the Academy, given the idea that, to defend the rationality of their method of assent, the Academics must do more than argue against cognitive impressions in ways that they themselves find persuasive.

In addition, this interpretation of the disagreement within the Academy is consistent with the way Sextus Empiricus understands the history. In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, he understands these Academics all to make the same mistake. Historians do not agree on exactly what this mistake is, but, given a leading interpretation,³⁶ the mistake is roughly that unlike the Pyrrhonians, these Academics use reason to form beliefs by assenting to their impressions in terms of their persuasiveness.³⁷ This interpretation, if it is correct, is evidence against Brittain's interpretation that the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians were divided over the question of whether from the fact that a given impression is persuasive, it follows that one has a reason to believe in the truth of the propositional content of this impression. Sextus Empiricus seems to have thought that both the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians accept that they have reason to believe in the truth of the propositions that form the content of the impressions to which they assent and that this acceptance is a crucial part of what distinguishes the Academics in the New Academy from the Pyrrhonians.

It is also true that Sextus Empiricus does not call attention to the way that the Clitomachians and Philonian/Metrodorians differ with respect to the justification of the Academic assent to impressions. It is possible, though, to get some idea of how this could have happened. The Clitomachians do not think that the justification consists in a factual property, but there is no reason to think that they denied that assenting to impressions in terms of the impressions' persuasiveness is a reliable method for producing true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. The Clitomachians, however, unlike the Philonian/Metrodorians, did not believe that either being 'truth-like' or any other factual property justifies Academic assent. The Clitomachians recognise the need to respond to the challenge the Stoic epistemology poses, but to meet this challenge, they do not think it is necessary to identify a factual property to justify the method of assent they use to give arguments that they find persuasive to show that there are no cognitive impressions. This difference in the ways the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians understand and defend the Academic reaction to Stoicism is real, but it is easy enough to see how it might not always have been clear even in the Academy and how the difference might have seemed unimportant to Sextus Empiricus, given his philosophical views.³⁸

If this interpretation of the history of the New Academy is correct, what it offers to contemporary epistemology is not an altogether overlooked or wrongly rejected solution to a philosophical problem. This can happen, but more often the contribution concerns assumptions that frame the way contemporary philosophers think about problems.³⁹ Understanding the circumstances in which assumptions become part of the philosophical tradition can help reveal whether they are still useful for understanding ourselves, or instead should be rejected because they are vestiges of a way of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world that we no longer find plausible.

The interpretation of the disagreement between the Clitomachians and Philonian/Metrodorians I have set out is a step in this direction. The challenge the Stoic epistemology poses is to the rationality of the Academic method of forming and revising beliefs in terms of assent to persuasive impressions. For the Stoics, given their views about nature and its providence, the justification of their method of forming beliefs in terms of assent to cognitive impressions is a purely factual matter. In their attempt to defend the Academic reaction to the Stoic epistemology, the Philonian/Metrodorians identify a factual property to take the place of the one that the Stoics cite to justify their method of assent. The Clitomachians do not. They try to meet the challenge from the point of view of the evaluative conception of justification that Field advocates, but, given the idea that presenting arguments against cognitive impressions that the Academics themselves find persuasive is not enough to defend the rationality of the Academic method of assent, the Philonian/Metrodorian view won out within the Academy. In this way, the Stoic conception of the justification of assent as a purely factual matter became part of the philosophical tradition without the accompanying support of the Stoic metaphysics.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 For discussion, see Brittain (2006a, 2006b: introduction).
- 2 Brittain is careful to distance himself from the coherence of ‘radical scepticism’: ‘The philosophical sense of the distinction between these two groups [the Clitomachians and the Philonian/Metrodorians] has proved difficult to capture’ (2001: 16). ‘The manner in which it is held best to spell out this distinction [that defines the Clitomachian position] is not significant here’ (75). ‘It remains very controversial whether there is a coherent distinction to be made between approving a view [the Clitomachian position] and assenting to its truth [the position of the Stoics and the Philonian/Metrodorians]’ (2006a). ‘It is perhaps unclear how we should (or even can) make sense of this [Clitomachus’] position’ (2006b: xxvii). Burnyeat gives a much more direct judgement of the relative plausibility of the Clitomachian and the Philonian/Metrodorians views: ‘To my taste, Philo’s version of what it means to follow “probability” is easily the more attractive’ (1997: 309).
- 3 See also Chrisman (2012).
- 4 Use ‘assent’ here with its ordinary meaning, and for now sidestep its relation to Cicero’s use of *adsensio* and *probatio* in connection to the Clitomachian and Metrodorian/Philonian understandings of ‘assent’ to an impression.
- 5 ‘My proposal is that it [the reasonableness] is an evaluative property, in a way incompatible with its being straightforwardly factual. [...] One shouldn’t ask whether it is the conduciveness to truth or the similarity to our methods in which the reasonableness consists, for reasonableness doesn’t *consist* in anything: it is not a factual property’ (Field 2000: 127). This conception of justification is not straightforward to understand in detail, but the general idea is this. Justification is relative to a domain of normativity. (For discussion, see Cohen and Comesaña [2013: 21] and Cohen [2016b: 843].) In a dispute over which methods to use in forming beliefs, the domain is that of rationality. A method of forming beliefs in terms of assenting to impressions is justified just in case it is rational. The justification of the method is a matter of positively evaluating the method as permissible to use in forming and revising beliefs. This does not mean that every positively evaluated method is equally rational, but it does have the consequence that no list of factual properties alone justifies a method. Further, it is rational to reply to a challenge posed by an opposing method without identifying factual properties to establish the rationality of the method in terms of which one finds persuasive the argument against the opposing method.
- 6 He headed the Academy for about 25 years. Little is known of his successors until Carneades, who was fourth in succession from Arcesilaus. Carneades was followed by Clitomachus and Philo of Larissa.
- 7 Like Socrates, Arcesilaus wrote nothing. For discussion of the evidence for what he thought, see Brittain (2005).
- 8 Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* 1 (M 7).151–3, in Bury (1935).
- 9 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* VII.51.
- 10 *Apology* 21a–22e. ‘I proceeded to investigate (ζήτησιν) him somewhat as follows’ (*Apology* 21b: see Fowler 1914).
- 11 ‘[On one] definition, a sceptic is someone who positively evaluates abstention from all belief; scepticism in that sense is idiotic’ (Field 2000: 127).
- 12 This may have started with Arcesilaus. See Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* I (M 7).158, in Bury (1935).

