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Carneades' Approval as a Weak Assertion: A Non-Dialectical Interpretation of Academic Skepticism

~ RENATA ZIEMINSKA ~

ABSTRACT *Academic skepticism is usually interpreted as a type of discourse without an assertion (a dialectical interpretation). I argue against this interpretation. One can interpret Carneades' notion of approval as our notion of weak assertion and thereby ascribe to him his own views (a non-dialectical interpretation). In *Academica* Cicero reports the debate about the status of approval as a kind of assent among Carneades' followers, especially the views of Clitomachus and Philo of Larissa. According to Clitomachus, approving impressions implies acting on them without taking them as true, while according to Philo of Larissa, approval is taking something as true without certainty. In more modern terms, we can say that Philo refers to the notion of weak assertion and Clitomachus to non-assertion. Thus Clitomachus' reading correlates with a dialectical reading, and Philo's reading correlates with a non-dialectical reading. Philo's reading leads to the interpretation of Carneades as a quasi-fallibilist. It is difficult to establish the precise position of the historical Carneades because he was hesitant in his oral teaching. Still, there is some basis in Carneades' theory for interpreting approval as weak assertion (comprising three degrees of persuasiveness involving rational consideration of what seems to be true). My aim in this essay is thus to argue that a quasi-fallibilist and non-dialectical reading is applicable to the historical Carneades.*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient skepticism—understood as the total suspension of judgment (*epochē*)—presents a serious problem of inconsistency. The linguistic activity of the ancient skeptics seems to entail a contradiction between explicit speech acts and their implicit presuppositions. For, when they assert that “nothing can be known,” they presuppose at the same time that they know something, namely, that nothing can be known and that they have reasons to state this. According to recent scholarship,¹ the most effective way of reading ancient skepticism consistently is by using a dialectical interpretation. Skepticism should be a method of refuting other views, that is, a type of discourse without assertion. Skeptical activity, according to this interpretation, is practiced through certain *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. As such, a skeptic takes her interlocutor's views as premises in her argument and brings them to a contradiction, yet neither the premises nor the conclusions are asserted. The ancient skeptic Carneades, according

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to the dialectical interpretation, was simply a dialectician discussing other views: he accepted no doctrines and did not espouse his own views, not even his view that a wise person should suspend all judgments. The problem of inconsistency would disappear if there were no assertions.

However, the global dialectical interpretation of ancient skepticism has been undermined by contemporary theories of language. Speaking and arguing implicitly require certain presuppositions to be taken as true, and so the attitude of non-assertion is possible only locally.² Skepticism merely as a method of argumentation would have to be part of another, more general philosophical view, such as Empiricism or Platonism, which would provide a conception and description of the world as a basis for formulating it as a method. In the case of Carneades, rejecting the Stoics' epistemology may be simply a series of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, but Carneades' theory of the persuasive (*pithanon*) impression is not based on Stoic assumptions. It is rather an attempt to change Stoic assumptions and thereby to create a new notion of approval to better explain everyday beliefs and skeptical attitudes. I claim that the approval of persuasive impressions can be explained as a weak assertion (a quasi-fallibilist interpretation). If this is so, there are grounds for ascribing to Carneades some philosophical views as his own beliefs (a non-dialectical interpretation). *Epochē* would be restricted to strong assertions. *Approval*, I claim, is the key to understanding Carneades' skepticism. If *approval* is a weak assertion, Carneades would accept fallible views on behalf of the skeptics and would himself have his own views. However, if approval is a non-assertion, Carneades would not be able to have his own consistent views.

Harald Thorsrud offers a fallibilist and non-dialectical interpretation of Carneades' skepticism.³ I will support this interpretation by focusing on the notion of approval and by commenting on Thorsrud's notion of fallibilism and explanation of the incoherence in Cicero's books. My reasons are not only epistemological (contemporary theories of belief acquisition) but also historical (the content of the Carneadean theory of the persuasive). I will begin with Carneades' basic arguments for *epochē*.

SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS

Both Cicero and Sextus Empiricus present Carneades as a follower of Arcesilaus who attacked Stoic epistemology, especially the Stoics' use of a *kataleptike* impression as a criterion of truth. According to the Stoics, *kataleptike*, a graspable impression, is "plain and striking, all but grabs us by the hair, and draws us into assent."⁴ This impression is considered as self-evident and infallible.

Carneades claims that true impressions cannot be discriminated from false ones. He refers to the impression of a bent oar that is straight and of a pigeon's neck that seems multi-colored,⁵ the impression that the sun seems smaller than the earth, and that of a large ship that seems minute from a long distance (Acad. 2.82). Cicero also reports something very similar to the Cartesian hypotheses: "There are often <persuasive> impressions of things that don't exist at all" (2.47). Examples of such impressions can be found in dreams, abnormal states of mind, or as messages from god through revelations. All of these arguments suggest that all sense impressions could turn out to be false. We can also posit some arguments against the reliability of reason, including

the sorites paradox, the liar paradox, and the problem with first principles (2.93–96). According to Carneades, there is no criterion for truth: “not reason, not sense-perception, not appearance, not anything else that there is; for all of these as a group deceive us” (M 7.159). If so, “nothing is apprehensible” (Acad. 2.59). These arguments led the Academics to the precept of *epochē*, in Latin *retentio adsensationis*, that is, the suspension of judgment: ‘a keeping back of judgment/withholding’.

The Stoics' answer was the charge of *apraxia*: if we suspend all judgment, we have a problem acting in ordinary life, and thus skepticism leads to complete inactivity. Arcesilaus gave some examples of animal activity without beliefs, but Carneades was interested in identifying the criteria for the rational conduct of life. He found the solution to this problem in his theory of the approval of the persuasive impression.

APPROVAL OF PERSUASIVE IMPRESSIONS

Our knowledge of Carneades' skepticism is derived primarily from Cicero's *Academica* and Sextus Empiricus' books. The aim of the *Academica* was to make Hellenistic philosophy available in Latin. Cicero translated the Greek *pithanon* as the Latin *probabile*. The Latin *probabile* denotes that which is subjectively convincing, rather than that which is probable from an objective point of view. Cicero tries to connect *pithanon* with the Latin verb *probare* (to approve, to accept): “The *probabile* quite literally is that which invites approval or assent.”⁶ However, the contemporary notion of *probable* loses this subjective element. Today the notion of probability usually refers to objective probability (frequency) and is thus inadequate for the Carneadean *pithanon*. Sextus Empiricus clearly distinguishes objective *truth* from the subjective *pithanon* (M 7.168). It is therefore more adequate to refer here to *persuasive*, *plausible*, *convincing*, or *credible* impressions. It is also acceptable to use the term *subjectively probable*, which refers to the subject's degree of conviction.

Cicero and Sextus Empiricus provided similar descriptions but different assessments of Carneades' answer to the *apraxia* charge. A skeptic has no theoretical beliefs, but in practice, she approves that which is persuasive. Persuasive impressions are “some criterion for the conduct of life and for the achievement of happiness” (M 7.166). Persuasive impressions can move through three sequential stages.

At the first stage, the persuasive is what seems to be true, and the unpersuasive is what seems to be false. What is persuasive is a clear and strong impression that draws us to assent (Acad. 2.32). What is false cannot be known, although it can still be persuasive (2.103).

The second stage of persuasiveness relates to those impressions that are coherent with the body of previous impressions, when “nothing contrary to its persuasiveness presents itself” (Acad. 2.99).

The third stage of persuasiveness depends on careful scrutiny. For instance, “someone observing a coil of rope in an unlit room immediately jumps over it, supposing it to be in fact a snake” (M 7.187). However, we can poke the coil with a stick. After this action, we have an examined impression and its persuasiveness increases.

Carneades also compares the three stages of the persuasive to an investigation in court. “When we are investigating a small matter we question one witness, when it is a greater matter, several witnesses, and when it is an even more essential matter we examine each of the witnesses on the basis of the mutual agreement among the others” (M 7.184). Cicero writes that persuasive impressions constitute a practical criterion for investigation and argument (Acad. 2.32, 2.110), thus their use is appropriate for philosophy.

