

12-28-2002

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Recommended Citation

Obdrzalek, Suzanne, "Carneades' Pithanon and its Relation to Epoche and Apraxia" (2002). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 354.

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Carneades' Pithanon and its Relation to Epoche and Apraxia

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Presented to the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy at its meeting with the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, December 2002, Philadelphia

Though the interpretation of ancient texts is notoriously difficult, Carneades presents what one might call a worst-case scenario. In the first place, he wrote nothing. His faithful disciple Clitomachus, attempting to play Plato to Carneades' Socrates, reportedly recorded Carneades' teachings in four hundred books. Not one remains. However, Clitomachus' attempt to make a philosophy of Carneades' anti-theoretical stance was not a complete failure; Carneades had a tremendous influence on the later Academy as well as the Stoa, and his views (or lack thereof) have been handed down to us by both Sextus Empiricus and Cicero. These sources are, nonetheless, problematic. As a Pyrrhonist, Sextus was critical of the Academy and may have exaggerated what he took to be Carneades' dogmatism. Cicero, on the other hand, a student of both Philo and later Antiochus, was undoubtedly influenced in his interpretation of Carneades by the dogmatic skepticism of the former or the anti-skeptical stance of the latter. Carneades is perhaps best known for proposing the *pithane phantasia* as a criterion for life. However, the status of his theory of the *pithanon* is completely unclear. Was it merely a dialectical move against the Stoic charge of *apraxia*? Was it a theory that Carneades himself endorsed? Or was it perhaps meant to counterbalance the appeal of the Stoic kataleptic impression or even Carneades' own arguments for the impossibility of knowledge?

In this paper, I shall argue that the content of Carneades' theory can be determined irrespective of its meta-theoretical status. Whether Carneades devised the *pithanon* theory simply as a dialectical ploy against the Stoics or whether he subscribed to it himself, his theory must meet a rather difficult challenge: in order to avoid complete self-refutation, Carneades must demonstrate that the *pithane phantasia* can demolish the Stoics' *apraxia* charge while peacefully coexisting with the Skeptic's commitment to *epoche*.

Interpretations of Carneades tend to fall into two camps. The first group, which subscribes to what I will call the weak interpretation, argues that assent to the *pithanon* involves no commitment to the truth of one's impressions but rather consists in going along with whatever one finds convincing. The second camp, advancing the strong interpretation, claims that when one assents to the *pithane phantasia*, one takes one's impressions to be probably true.¹ As my terminology perhaps suggests, I intend to come down on the side of the strong interpretation. However, though this interpretation has greater textual support and offers a superior response to the *apraxia* charge than the alternative, it risks committing Carneades to the decidedly unskceptical claim that we have occasional infallible access to the truth.

In order to properly understand Carneades' *pithanon* theory, we must first situate it in an ongoing spat between the Academy and the Stoa. The Stoics claimed that one should model oneself on the ideal of the wise man, he alone who has infallible knowledge because he assents to the kataleptic impression in a manner that is firm and unshakable by reason (*Adversus Mathematicos* 7.152). This kataleptic impression is an impression that arises from what is, is stamped in accordance with what is, and is of such a sort that it couldn't arise from what is not (AM 7.248). The Stoic wise man is able to identify the kataleptic impression because, like the

¹ I take Bett, Frede and Burnyeat to subscribe to the weak view, while Stough advances a version of the strong view.

horned serpent, it possesses a special mark that distinguishes it from non-kataleptic impressions (AM 7.252).

The Academics responded to the Stoic theory with the following syllogism:

1. There are true and false impressions.
2. False impressions are non-kataleptic
3. True impressions are always such that false impressions could appear identical to them.
4. Among impressions with no perceptible difference between them, it is impossible for some to be kataleptic and others not.
5. Therefore, there are no kataleptic impressions. (*Academica* 2.40)

Obviously, the controversy with the Stoics lay in the third claim, which denies that kataleptic impressions possess a distinguishing mark. The Sceptics attempted to demonstrate the potential indistinguishability of true and false impressions by arguing from cases of dreams, hallucinations, perceptual illusions, and resemblances between objects such as eggs (Ac. 2.79-95). If we are incapable of distinguishing properly between true and false impressions when we are asleep or mad, then on any occasion when we claim to have infallible access to the truth we may in fact be mistaken. The conclusion of the Sceptics' argument against the kataleptic impression is that, given the non-existence of the kataleptic impression, the Stoic wise man will be forced to either withhold assent or to opine.

Faced with this rather unpleasant prospect, the Stoics responded by unleashing the *apraxia* charge upon the Academy. Lucullus, speaking for Antiochus, outlines the Sceptics' pernicious deeds in no uncertain terms:

Those who assert that nothing can be grasped deprive us of those things that are the very tools or equipment of life, or rather actually overthrow the whole of life from its foundations, and deprive the animate creature itself of the mind that animates it, so that it is difficult to speak of their rashness entirely as the case requires. (Ac. 2.31)

Bett suggests that the *apraxia* argument takes two forms ("Carneades' *Pithanon*", p. 62). In response to the Sceptic argument that there are no kataleptic impressions, the Stoic argues that without such impressions there can be no criterion of truth on which to base the decisions required to live a rational and coherent life. In response to the Sceptic argument that we should withhold assent, the Stoic argues that without assent we should not be able to act at all. The *apraxia* argument also involves a charge of self-refutation. The Sceptic not only renders us unable to act, but since he claims that we never have certain access to the truth, the Sceptic also undermines reason itself (Ac. 2.26). However, with reason must fall argumentation, and thus the Sceptic's own arguments against the Stoic. Put another way, syllogistic reasoning, which the Sceptic uses to demolish the Stoic's theory of kataleptic impressions, requires premises that are unmistakably true. Yet if the conclusion of the Sceptic's syllogism is correct, that there are no unmistakably true impressions, then the syllogism itself is invalid (Ac. 2.44).