- 13 ‘The practical importance of a question (i.e., our degree of interest in it) determines how justified we must be in an answer before we can rest content in that answer’ (Pollock 1995: 48). Cf. Frede (1984: 208).
- 14 Cf. Cohen (2016a: 435): ‘One is required to believe *p* if one is rationally *permitted* to believe *p* on the basis of one’s evidence, and one is considering whether *p*.’
- 15 Bury (1935: 99–100, with minor changes). Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism (PH)* I.227–9, in Bury (1933).
- 16 This view about evidence and importance is suggestive of what, in contemporary epistemology, is described as ‘pragmatic encroachment’ on knowledge. (For a discussion that takes there to be such a phenomenon, and considers possible ways to explain it, see Ross and Schroeder (2014). Sextus Empiricus, as far as I know, does not discuss Carneades’ use of the Greek words for ‘know’ in connection with the ordinary way to form and revise beliefs in terms of evidence and importance. Still, Frede appears right when he says that ‘[t]here is no reason why the skeptic should not follow the common custom to mark the fact that he is saying what he is saying having given the matter appropriate consideration in the way one ordinarily goes about doing this, by using the verb “to know”’ (1984: 211). Aenesidemus may provide an instance of this practice (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 212.169b). See also *Academica* II.148.
- 17 For a contemporary example, see Pollock’s ‘ship captain on a busman’s holiday’ (1995: 48–9). Further, Pollock may provide a parallel to Carneades. Pollock did not discuss evidence and importance in connection with knowledge, but he uses ‘know’ in the ship captain example in a way that suggests that he is adhering to what Frede describes (in the prior note) as the ‘common custom’ the ‘[ancient] skeptic’ has no reason not to follow.
- 18 The translation ‘gives absolute assent to nothing (*omnino eum rei nulli adsentiri*)’ takes the adverb to modify the verb, not as the object of the verb. See Reid (1885: 300). See also Bett (1990: 15, 20n32). Burnyeat says that this translation is ‘strained, special pleading’ (1997: 302n63). Instead, he translates it as ‘assents to nothing at all’ (*ibid.*). Long and Sedley give this translation too (1987: 69 I 2). Brittain translates it as ‘will assent to nothing at all’ (2001: 75) and ‘won’t assent to anything at all’ (2006b: 61).
- 19 Cicero uses *probabilis* to translate *πιθανόν*. For some discussion, see Frede (1984: 215).
- 20 The emphasis here and in the quotations that follow is Brittain’s. Cf. Long and Sedley (1987: 460): ‘In all circumstances the Academic suspends judgement about everything: he never commits himself to anything’s being true or false. While maintaining this strong suspension of judgement, he does allow himself a weak form of assent, in the sense that he says “yes” to convincing impressions and “no” to unconvincing ones. Such impressions are sufficient to motivate his actions, but they do not saddle him with opinions.’
- 21 Cf. Brittain (2006b: xxvii–xxviii). See also Perin (2010: 149–50).
- 22 Cf. Brittain (2006a): ‘These mitigated skeptics thus took the persuasiveness of perceptual impressions under the right perceptual and coherence conditions as defeasible, but rational, *evidence* for their truth, rather than as merely the ground for their acceptance.’
- 23 Cf. Brittain (2006b: xxviii) and Vogt (2018: 3.2).
- 24 Kinds and senses are not the same. For discussion, see Matthews (1972).
- 25 Richard Bett (1990: 10–11) seems to argue for this sort of interpretation.
- 26 Brittain’s interpretation of the Clitomachian and the Philonian/Metrodorian positions is thus similar to a conception of belief formation that Morison finds in

Frede [1979, 1984]. ‘Frede’s view is best captured by the distinction [...] between coming to believe something on the basis of marshalling reasons for and against it, and coming to believe it because you are going along with an impression you have’ (Morison 2014b). Brittain acknowledges Frede’s influence (2001: 16n24). See Frede (1984: 214; 2003: 277–8).