According to Cicero, Carneades’ theory of approval (*sunkatathesis*) of persuasive impressions (*pithanon*) is a powerful and original response to the charge of *apraxia*, showing how a skeptic can act as well as philosophize, and reconcile skeptic philosophy with the requirements of ordinary life. A Carneadean skeptic, as a wise person trying to avoid error, suspends strong judgments but approves in some weak way certain persuasive impressions. “While there are no impressions allowing for apprehension, there are many allowing for approval” (Acad. 2.99). Apprehension and approval are thus two types of assent.

The later skeptic Sextus Empiricus neglected this distinction and instead considered Carneades to be a dogmatist, specifically a proponent of negative dogmatism who strongly claimed that truth is inapprehensible.⁷ For Sextus, a dogmatic person is one who holds an opinion that she takes to be true. Sextus presented Carneades’ position as contradictory, taking as true the claim that truth is inapprehensible. Thus Sextus understood *approval* as a type of assertion and as the betrayal of skepticism. He presented Carneades as an opinion holder in ethics who accepted persuasive/plausible impressions: “the Academics say that things are good or bad not in the way we do, but with the conviction that it is plausible” (PH 1.226).

Two centuries earlier Cicero had presented Carneades as a suspender of all judgments, that is, as a full skeptic: “Someone claiming that nothing is apprehensible makes no exceptions; it follows necessarily that, since it hasn’t been accepted, the claim itself can’t be apprehensible, either” (Acad. 2.28). According to Cicero, Carneades *approved* this principle “as persuasive rather than apprehended” (2.110). According to Sextus, the *approval* of the persuasive is an assertion to some degree and is therefore dogmatic.

In any attempt to explain this disagreement, we must answer the question regarding the status of approval. Unfortunately, the concept of *approving what is persuasive* is rather unclear. Carneades’ pupils interpreted it in two different ways. Philo and Metrodorus understood approval as a weak assertion, whereas Clitomachus understood approval as a no-assertion. Clitomachus’ interpretation was officially accepted by Cicero, and so we can call this approach the Clitomachus/Cicero interpretation. Because Sextus used Philo’s interpretation to criticize Carneades as one who had betrayed skepticism, we can call this approach the Philo/Sextus interpretation. The Clitomachus/Cicero interpretation presents Carneades as a radical skeptic (non-assertion), whereas the Philo/Sextus interpretation presents Carneades as a moderate skeptic or a quasi-fallibilist dogmatic (weak assertion without certainty). Clitomachus’ interpretation is the equivalent of a modern dialectical interpretation, whereas Philo’s interpretation is the equivalent of a modern non-dialectical interpretation. The dialectical interpretation of Carneades presents him as a radical skeptic, whereas the non-dialectical interpretation presents him as a moderate skeptic or quasi-fallibilist.

CLITOMACHUS AND PHILO OF LARISSA: TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF APPROVAL

In *Academica* Cicero reports a discussion between Carneades' followers, especially between Clitomachus and Philo of Larissa (following Metrodorus), regarding the status of approval as an assent of sorts in a broad sense (Acad. 2.99). The problem they discuss is whether approval is a belief (assertion) or a certain attitude without any belief or assertion. An assertion is taking something as true or false and can be strong (when we are certain) or weak (when we are not certain). According to Clitomachus, to approve an impression is to act on it without taking it as true (2.104). According to Philo, to approve an impression is to take it as true but without certainty (2.78). Both of them accept Carneades' distinction between the two types of assent. The difference between them, then, is whether the approval of a persuasive impression involves some type of commitment to its truth.

Clitomachus places one type of assent on the level of theory and another on the level of practice: "the wise person accepts the suspension of assent in the first sense, with the result that he never assents; but he holds on to his assent in the second sense... following what is persuasive" (Acad. 2.104). Persuasive impressions occur on the level of practice; as subjectively credible, these impressions invite us to follow them and "excite us to action" (2.104). They are irrational, involuntary, and forced by action. Approving that which is persuasive, in this reading, constitutes practical assent without reference to truth and thus without assertion.