After expounding Carneades' initial attack on the Stoic position, Sextus claims that Carneades was effectively compelled to provide an alternate criterion for the conduct of life and attainment of happiness (AM 7.166-7). This criterion is the *pithane phantasia*- the impression that, without possessing a mark of truth, does possess the appearance of truth and can therefore serve as the basis for action (Ac. 2.101). Following Bett, we can analyze Carneades' response to the Stoic as follows. In response to the Stoic argument that without kataleptic impressions we will have no criterion for conducting our lives, Carneades counters that the *pithane phantasia* can serve as the necessary criterion. In response to the Stoic claim that action is impossible without assent, Carneades argues that our actions can be motivated by approval, a form of assent that is compatible with *epoche*. These two arguments are, in fact, closely intertwined; the Carneadean Sceptic will conduct his life by approving of *pithanai phantasiai*.

Perhaps with the intention to confuse and conquer his opponents, Carneades situates the *pithanon* within a rather convoluted taxonomy of impressions (AM 7.166-84). Impressions possess two aspects, one in relation to the object and the other in relation to the perceiver. In their objective aspect, impressions are either true or false; in their subjective aspect, impressions are either apparently true or apparently false. Those impressions that are apparently true are

pithanai, or probable.² Of the probable impressions, some are vivid, while others are dim. The dim impressions, on account of the smallness of the object, its distance from the perceiver or the weakness of the perceiver's vision, cause a confused impression and do not compel assent, whereas the vivid impressions appear true with great intensity. These vivid and probable impressions constitute the criterion of truth followed by Carneades. Significantly, there is no necessary relation between what appears true and what actually is true. The *pithanai phantasiai* encompass what appears true and actually is true as well as what appears true but is false, the common ground being what appears true. Carneades emphasizes, however, that the occasional occurrence of false but convincing impressions should not undermine our general confidence in impressions, since they tell the truth for the most part (AM 7.174).

Carneades' *pithanon* is not merely the probably and vivid impression. In the first place, impressions do not exist in isolation, but depend upon one another like links in a chain. Thus Carneades' second criterion is the impression that does not conflict with any of one's other impressions; he calls it the undiverted impression. Furthermore, just as, in Carneades' time at least, we zealously cross-examine candidates for public office, so too on occasion we will choose to closely test some of our impressions (AM 7.182). We might examine the size and distance of the object, the clarity of the atmosphere and the competence of the perceiver. Should the impression withstand all of these tests, we will have arrived at the *pièce de résistance* of the *pithanon* theory, namely the convincing, undiverted and thoroughly explored impression. Of course, it too can always turn out to be false.

According to Carneades, the criterion we live by will include the merely probable, the probable and undiverted, and the probable, undiverted and thoroughly explored impressions; which impression we follow will depend on the importance of the matter at hand and the amount of time at our disposal (AM 7.184). For example, a man, upon seeing what is actually a coil of rope in an un-lit room initially jumps over it because he takes it to be a snake. The man then returns to the room and, seeing that the object is motionless, assumes that it is not a snake. However, since the man also knows that snakes can be motionless when numbed by frost, the man prods the object with a stick. After he sees that the object remains motionless, the man then assents to his impression that the object is not a snake (AM 7.188).

Examples of this sort suggest that, though Carneades' theory may appear recondite, it is actually meant to describe how successful people operate in everyday life. When the man concludes that the object is not a snake, he does not claim to have infallible access to the truth about external reality; he is simply stating how things appear to him. In another example of Carneades', a wise man, upon boarding a ship, states that he will complete his voyage (Ac. 2.100). Obviously the man isn't claiming to know every possible eventuality. Nonetheless, given that the voyage is a mere four miles, his crew and helmsman are reliable and the weather is good, it appears probable to the man that he'll make it and he employs these probable impressions in planning out his voyage and making predictions about the future.

However intuitive Carneades' theory may appear, it faces an obvious challenge. How is it possible for Carneades to remain a Skeptic while advocating the *pithanon* as a criterion for life? Practically by definition, Carneades, as a Skeptic, is committed to the view that one should withhold assent. However, this view caused the Stoics to level the *apraxia* charge, to argue that were the Skeptic in fact to adhere to his commitment to *epoche*, he would be unable to live. In order to respond to this charge, Carneades is obligated to show that it is possible for the Skeptic both to withhold dogmatic assent and to conduct an orderly and successful life. In arguing that the Skeptic can accept and act upon impressions that seem probable to him, Carneades may appear to be fudging his response to the Stoics by advocating an inadmissible form of assent.

² How one translates *pithanon* is inevitably a contentious point. Proponents of the weak interpretation tend to translate it as *convincing* or *persuasive*. However, according to my interpretation, the *pithanon* is not simply whatever happens to persuade one, but also what one considers likely to be true. Thus, I believe that the term *probable* better reflects my interpretation. Proponents of the weak interpretation may, however, be consoled by the fact that the word *probable* is derived from the Latin *probabile*, the term which Cicero himself uses to translate *pithanon*, and a term which carries the sense of *trustworthy*.