- 27 Cicero uses of forms *percipio* for κατάληψις (‘cognition’ or, literally, ‘grasp’).
 28 Cf. *Academica* II.59, 112.
 29 Cf. Frede (1984: 212–13): ‘hence I approve of this kind of withholding assent in all matters, but I vehemently assent.’ For proposed emendations to the text, see Brittain (2001: 80n13). See also Görler (1997: 55n29). Brittain thinks that the text should be emended so that Catulus does not agree with the rule to withhold assent (2001: 80–1; cf. 2006b: 86n241).
 30 As far as I know, the argument is never explicitly stated in the secondary literature.
 31 Lucullus’ speech occurs in *Academica* II.11–62. Antiochus is acknowledged as the source for Lucullus’ views (*Academica* II.11–12). For discussion, see Brittain (2006b: xxxi–xxxv).
 32 ‘The conception of the *pithanon* as providing ‘truth or its best approximation’ plainly marks this [*Academica* II.36] as Philonian/Metrodorian’ (Brittain 2001: 108).
 33 Cf. *Academica* II.7, 66, 99, 107. See also Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.11–12.
 34 For detailed studies, see Görler (1992), Glucker (1995), Peetz (2005), and Hoenig (2013: para. 15 n24, 17–18, para. 18 n30). See also Reid (1885: 16) and Obdrzalek (2006: 267–70).
 35 This is not a way of saying that, whereas the Philonian/Metrodorians are what contemporary epistemologists call ‘externalists’ about justification, the Clitomachians are ‘internalists’ about justification.

[The distinction between externalism and internalism] as normally drawn (for instance in [Goldman 1980]) rests on a false presupposition. The presupposition is that epistemological properties like reasonableness are factual. If they are factual, it makes sense to ask whether the factual property involved includes ‘external’ elements. On an evaluativist view, it is hard to draw a distinction between externalism and internalism that doesn’t collapse. Any sensible evaluativist view will be ‘externalist’ in that one of the things we value in our rules is (some restricted version of) reliability. A sensible view will also be ‘internalist’ in that we also place a high value on our own rules.

(Field 2000: 138–9)

- 36 ‘I think Sextus is distinguishing one way in which beliefs are arrived at and pointing out that sceptics cannot have beliefs in this way. [...] [A sceptic cannot] come to believe that *p* as a result of marshalling arguments, or considerations, in favor of the proposition that *p*’ (Morison 2011: 266). ‘[T]his is a matter of not believing any propositions as a result of marshalling arguments or considerations in favour of them, which would mean that one could not be an Aristotelian or Platonist since their characteristic beliefs are arrived at through the deployment of reason and argument’ (ibid.: 268; cf. 2014a: 3.4.1, 3.4.4).
 37 ‘And as regards impressions, we say that they are equal in respect of probability and improbability (πίστιν ἢ ἀπιστίαν), so far as this is a matter of reason [or: a matter of argument (ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ)], whereas they [in the New Academy] assert that some impressions are probable, others improbable’ (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.XXXII.227; Bury 1933, with minor changes). Cf. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.I.1–4, I.X.19–20, I.22, I.XXXI.215, I.XXXIII.226–7, 229–31, III.X.65; *Against the Logicians* II (*M* VIII). 316, II.396–7; and *Against the Ethicists* (*M* XI) 160–6. It is not easy to know

just how Sextus Empiricus understands ἐπι τῷ λόγῳ and ἐπι τῷ φιλοσόφῳ λόγῳ, and how the empirical tradition figures into his understanding, but he may think that the Academics in the New Academy understand assent in terms of the conception of reason in Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. For some discussion, see Frede (1984: 206–7).

- 38 Cf. Striker (1996: 112–13): ‘One might be inclined to object at this point with Hartmann (*Gewisshett*, 44) and dal Pra (*Lo scetticismo*, 298) that the difference between the positions of Metrodorus and Clitomachus – provisional assent on the one hand and positive attitude on the other – is insubstantial. The important similarity seems to lie in the fact that on both accounts propositions can be assented to or adopted on the basis of evidence – and this is the main point of the distinction between the rational attitude of Academic scepticism and the irrationalism of the Pyrrhonists.’
- 39 For a judgement about how often this has happened, see Williamson (2018: 108).
- 40 I am grateful for comments I received on earlier versions of this chapter from students in a spring 2018 seminar; from Vikram Kumar, Sara Magrin, and Robert Wardy; and from Stephen Hetherington and Nicholas D. Smith.

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