However, according to Clitomachus' pupil Philo of Larissa, the approval involves taking something as true without certainty (Acad. 2.78), and is thus a fallible belief or opinion. Opinions are not only the passive inability to oppose an impression but also the result of a deliberate and active process of evaluating the available reasons. Persuasiveness is taken as the evidence of truth, even if that truth is uncertain. Taking an impression as convincing is taking it as likely to be true. According to Philo, Carneades was sincere in allowing the wise person to have opinions; yet according to Clitomachus, Carneades allowed the wise person to have opinions only for the sake of argument, as part of his dialectical discussion with the Stoics. We can say, using modern terminology, that Clitomachus, similar to Sextus, considers skepticism to be the attitude of universal non-assertion and that Philo accepts weak assertion. Thus Clitomachus was the forerunner of our dialectical interpretation and Philo the forerunner of quasi-fallibilist interpretation.

It is astonishing that many scholars (Gisela Striker, Michael Frede, Richard Bett, and Charles Brittain) have accepted Clitomachus' interpretation as better than Philo's. Of course, Clitomachus had a close connection to Carneades. He wrote all of his books on suspending assent during his master's lifetime, and they were verified by Carneades. Cicero quotes one of those books and writes that Clitomachus "worked with Carneades right up to his old age, and he was a clever man... as well as a serious and diligent scholar" (Acad. 2.98). Thus Clitomachus was a reliable reporter. Cicero trusts Clitomachus rather than Philo and writes that Carneades preferred Clitomachus' reading. There is thus strong historical ground to say that Clitomachus could understand Carneades' intentions and declarations better than Philo.

Still, Philo seems to give a better interpretation of Carneades' philosophical practices. His reading is more consistent with our recent understanding of belief acquisition. Clitomachus' reading, as applied to Carneades' philosophical activity (global dialectical reading), is excluded on epistemological grounds, whereas we have strong epistemological support for Philo's reading. In the case of such a draw, let us examine the historical reasons we may use to apply Philo's reading to Carneades' intentions.

HISTORICAL GROUNDS FOR PHILO'S CARNEADES

According to Richard Bett, Carneades' distinction between the two types of assent *sunkatathesis*—in Cicero's terminology, typical assent (*adsensio*) and 'approval' (*approbatio*)—were introduced as improvements to the Stoics' vocabulary (Acad. 2.37, 2.99, 2.104): "He [Carneades] is recommending that the term 'assent' be restricted to cases... where one does (explicitly) commit oneself to truth of some impression; and he is coining the new term 'approval' to designate the types of reactions to impressions which do *not* include a commitment to their truth."⁸ The key to this division is a commitment to truth that can be made with more or less conviction and on practical and theoretical matters. According to Bett, approval can be given without commitment to the truth when an impression is allowed to influence behavior without considering it as true.

In a similar vein, Charles Brittain accepts this interpretation. Approval means acting on a persuasive impression *as if* we took it to be true, but without taking it to be true. Examples of this are the behaviors of animals, acting unconsciously or from habit, and acting deliberately "when we follow an unendorsed hypothesis in conditions of uncertainty."⁹ The last example is the most promising, but is possible only locally. However, Carneades is not interested in analyzing the activity of animals or small children but in the activity of rational humans trying to control their lives; examples include "when you are sailing, sowing, marrying, and having children" (Acad. 2.109), during an investigation in court (M 7.184) or studying philosophy (Acad. 2.32). He tries to explain how a skeptic as an adult human being can live and make rational decisions and how people following academic skeptics can live a full human life. Carneades' answer to the charge of *apraxia* is much stronger than that of Arcesilaus', as it explains not only animal behavior but also shows how a skeptic can make rational decisions and philosophical arguments.