Lucullus, for one, was of the opinion that Carneades had backed down from his commitment to *epoche* (Ac. 2.59). Following a principle of charity, I believe that the most successful interpretation of Carneades will find a way for him to navigate between this Scylla and Charybdis- to avoid both the *apraxia* charge and the accusation that he has abandoned his commitment to *epoche*.

One might attempt to dismiss the problem I raise in three ways. In the first place, one might claim that Carneades was not committed to desirability of maintaining *epoche*.³ Now it is not clear why Carneades would be called a Skeptic, let alone why he should be viewed as a less dogmatic Skeptic than Philo, were he not committed to withholding assent. Nonetheless, it must be conceded that there is no remaining textual evidence that Carneades actually advocated *epoche*. However, Clitomachus states that "Carneades really did accomplish an almost Herculean labour in ridding our minds of that fierce wild beast, assent"(Ac. 2.108). Furthermore, Academica 2.104 demonstrates that Carneades was concerned to distinguish between dogmatic assent and some weaker form of assent that is acceptable for the Skeptic. Carneades would clearly not be motivated to make such a distinction unless he felt that the Skeptic should maintain *epoche*.

The second strategy open to my would-be-reducer is to turn the tables and argue that Carneades is not actually committed to the *pithanon* theory. According to this view, Carneades' *pithanon* theory is simply meant to stand in equal opposition to the Stoic theory of kataleptic impressions.⁴ There is no need for Carneades to endorse this theory himself, and there is no cause for concern if assent to the *pithanon* seems to be at odds with *epoche*. There is certainly a great deal of evidence that the *pithanon* theory was situated in a dialectic with the Stoics. Carneades himself famously claims, "if there had been no Chrysippus, there would have been no Carneades" (Diogenes Laertius, 4.62), and the Stoics grumbled that Carneades had stolen his ideas from the Stoa (Coussin, pp. 42-43). Carneades borrowed extensively from Stoic terminology in constructing his theory, and his taxonomy of the *pithanon* almost looks as though it were cribbed from the Stoic classification of impressions (AM 7.241-8). However, it is crucial to note that whatever the status of Carneades' theory, it was clearly intended as a response to the Stoic *apraxia* charge (AM 7.166-7). As a response to the *apraxia* charge, it only succeeds if Carneades can demonstrate that assent to the *pithane phantasia* enables the Skeptic to lead a reasonable life while not compromising his commitment to *epoche*. If Carneades succeeds in meeting this charge, then there is no reason why he should not himself employ the *pithanon* and even endorse his own theory as probable.⁵

Now for the final objection. In a generous moment, my hypothetical adversary allows that Carneades actually endorses both *epoche* and the *pithanon* theory. However, continues my opponent, potential conflict between *epoche* and the *pithanon* theory is not a problem for Carneades, since as a Skeptic he is not committed to the canons of rational argumentation. In fact, self-refutation is one of the Skeptic's tools in trade. Sextus, in *Against the Logicians* frequently compares the beneficial effects of self-refutation to those of an emetic. In response, I would argue that even if Carneades himself needn't endorse the canons of rational argumentation, insofar as he is engaged in a philosophical debate with the Stoic, he is obliged to abide by the rules of the game. I might add that certain forms of self-refutation are more dangerous than others. For example, the paradox inherent in the statement that one knows that one knows nothing only serves to strengthen the claim being made. However, should Carneades fail to establish that *epoche* is compatible with assent to the *pithanon*, he will simply have failed to

³ Bett raises and responds to this objection in "Carneades' Distinction Between Assent and Approval", pp. 3-4.

⁴ Bett raises this objection in "Carneades' *Pithanon*", pp. 81-2, but responds to it by emphasizing that the textual evidence is such that we can only speculate whether the *pithanon* theory was meant as more than a dialectical ploy against the Sceptics.

⁵ Another version of this sort of argument would be to claim that Carneades needn't disprove the *apraxia* charge; he need only "equipollize" it. The same response holds. If Carneades fails to demonstrate that *epoche* is compatible with approval of the *pithanon*, then his response to the Stoics will fail to stand in equal balance to the *apraxia* charge.

respond to the Stoic. Finally, even if Carneades needn't be bothered by charges of self-refutation, his attempt to reconcile assent to the *pithanon* with *epoche* at *Academica* 2.104 is a sign that he was concerned with the internal consistency of his theory.

Assuming that I have demonstrated that Carneades' *pithanon* theory must not be at odds with his commitment to *epoche*, it is now incumbent upon me to demonstrate how this is in fact possible. I therefore turn to the weak interpretation. One can number among its progenitors Michael Frede, Richard Bett and Myles Burnyeat. There are, of course, differences in their interpretations of Carneades. Burnyeat argues that Carneades' theory is simply a dialectical ploy against the Stoics (p. 32), while Frede (p. 128) and Bett ("On the Distinction." p. 16) claim that Carneades could and perhaps did endorse his own theory. Furthermore, Burnyeat doesn't take a stand on the nature of the Skeptic's assent, while Bett argues against Frede that the sort of assent permitted by Carneades can be at times explicit and active ("On the Distinction..." pp. 14-15). However, all three are firmly committed to the view that the *pithanon* is whatever convinces us and is not tied to notions of objective truth or evidential support. In the interests of narrowing my field of adversaries, I will focus on Frede's theory in "The Skeptic's Two Kinds of Assent".^{6 7}

As the title suggests, Frede's article centres on a distinction between two forms of assent. The first kind, which I shall term strong assent, consists in taking something to be true for a reason. The second sort, which I'll call weak assent, simply amounts to following one's impressions. This distinction can be illuminated by a parallel contrast between making a claim and having a view. When a person makes a claim, he thinks that a proposition is true and that there are reasons to suppose it to be true. In so doing he commits himself to the canons of rationality. However, if that person has a view, he is merely left with an impression. It doesn't follow that he takes his impression to be true or that he thinks that there are reasons to suppose it to be true. According to Frede, Carneades' response to the *apraxia* charge is to propose that something along the lines of weak assent is sufficient ground for action (p. 143). Frede therefore attributes the following position to Carneades:

A view one acts on and a view one is willing to communicate do not presuppose either that one takes them to be true or that one has considered the matter carefully. It is rather that, as a matter of fact, we sometimes only act on an impression if we have considered the matter further, but not because we think it more likely to be true. (p. 143)

Thus, in assenting to the *pithanon*, one in no way commits oneself to the truth of one's impressions; one simply goes along with whatever impressions happen to be convincing. The fact that we sometimes feel compelled to investigate before acting on our impressions should not suggest that we think that we are more likely to arrive at the truth by such means. Rather, it is a

⁶ Perhaps a few words are in order on Burnyeat and Bett's theories. I believe that my arguments against the claim that the *pithanon* is simply whatever happens to persuade us could also be leveled against Burnyeat's interpretation of Carneades. Burnyeat might respond to these arguments by claiming that Carneades is not attempting to provide a criterion that would meet Stoic demands; rather, Carneades is demonstrating to the Stoic that the *pithanon* is the closest available approximation to a criterion, and that since it does not succeed as a criterion, the Stoic should withhold assent (p. 18). While Burnyeat's view is ingenious, I believe that it ignores much of the textual evidence, both to the effect that Carneades proposed his theory in good faith as a response to the *apraxia* charge (AM 7.166) and that he considered the *pithanon* to actually constitute a criterion of truth and of action (Ac. 2.32, AM 7.171). As for Bett's theory, I am in agreement with Bett that the form of assent allowed by Carneades can be deliberate and explicit. While Bett is at pains to emphasize *contra* Frede that the *pithanon* is a criterion that can be acted on deliberately, he also claims that assent to the *pithanon* involves no commitment to the truth of one's belief. However, in the absence of some reason for assenting to one's impressions, such as a belief in their reliability, it is not clear how one's assent can actually be considered deliberate. Put another way, if the *pithanon* is simply whatever happens to convince the individual, then it does seem that the individual is passively acquiescing to, rather than consciously assenting to his impressions.

⁷ To be precise, Frede doesn't actually come out and endorse the weak interpretation of Carneades; rather, he attributes that interpretation to the classical Sceptics, including Clitomachus, and contrasts it with the interpretation of the dogmatic Sceptics. However, I believe that Frede's comments on Carneades on pp. 147 and 149 make clear that Frede believes that the correct interpretation of Carneades is the classical and not the dogmatic one.

psychological fact that we act on different kinds of impressions under different circumstances; whichever impression ends up moving us to action is the one properly termed the *pithanon*.

It cannot be denied that Frede has succeeded in rendering the *pithanon* theory compatible with *epoche*. Recall that the danger facing Carneades was that assent to the *pithanon* would amount to a form of assent violating the Skeptic's commitment to *epoche*. However, if Frede's interpretation is correct, then Carneades and his followers have no grounds for fear. Surely finding oneself compelled to act upon one's impressions could not be considered assenting to them in an un-skeptical manner. The primary textual evidence that Frede adduces in favour of his interpretation is *Academica* 2.104. Here, Clitomachus, speaking on behalf of Carneades, attempts to delineate the sort of assent available to the Skeptic. Clitomachus claims that while the Skeptic "restrains himself from replying so as to approve or disapprove of something", he is also guided by "probability", and "wherever this confronts him or is wanting he can respond 'yes' or 'no' accordingly". Clitomachus continues:

...there remain presentations 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 presentation, provided that we answer without actual assent.

This passage seems to support the claim that assent to the *pithanon* consists in passive acquiescence to one's impressions. The further claim, that assent to the *pithanon* does not involve a commitment to the truth of one's impressions, garners support from the fact that Cicero does not mention the true or the apparently true in his taxonomy, but rather places the *pithanon* under akataleptic impressions (Ac. 2.99), and from Cicero's emphasis that what is probable is not necessarily true (2.103).

My prime cause for dissatisfaction with the weak interpretation is a suspicion that in attempting to reconcile the *pithanon* to *epoche*, this interpretation has deprived the *pithanon* of its original function, to meet the *apraxia* charge. The *apraxia* charge is not simply a demand that the Skeptic explain how it is that humans function. According to Sextus, Carneades was obligated to provide a criterion "for the conduct of life and attainment of happiness"(AM 7.166). Cicero in turn describes the *pithanon* as "a canon for philosophy and life"(Ac. 2.32). What Carneades is attempting to accomplish in advocating the *pithanon* is to explain how the Skeptic, while refraining from dogmatic assent, can lead a life that is ordered and successful, can attain happiness and can function as a philosopher. The weak interpretation fails to meet this demand for two reasons: the form of assent it proposes is too weak and the criterion it offers is contentless.