We should distinguish between Carneades' intentions or declarations (even if his view is wrong in light of our recent theories) and his practices (for external observers). When Clitomachus writes that Carneades was a radical skeptic, he was most likely referring to Carneades' own intentions and imagination of the obligations of a wise person. When Philo writes that Carneades accepted weak assertions, he most likely intended to address Carneades' practice as a philosopher. Ancient psychology and ancient theories of language assumed that a wise person can have full control over her own beliefs and that she can use language without any theoretical presuppositions. This assumption was the source of the idea of universal *epochē*. Our recent psychological and linguistic theories exclude this assumption and, thereby, Clitomachus' total

non-assertion reading. This epistemological reason impacts our understanding of Carneades' practice but has little effect on his intentions.

When we consider the historical reasons for Philo's Carneades, we find that Carneades was hesitant on the issue of his own notion of approval. Cicero remarked on this with the following: "Clitomachus affirmed that he never could work out which view had Carneades' approval" (Acad. 2.139). "Arcesilaus was rather more consistent. ... Carneades was occasionally liable to sink so low as to say that the wise person would have opinions, i.e., that he would err" (2.59). Cicero writes that Carneades preferred Clitomachus' interpretation, but sometimes did consider the Metrodorus/Philo interpretation: "Carneades didn't fight strongly on this issue [that a wise person would sometimes hold opinions]" (2.112). In fact, he writes that Clitomachus himself hesitated in this respect (2.139). Carneades in his oral teachings was hesitant and there was disagreement among his pupils as to how his *approval* and skepticism should be understood. Gisela Striker suggests that it would be "futile to try to settle this question now."¹⁰

Still, there are some grounds within Carneades' theory that allow us to interpret *approval* as a weak assertion. First, the content of Carneades' theory of the approval of persuasive impressions presupposes that something seems true. Thus, persuasive impressions are truth-like impressions (Acad. 2.32). The wise person "follows persuasive impressions... that... are *truth-like*. Indeed, if he didn't approve them, his whole life would be undermined" (2.99; my emphasis). This theory grants approval on rational grounds. The three Carneadean stages of what is persuasive presuppose some rational decisions concerning their degree of credibility, which can be defined as the degree of confidence with which we take something as true. The process of evaluation cannot avoid a commitment to the truth; in fact, this process presupposes that some data have been accepted as true. We thus have no answer to the following question: 'How can one assent to a convincing impression without taking it to be true?'¹¹

The second important point is that Carneades provides the following examples of using approval: investigations in court, philosophical discussions, sailing, and decisions about marriage. They require rational decisions concerning the degree of credibility. Rational decisions are connected with taking something as true. These examples are important to establish Carneades' intentions about *approval*. Approval is acceptance without certainty, a deliberate activity if we consider something to be true on rational grounds with the proviso that it may be false. These examples suggest a Carneadean intention of weak assertion. Even if Carneades might have a more complicated view of the ancient skeptics, he was also talking about ordinary people who were sailing or sowing. In such situations people use weak assertions. In other words, this is why Philo's interpretation of considering approval as a weak assertion can be applied to the intentions of the historical Carneades.

The third point is that Philo's reading is useful to explain the differences between Arcesilaus and Carneades. Carneades made a concession (Acad. 2.67) and softened academic skepticism (2.59). Clitomachus' reading does not report this change and presents Carneades as an equally radical skeptic. This discrepancy may suggest that Clitomachus was biased toward defending the thesis that the Carneadean strong answer to the charge of *apraxia* had no effect on full Carneadean skepticism.

The fourth reason is based on Cicero and on modern academic skeptics. When Cicero rejects Antiochus' critique of academic skepticism (how do the Academics establish what is persuasive if they accept no data? [Acad. 2.35]), he writes that Antiochus "would be right if we Academics did away with truth altogether. Yet we don't, since we discern as many true as false things. But our discerning is a kind of approval: we don't find any sign of apprehension" (2.111). Cicero seems to say that Antiochus is right about some radical skepticism, but not about Carneades' moderate skepticism. Thus Cicero presents Carneades' approval here as a weak assertion.