To turn to the first objection, according to the weak view, the criterion proposed by Carneades is whatever impression moves the individual to action, and one's assent to it consists in going along with one's impressions. One might say that the *pithanon* has assumed a causal, but not a justificatory role in motivating judgment and action. This does not seem correct. As a criterion, the *pithanon* should function as a rule for conduct, a method of deciding what to do and what to believe. Etymologically, *kriterion* is linked to such words as *kriteos* (to be decided) and *krites* (judge), and is ultimately derived from the verb *krinein* (to judge, distinguish, decide). Liddell, Scott and Jones define *kriterion* as a means for judging or a standard. Insofar as the *pithanon* is a *kriterion*, it is something that is actively employed in forming judgments - this sounds quite far from its merely being whatever impression one is left with. Carneades appears to be fully aware of the connection between his *kriterion* and *krisis* (judgment). In *Against the Logicians*, Carneades is said to compare the percipient employing the undiverted impression to a doctor testing symptoms against one another (AM 7.176); he goes on to compare using the fully tested impression to examining candidates for public office (AM 7.182); and finally likens our use of impressions of varying levels of probability to the cross-examination of witnesses (AM 7.184).

On a more general level, were it the case that the *pithanon* is a cause but not a justification for action, then Carneades' theory would merely amount to a causal description of human action. But if that were all that Carneades was up to, then there would have been no real need for him to advance such a detailed and even convoluted theory. Carneades could simply

have responded to the Stoic that the *apraxia* charge is ill founded since people's impressions do appear sufficient to cause them to act without a separate act of assent. The problem with such a response is that it would not differentiate the deliberate criterion-based behaviour of humans from the instinctual behaviour of animals. If the *pithanon* were merely an impression that causes action, then animals would also be employing *pithanai phantasiai* as their criterion, insofar as certain impressions cause them to act. To go a step further, I would like to argue that Carneades is not merely analyzing how humans act but rather how they can act well.⁸ He is describing a rule for conduct that people can choose to employ in their everyday lives because it seems to constitute a reliable basis for action and judgment.⁹ As such, Carneades' account is at least implicitly normative. And with normativity comes voluntariness; I can't tell you what to do unless I believe that how you act is up to you.

These facts can be obfuscated by the fact that on an everyday basis, one is not even aware of his acts of assent; when reaching for a ripe red apple one does not typically deliberate whether the apple actually exists. However, on any occasion, if asked why one reaches certain conclusions or acts in certain ways, insofar as one's behaviour and conclusions are based on a criterion, one should be able to offer an account that offers justification and that implies volition. Furthermore, it is obvious that on many occasions one's acts of assent are explicit and deliberate. One might call to mind the example of the man investigating whether the coil of rope is a snake (AM 1.188); the person Carneades describes does not simply go along with his impressions, but rather conducts a series of experiments in order to test his impressions and to determine the facts at hand.

Before concluding my first objection to the weak account, I'd like to point to some further textual evidence in my favour. Carneades states that in the case of the thoroughly explored impression, "we meticulously examine each impression in concurrence", and we judge whether our impression satisfies a list of nine criteria, including whether one has good vision and whether the atmospheric conditions are satisfactory (AM 7.182-3). This hardly resembles passive acquiescence to our impressions. Carneades also claims that we use different criteria depending on the importance of the matter at hand, suggesting a kind of self-reflexive awareness belied by the weak account (AM 1.184). Finally, Sextus, in criticizing the Academy, distinguishes the sense in which the Pyrrhonists and the Academicians can be said to be convinced (*peithesthai*). According to Sextus, while the Pyrrhonist goes along with his impressions without strong impulse or inclination, the school of Carneades and Clitomachus claims that "a strong inclination accompanies their credence and the credibility of the object" (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.230). For them, being convinced is "assent with choice and affinity due to desire".¹⁰

If I am correct in concluding that the *pithanon*, as a criterion, is something that one employs in choosing to act, then it must follow that there are reasons motivating this choice. Insofar as our behaviour can be said to constitute intentional action, it must be subject to explanations in terms of reasons and not merely causes. But, as suggested above, the weak account offers a merely causal account of human behaviour; we are *caused* to act by our impressions, but these are not said to *justify* our actions. The reason that the *pithanon* cannot justify action and judgment under the weak account is that justification is typically linked to truth; I can only adduce evidence in favour of my beliefs if I take that evidence to be true. The

⁸ This claim should come as no surprise. It should be recalled that one of the distinguishing marks of ancient as opposed to modern Skeptics is their concern with human happiness, and their claim that withholding assent leads to happiness.

⁹ The fact that the *pithanon* is meant to be a rule for conduct can be obscured by the fact that acting upon *pithanai phantasiai* is so fundamental to human conduct that it is hard to conceive of a human who would fail to do so; this failure would perhaps be a sign of total irrationality.

¹⁰ I fully acknowledge that Sextus is motivated here for dialectical purposes to exaggerate the dogmatic nature of the New Academy. However, given the non-existence of direct textual evidence regarding Carneades' views, and the problematic nature of both Cicero and Sextus as sources, I do not believe that it is appropriate to simply dismiss Sextus' claims here. Even if Sextus is exaggerating, he does appear to be convinced that for Carneades, *peithesthai* is more than simply going along with one's impressions.

weak account, however, explicitly denies that assent to the *pithanon* involves belief in the truth of one's impressions.

This brings me to the second of my objections to the weak interpretation: the criterion offered by this interpretation is essentially content-less. The weak account offers what one might call a causal black box as Carneades' response to the *apraxia* charge. Some impressions just do cause us to act, and these impressions, whichever they be, constitute the criterion. It should be noted that this is a singularly uninformative and weak response to the Stoic's demand for a criterion. It is as if Glaucon, the notorious boy-lover of *Republic V*, were to deny Socrates' charge that he loves boys indiscriminately, by claiming that he must have some criterion in choosing which boys to love, insofar as he chooses some boys and not others. Until Glaucon can describe what features he seeks in boys he cannot be said to possess a criterion for boy-loving; similarly, until the Skeptic can state what quality of impressions motivates him to act, he has not delineated a criterion for action. To respond that it is the quality of being convincing that motivates one to act is not a satisfactory answer, insofar as by the weak account, being convincing amounts to the tendency to cause action. It should be added that if the Carneades' criterion simply constitutes whatever impressions motivate us to act, then the same sorts of problems mentioned in the first objection would apply. Namely, the criterion recommended by Carneades for the conduct of life and the attainment of happiness would not differ from the impressions that move animals to act. Furthermore, were Carneades' intention merely to claim that people's impressions *do* cause them to act, he needn't have advanced the *pithanon* theory.

As luck would have it, Carneades does describe the feature of impressions that renders them *pithanai* and that enables them to motivate our actions and beliefs. This feature is the quality of appearing true. In Sextus, Carneades makes countless mention of the fact that *pithanai phantasiai* seem true to the percipient. To mention a few, at 7.173, Carneades claims that the vivid and probable impression "appears true and appears so vividly" and constitutes "a criterion of truth". He later states that the *pithanai phantasiai* tell the truth for the most part (AM 7.174), and that in the case of undiverted impressions, all of the impressions with one accord appear true (AM 7.176). In fact, Carneades' entire taxonomy of the *pithanon* begins with the placement of the *pithanon* under the category of impressions that seem true to the percipient. Advocates of the weak interpretation would like to deny that the Skeptic takes his impressions to be true. However, if this is the case, it is very difficult to know what to make of Carneades' emphasis on the fact that *pithanai phantasiai* are impressions that appear to be true.

It may appear that there remains one avenue of escape open to the proponents of the weak interpretation. While it is true that Carneades places the *pithanon* under the apparently true in his taxonomy of impressions (AM 7.166-184), it should also be noted that Carneades distinguishes between an impression's appearing true and its actually being true. The *pithanai phantasiai* are classified under the aspect of the impression relative to the perceiver, and Carneades often emphasizes that what appears true can in fact be false. Thus, assent to the *pithanai phantasiai* only amounts to a commitment to their subjective truth; the Skeptic naturally avoids making claims regarding objective truth. My response to this argument is as follows. Carneades first introduces a gap between appearances and reality in order to argue against the Stoic that in any case when we believe we have infallible access to the truth, we may in fact be mistaken. I believe that Carneades retains this gap in his *pithanon* theory in order to dissuade the Skeptic from developing the epistemic arrogance of the Stoic. At best we can make judgments regarding what is likely to be true, but we can always be mistaken. If this is all that Carneades is up to, then, with the exception of cases of systematic delusion, how things appear is how they really are for the most part, and the divide between subjective and objective reality exists in potentiality only. Our awareness of the possibility of error should chastise us into developing beliefs about how things *probably* are in reality. In fact, Carneades states that the rare occurrence of apparently true impressions that turn out to be false should not make us distrust the *pithanai phantasiai*, which generally report truly (AM 7.175). Thus, according to my interpretation, subjective truth is nothing more than the appearance of objective truth. This interpretation would presumably not satisfy the proponent of the above-mentioned argument, but it is unclear to me what the alternative consists in. To impose a perverse offspring of Kantianism

onto Carneades, according to which appearances bear no relation to external reality, would not only be anachronistic, but also overly theoretical for this most anti-dogmatic of philosophers.

I would now like to turn to the strong interpretation. I was seduced into this rather unpopular view by the sort of textual evidence that I deployed against the weak interpretation. Namely, if Carneades himself emphasizes that the *pithanon* is what appears true and that it serves as a basis of judgment, then it seems reasonable to conclude that when the Skeptic assents to his impressions, he either implicitly or explicitly judges them to be true. Perhaps I have overstated matters. As a Skeptic, Carneades also emphasizes the possibility of error. Though many impressions appear true, none possesses the Stoic mark of truth (Ac. 2.101), and on any occasion when we take ourselves to know something, we may be mistaken. Thus, while the Skeptic normally takes his impressions to be true, he is also constantly aware of the possibility, however remote, that they may turn out to be false. This can be best expressed by describing the Carneadean Skeptic as one who takes his impressions to be probably, though not certainly, true. The difference between the Skeptic and the Stoic lies in this crucial restriction. While the Stoic criterion is the impression that is unmistakably true, the Skeptic employs the impression that is probably true. The Skeptic criterion I have outlined is just the sort of thing that we use in everyday practical reasoning. When an individual gets married, begets a family or goes on a voyage, he is not indubitably sure of the outcome, but if he has investigated the matter with care, then he can follow what is probable.