It is very curious that, before giving his answer to Antiochus, Cicero declares his acceptance of Clitomachus' reading: "I trust Clitomachus rather than Philo" (Acad. 2.78, 2.59). However, Cicero accepts Clitomachus' view as an ideal to which he should aspire, even though he follows Philo in practice. Cicero concedes that he is not able to be a real skeptic. "I am actually a great opinion-holder: I am not wise. ... But it's not me, as I said, but the wise person we are investigating" (2.66). Cicero concedes that, in fact, he holds opinions even if he takes them to be irrational. He concedes that he cannot refrain from assenting, writing that "even Carneades didn't fight strongly on this [holding opinions] issue" (2.112). Thus while Clitomachus expresses what a skeptic *should* do, according to Cicero, Philo expresses what Cicero, in fact, *does*. Cicero points to the uncertainty about truth (2.8) as the only difference between the dogmatic and the skeptic, and in doing so he follows Philo. Speaking on behalf of all Academics, he writes that their goal is "truth or its closest possible approximation" (2.7).

In his other books, Cicero expresses his view that it is reasonable to make judgments after the careful examination of pro and contra arguments, looking for what is similar and close to the truth (e.g. *Tusculanae Disputationes* 1.8, 5.11). He also refers in this context to his *Academica* (Tusc. 2.4) and to Carneades as a proponent of this method (Tusc. 5.11). We should therefore reject any exclusively dialectical reading of Carneades, if we want to find coherence between Cicero's *Academica* and his other works. I thus agree with Thorsrud that "Cicero is not sufficiently careful about differentiating the various senses of opinion and assent that are in play."¹²

When Cicero writes that the wise person will have no opinion, this claim comes under dialectical discourse. When he writes that the wise person will have some opinions (Acad. 2.67), this claim belongs to ordinary discourse. However, I do not accept Thorsrud's distinction between opinion_S and opinion_A and his thesis that the source of incoherence and disagreement here is an equivocation.¹³ Rather, both are fallible opinions ("fallible judgments of truth"), whereas Thorsrud indicates no difference in their content or modality. "Moral and epistemic failing" and "deficient mental state," referring to opinion_S, do not point to the meaning of the word "opinion" but rather to its evaluation within the context of Stoic epistemology and thus within the context of the dialectical fight with the Stoics. Opinion_A belongs to the ordinary non-dialectical context, in which holding a fallible opinion is morally neutral. In both cases, the word "opinion" can be explained as belief with weak assertion. In my view Cicero's mistake is not his equivocation concerning "opinion" but his lack of distinction between dialectical and non-dialectical discourse. I agree with Thorsrud that this lack can explain Cicero's preference for Clitomachus. Further, the controversy between Clitomachus and Philo can be explained by the lack of distinction between Carneadean dialectical discourse and ordinary discourse. Cicero's minor error and

quasi-fallibilist reading of approval is the only concession we must make to preserve the coherence of his books and of Carneadean skepticism.

Modern academic skeptics (Montaigne, Hume) have followed Philo in making their judgments with weak assertion. "Montaigne assimilates opinions, according to what appears to him as true, without taking it to be absolutely true."¹⁴ This view provides additional confirmation that the only applicable modern term for Carneades' approval is weak assertion. That is why I claim that Philo's reading gives a better explanation of Carneades' philosophical practices and theory of the persuasive/probable. The structure of his theory of approval (three degrees of persuasiveness involving rational consideration about what seems to be true) and his examples of contexts in which approval is to be used (sailing, investigations in court, doing philosophy) are more important for establishing Carneades' intentions about approval than his declared preference for Clitomachus' reading.

PHILO'S CARNEADES AND QUASI-FALLIBILISM

According to Philo's reading, Carneades makes an important distinction between truth and certainty. Approval is connected with truth but is deprived of certainty. Since an approved opinion is an opinion that is taken as true without certainty, Carneades' approval can be viewed as similar to our modern conception of a weak assertion. If we believe something, we take it as true even if we have no guarantee of its truth or certainty about it. Sextus Empiricus and other ancient radical skeptics followed the rule of "no certainty—no assertion." Thus Carneades, in Philo's reading, discovered that we can take something as true without certainty. He has no certainty and suspends all strong judgments, while accepting weak assertion, that is, taking some opinions as true with the proviso that they might be false. For this reason, I characterize his view as that of a quasi-fallibilist.