I take it to be fairly obvious that my version of the Carneades' theory is not susceptible to the *apraxia* charge. The real challenge for my interpretation rests in whether it can marry such a strong version of the *pithanon* to the Skeptic's commitment to *epoche*. As I suggested above, the Skeptic is to be distinguished from the Stoic in his awareness of his own epistemic fallibility. Thus, by my interpretation, *epoche* consists in the Skeptic's commitment not to adhere dogmatically to any view, not to take any impression to be unmistakably true. My understanding of *epoche* can perhaps be clarified by creating an artificial distinction between the degree of credence and the degree of explicitness of an act of assent. In any case where one assents to an impression, one can distinguish one's degree of certainty regarding the propositional content of the impression that one assents to (taking the impression to be true, taking the impression to be merely probable etc.), from the way in which one "holds" that propositional content (implicitly, explicitly etc.). I believe that the Skeptic does not differ from the Stoic in the degree of explicitness of his assent. Both can assent to impressions in a manner that is implicit, when they are simply led to act by their impressions, and in a way that is explicit, when they give deliberate and conscious assent to their impressions. The crucial difference lies in the degree of credence involved in their assenting. While the Stoic takes his impressions to be true, the Skeptic merely takes them to be probably true. I believe that my interpretation not only allows for the complexity of our perceptual and intellectual experience, but also that it makes the best sense of the text. After all, Carneades allows that the *pithanon* is employed both in the case when a man in flight thoughtlessly assumes that a ditch is ambushed, and when he painstakingly investigates whether a coil of rope is a snake (AM 7.186, 188). Again, the form of assent permissible to Carneades is described at one point as a matter of deliberate choice (Ph. 1. 229-30), and at another as merely following one's impressions (Ac. 2.104).

It is my hope that my interpretation of Carneades makes clear the way in which his *pithanon* theory, though advanced in debate with the Stoics, is not intended as a bizarre philosophical doctrine but rather as a description of the way in which ordinary people can function successfully. I believe that this is somewhat lost in the weak interpretation; the Skeptic comes across as avoiding commitment to his own beliefs in a manner that seems unnatural and even fanatical. This cannot have been Carneades' intention. He compares the Skeptic wise man to such ordinary figures as a doctor diagnosing fever, a man fleeing his enemies, a person avoiding a snake and a man setting off on a voyage. Carneades' Skeptic does not claim to have knowledge as defined by the Stoic, namely unshakable assent to the kataleptic impression. However, the Skeptic does allow that he can get at the way things probably are, particularly if he employs a series of common-sense tests, such as examining the object closely and in full light. Through it all, Carneades' Skeptic realizes the omnipresent possibility of error. Carneades uses

several examples derived from myth and tragedy (for example, at AM 7.170 he quotes Euripides' *Oresteia*); one might say that he is exhorting the Skeptic to avoid a hubristic over-confidence in his powers of perception and judgment.

It would be only fitting for a paper on skepticism to aim at equipollence; I will therefore set out what I take to be the main objections to my interpretation. The first set I do not consider to be especially damning; these consist of attempts at textual refutation. I believe that the passage offering the strongest evidence against me lies at *Academica* 2.104; Frede uses this as the basis for his weak assent theory. Recall that the Skeptic wise man is described here as one who "restrains himself from replying so as to approve or disapprove of something", and as one who, following probability "wherever this occurs or is lacking can respond 'yes' or 'no' accordingly". This passage might lead one to conclude that taking one's impressions to be probably true would consist in affirming them, and that all that is permitted is to be swayed by one's impressions into responding in the affirmative or negative when asked.

However, I do not believe that such an interpretation of the passage is warranted. It would depend on the assumption that in claiming that the wise man avoids assent and approval, Carneades employs the terms "approve" and "assent" to mean taking one's impressions to be either true or probably true. I could equally well respond that what Carneades really means by those expressions is taking something to be *indubitably* true. While my interpretation might be considered a stretch of the ordinary sense of the terms, this would not be that unusual for Carneades. After all, Carneades often claims that nothing is perceivable (Ac. 2.28, 103 etc.), and his meaning is hardly that nothing can be detected by the senses; rather, he uses the term "perceivable" to mean subject to unshakably correct perception. In fact, it seems that Carneades must be using "approve" and "assent" in some sense that is stronger than their ordinary use, since otherwise in saying "yes" or "no" the Skeptic would violate his commitment to approve of nothing. If we are to fill in the meaning of Carneades' terms here, we will have to rely on Carneades' examples of how the wise man acts. These examples include the man who investigates the coil of rope by prodding it and the sailor who concludes that he will complete his voyage after ensuring the weather conditions and the quality of his crew. I believe that these examples demonstrate that the form of assent considered acceptable by Carneades includes more than merely acquiescing to one's impressions; one can also actively investigate them.¹¹

On a more general level, I believe that the strong interpretation of Carneades has been unpopular in recent years because of a determination to distinguish Carneades' philosophy from

¹¹ A few additional words on *Academica* 2.104. In my opinion, the obscurity of this passage renders it a poor foundation for any interpretation of Carneades. The passage in question states the following:

1. "The wise man withholds assent" is said in two ways.
2. In one way, it means that he assents completely to nothing (taking *omnino* adverbially)/to nothing at all (taking *omnino* with *rei nulli*).
3. In another way, he restrains himself from replying so as to approve or disapprove of something in order that he neither negates nor affirms anything.
4. He holds the one so that he never assents.
5. He holds the other so that following probability wherever it occurs or is lacking he can either respond "yes" or "no".

In the first place, the claims at 3 and at 5 seem to be completely incompatible. How can one refrain from assenting and still say "yes"? By definition, the one seems to consist in the negation of the other. Presumably, Carneades is making some specialized use of the terms in question; unfortunately, he does not clarify his usage. One might argue that the form of assent at 5 is more passive than that at 3 because of the use of *sequens*. However, that would ignore the fact that 3 is similarly qualified by *respondendo*, which also suggests a kind of passivity- the Skeptic is described as answering questions and not as independently seeking out the truth. The addition of *respondendo* at 3 is quite puzzling. Is the idea that the Skeptic can approve or disapprove when he is not answering questions, but rather investigating matters for himself? The forms of *epoche* described at 2 and 3 are supposed to differ in such a way that 3 allows for mitigated assent while 2 does not. But how do the two forms of *epoche* in fact differ? The only possibility seems to be to take the *omnino* at 2 with *rei nulli*, implying that at 3, we are permitted to assent to some things. Assuming that 2 is a stronger form of *epoche* than 3, how does the Skeptic manage to hold both without conflict? The Loeb translation attempts to alleviate this tension by translating *placere* as "to hold in theory". Presumably Carneades must be making some distinction between *placere* (2) and *tenere* (3), but once again we are left without textual or linguistic grounds for interpreting his peculiar usage.

that of the later, more dogmatic Academy. Thus, one might object to my theory by claiming that I have made a dogmatic Skeptic of Carneades and have rendered him indistinguishable from his later follower Philo. In the first place, such an interpretation begs the question; Carneades may very well have been a dogmatic philosopher. Furthermore, it is not clear that for Carneades to be dogmatic is for him to be identical to Philo. Sextus, while allowing that one can distinguish the New Academy of Carneades and Clitomachus from that of Philo and Charmides (Ph. 1.220), veers further than myself in the direction of rendering Carneades a dogmatist. He claims that the New Academy affirms positively that all things are non-apprehensible (Ph. 1.226), and that their assent consists of assent to matters of deliberate choice with strong inclination (Ph. 1.230). Finally, one could well accuse the weak interpretation of erring in the opposite direction, of failing to distinguish the philosophy of Carneades from that of Arcesilaus. Carneades was said to have gone beyond Arcesilaus, both in claiming that the wise man opines and in offering the *pithanon*, rather than the *eulogon* as a criterion for life. Sextus clearly finds Carneades objectionably dogmatic, while he exempts Arcesilaus from this charge (Ph. 1.232). However, the criterion offered by the weak interpretation does not seem to differ substantially from the retrospective justification offered by the *eulogon*.

Enough said for textual objections. I believe that the real problem for my interpretation is of a more philosophical nature. While the weak interpretation provides an unsatisfactory response to the *apraxia* charge, the strong runs afoul in undermining the Skeptic's commitment to *epoche*. This is not as obvious as it might seem. The strong interpretation does allow for a clear gap between dogmatic and skeptical forms of assent; the Skeptic can approve of his impressions so long as he does not take them to be indubitably true. The real difficulty is more pernicious; Carneades is necessitated by his own theory to employ the sort of assent that I claim he would consider dogmatic. This conflict is hinted at in the *Academica*, when Cicero describes the objection raised by Antiochus that Philo was said to have found the most problematic for the *pithanon* theory. According to this objection, Carneades is guilty of two contradictory assumptions, that there are some false impressions, and that true and false impressions are indistinguishable (Ac. 2.111). Philo was obviously being a bit thick; the Skeptic is not required to establish the existence of false impressions, only their possibility. Furthermore, the Academic Skeptic can respond, as Cicero does, that true and false impressions do differ in appearance, just not infallibly so.

Now imagine turning Antiochus' objection on its head. Carneades' problematic assumption is not that there are false impressions but that there are true ones, and this cannot be established to anyone's satisfaction in the absence of infallible access to the truth. Why should Carneades be committed to the view that there are true impressions? Because they are required in order to enable the Skeptic to employ the *pithanon* as a criterion for life with any confidence. In order to induce *epoche* in his opponent, the Skeptic is required to emphasize and even exaggerate the possibility of error. But why then should the Skeptic have any confidence in his own impressions? As Lucullus claims for Antiochus, if Carneades' probable presentation has a community with false presentations, it will contain no standard of judgment (Ac. 2.33-34). Carneades' response is to reassure his followers that, while the *pithane phantasia* occasionally counterfeits the truth, it reports truly for the most part (AM 7.174). Cases of dreams and hallucinations are merely meant to throw off the Stoic; the ordinary man can feel confident in the knowledge that he usually detects his errors and they are few and far between. The problem is, what makes Carneades so sure of this fact? It may appear to him that most people are not systematically deluded, but if any impression can be false, then why not that one? Thus, if Carneades' *pithanon* is to inspire the Skeptic with any confidence to act, Carneades must be indubitably sure of at least one thing: that the *pithanon* reports correctly for the most part.

While this tension in my interpretation of Carneades' theory is philosophically problematic, I believe that it is also psychologically compelling. In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus compares Carneades and his followers to *akrateis* (Ph. 1.230). Sextus claims that the Academicians trust in the *pithanon* as an incontinent man believes him who approves of an extravagant lifestyle. The implication is that just as the profligate man has an inkling that his flatterers' advice is unreliable, so the Academicians should suspect that the *pithanon* is not a

sound basis for conduct. The *pithanon*, after all, requires un-skeptical and un-substantiable assumptions regarding the truth of our impressions. However, like a fat man faced with the honeyed words of a sycophant, the Carneadean finds the illusion of certainty offered by the *pithanon* impossible to resist. I believe that this is an epistemic position that characterizes most of us. We are aware of our tendency to err, and the more philosophical among us countenance the possibility of systematic delusion. In my opinion, no satisfactory response has yet been found for skepticism about external reality. Nonetheless we continue to behave as though we do have access to certainty, or at least to probability. What is initially alluring about Carneades' theory is that it promises to explain how we can be Skeptics on the street as well as in the office. Upon closer examination, I believe that its real interest lies in its revelation of our epistemic hypocrisy.

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