In the current terminology, Philo's Carneadean approval is a fallible assertion. Still, his position is not exactly identical with contemporary "fallibilism." Fallibilism is the doctrine according to which there is no certainty and therefore knowledge can be fallible.¹⁵ Thus Carneades is not a fallibilist because he presupposes that apprehension requires infallibility (similarly, according to Hume, knowledge requires infallibility). In this case, both thinkers are skeptics, not fallibilists. I therefore disagree with Thorsrud that this is a simple fallibilist interpretation of Carneades, but, since I find no better-suited term, I propose a *quasi-fallibilist* interpretation of Carneades.¹⁶ When Carneadean approval is interpreted as weak assertion, it can thus be considered as a quasi-fallibilist interpretation.

Philo's interpretation presents Carneades as the first to posit that assertions can be developed in degrees. Plato's *doxa* and Aristotle's *phronesis* (practical wisdom) are examples of beliefs that fall short of complete certainty. However, in such cases, assertions can be interpreted by the concept of belief as an "on/off mental state." A person may be hesitant about accepting a certain opinion, but once she makes a decision, she either accepts it or does not. Contemporary philosophers working on the theory of probability (e.g., Frank Ramsey) have proposed another conception of belief that develops in degrees, namely, a partial belief. Carneades proposed three stages of

probability that allowed for three degrees of confidence. Moreover, all stages of persuasiveness and approval were weak in comparison to the ideal of assent to the apprehended (which would contain no risk of error). Perhaps Carneades can be considered as the forerunner of this new concept of belief that emerges in degrees.

WEAK ASSERTION AND NON-DIALECTICAL INTERPRETATION

If Carneades' *approval* constitutes weak assertion, he can approve (i.e., assert in an uncertain way) that nothing can be known, that we are obliged to suspend judgments, and that we can hold weak beliefs about the persuasive. Cicero comments that Carneades holds as persuasive, rather than as apprehended, that nothing can be known (Acad. 2.110).

Weak assertion allows for non-dialectical interpretation; that is, it allows us to ascribe to Carneades certain views to be held as his own, even if they are uncertain, persuasive, tentative, and probable. Many scholars who accept Clitomachus' reading of approval (non-assertion) adhere to a dialectical interpretation of academic skepticism. Richard Bett, for example, writes that Carneades "cannot *consistently* assent to the account of the *pithanon*" and that "the discussion of the *pithanon* is a piece of dialectical strategy, not a piece of Carneadean doctrine."¹⁷ Rarely do scholars accept Clitomachus' reading while taking a non-dialectical interpretation. Michael Frede is an example of such a combination, the price of which, however, is the unacceptable notion of belief without commitment to truth. When we follow Philo and take *approval* as a weak, uncertain assertion, it becomes easy to accept a non-dialectical reading. Harald Thorsrud outlines this kind of quasi-fallibilist and non-dialectical reading. He emphasizes that in this interpretation Carneades submits a very strong answer to the charge of *apraxia*.¹⁸ A skeptic with modest beliefs is able to act, to make deliberate decisions, and to hold philosophical views. Carneadean skepticism regarding this reading is thus moderate but very reasonable.

I disagree with Diego Machuca that, under a fallibilist reading, "the dialectical interpretation is to be preferred," as this presents Carneades' position as "a stronger and more consistent form of skepticism."¹⁹ I concede that the fallibilist reading eliminates radical skepticism and that Carneades turns out to depart from the ideal skeptical way. However, not every skeptic has to be radical. Carneades' fate was to create some version of moderate skepticism. Otherwise, Sextus Empiricus' assessment of Arcesilaus and Carneades would be the same (PH 1.230, 232).

If Carneades accepted fallible beliefs, there is no reason for him to avoid fallible acceptance of the thesis that nothing can be known (*akatalēpsia*) and of the thesis that we should suspend all strong judgments (*epochē*). A dialectical interpretation of Carneades fits Clitomachus' non-assertion reading: if Carneades suspends all judgments, he should also suspend his own skeptical view. If he has no beliefs at all, there cannot be *a fortiori* any inconsistency between them. This is precisely why Clitomachus' reading leads either to a dialectical interpretation or to inconsistency. Still, when we take up the Philonian quasi-fallibilist interpretation, two types of *assent* are necessary to allow fallible *assent* (*approval*) and not to exclude any assent. *Approval* is needed both for ordinary practice and for philosophical arguments. What Carneades

discusses is the wise person, namely, how can she know nothing but still make decisions and control her actions? The main reason for a non-dialectical reading is that the wise person is an ideal who expresses what every person should think, including Carneades. If the wise person forms fallible beliefs after thorough scrutiny, we can say that Carneades endorses the view that we can all have such beliefs. This argument is stronger when we remember that the approval and the persuasive were new concepts that were both coined by Carneades.

Both Pierre Couissin²⁰ and Gisela Striker prefer Clitomachus' reading, claiming that Carneades accepted no positive doctrines (global dialectical reading) and *a fortiori* had no views about skepticism. I disagree with this reading and believe that it does not even make Carneades' position consistent. In a dialectical global reading, Carneades has no reason to be a skeptic. Although he cannot assert his dialectical skepticism, no other proponent of his view can assert it either. His skeptical speech acts turn out to be pragmatically inconsistent. Generally speaking, after the Wittgensteinian theory of language games, a pure dialectical interpretation of the entire philosophical position seems implausible. Perhaps Carneades can be interpreted dialectically in one argument or another, when he takes an opponent's premises and brings them to a skeptical conclusion. Still, it is presupposed that every speech act has some theoretical background. Thus, when we discuss the general philosophical position of Carneades, it is pragmatically impossible for him to avoid having some picture of the world that is categorized by some system of concepts. Such a picture is the prerequisite of being a competent user of any language. I believe, in short, that it is time we stopped using the global dialectical approach to interpret a philosophical position.

In conclusion, Carneades' notion of approval of the persuasive can be explained as belief with a weak assertion. According to this reading, Carneades was a moderate skeptic or quasi-fallibilist. The outcome of this approach is a non-dialectical interpretation of Carneadean skepticism.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTES

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1. Gisela Striker, "Academics versus Pyrrhonists, Reconsidered," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Skepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010), 201, and "Sceptical Strategies," in *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, ed. Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 56; Diego Machuca, "Ancient Skepticism: The Skeptical Academy," *Philosophy Compass* 6.4 (2011): 264 n. 16.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe and D. Paul, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 341.
3. Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2009), 79, and “Arcesilaus and Carneades,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Skepticism*, 75.
4. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians (Adversus Mathematicos VII and VIII)*, trans. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.257; hereafter abbreviated as M and cited in the text.
5. Cicero Marcus Tullius, *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2006), 2.79; hereafter abbreviated as Acad. and cited in the text.
6. Michael Frede, “The Sceptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge,” in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, ed. Miles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 142.
7. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism (Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes)*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.3; hereafter abbreviated as PH and cited in the text.
8. Richard Bett, “Carneades’ Distinction between Assent and Approval,” *Monist* 73 (1990): 14.
9. Charles Brittain, introduction to Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), xxvii.
10. Striker, “Sceptical Strategies,” 55.
11. See Thorsrud, “Arcesilaus and Carneades,” 73, and *Ancient Scepticism*, 80.
12. Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, 77.
13. Thorsrud, “Arcesilaus and Carneades,” 75–78.
14. Marc Foglia, “Michel de Montaigne,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014), 9; at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/montaigne/>. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), chap. 12.
15. “Fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and indeterminacy” (Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1931), vol. 1, paragraph 171).
16. See Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, 78, 84.
17. Richard Bett, “Carneades’ *Pitánon*: A Reappraisal of its Role and Status,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1989): 78.
18. Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, 83.
19. Machuca, “Ancient Skepticism: The Skeptical Academy,” 262.
20. Pierre Couissin, “Le stoicisme de la nouvelle Academie,” *Revue d’histoire de la philosophie* 3 (1929): 241–76; English translation, “The Stoicism of the New Academy,” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1983), 31–63.