Carneades the Socratic

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I. Introduction

I wish to explore in this paper[1] a topic which, though it has received considerable attention over the years,[2] has not, I think, been approached from quite the present angle, to wit, the degree to which that movement within Platonism known as the 'New Academy', or the sceptical Academy, can be seen, and indeed saw themselves, as constituting a return to the Socratic roots of Platonism, which had been progressively obscured by the increasing dogmatism of what we know as the 'Old' Academy, of Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemon, and their colleagues. In particular, I wish to explore the possibility that Carneades of Cyrene (c. 214 – 129 B.C.E), with whom the 'New Academic' tendency may be said to come to its culmination,[3] may have been encouraged to develop his theory of progressive degrees of 'probability' (insofar as that is a permissible translation of *pithanotês*)[4] on the basis of his study and interpretation of certain positions taken up by the Platonic Socrates in a number of the 'early' and 'middle' dialogues.

It was, as we know, a basic principle propounded by Gregory Vlastos that one can identify in certain 'early' Platonic dialogues a philosophical method and a collection of philosophical theses which may properly be attributed to Socrates, as distinct from

1. This paper began life as the 2014 Gregory Vlastos Memorial Lecture, at Queen's University, Kingston ON, but also received an airing, just previously, at the Ancient Philosophy Working Group at the University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful to my hearers on both occasions for a lively discussion, and various useful suggestions.

2. To mention only a selection of authorities: Long (1967), Stough (1969), Frede (1983), Striker (1983), Ioppolo (1986), Bett (1989).

3. The Academy of Arcesilaus and his immediate successors, we may note, is often described in the sources (e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *PH* I 220) as 'Middle', rather than 'New', a title that is reserved for that of Carneades and *his* immediate successors.

4. 'Persuasiveness' is perhaps a more accurate rendering, and I shall employ it henceforth; at any rate, any suggestion of *statistical* probability must be set aside in this context, as Myles Burnyeat has brought to our attention in his unpublished paper, 'Carneades was no Probabilist'..

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Plato. He explores these in a series of well-known articles and books,[5] often correcting himself sternly on matters of detail, but holding throughout to certain main theses. One of those, which is of particular relevance to the present enquiry, is that, despite Socrates' repeated and notorious disavowals of knowledge, there is in fact much that he feels he 'knows', at least in a certain sense of 'know'. What I wish to do first, on this occasion, is to review a series of key passages, chiefly from the *Apology* and the *Gorgias,* all of them well known to any Socratic scholar and dwelt on repeatedly by Vlastos, which both set up the apparent paradox of Socrates' avowal of ignorance combined with various assertions of deep conviction, as well as pointing to its solution – my thesis being that, if Gregory Vlastos could discern the solution to the paradox, then so could an ancient Platonist such as Carneades.

II. Socrates

Vasilis Politis, in a penetrating study of Plato's portrayal of the Socratic aporetic method in the early dialogues, *The Structure of Inquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues,*[6] identifies two extreme positions in Socratic studies, 'Socrates the Sceptic' and 'Socrates the Visionary', which he identifies respectively with Michael Forster[7] and Catherine Rowett (formerly Osborne),[8] but which of course go back much further than either of those protagonists. The former argues that the purpose of Socrates' aporetic enquiries is to prove that knowledge, primarily in the sphere of ethics, but also in all matters of consequence, is unattainable for mortals, and possible only for God, or the gods; the latter wishes to claim that, on the contrary, the point of Socrates' procedure is to indicate that we do not need to possess 'conventional', *propositional* knowledge in order to be wise, or happy, but rather that the aim of Socratic dialectic is to enable us to attain a different kind of knowledge, namely, a direct, non-discursive *vision* of the truth, such as is vouchsafed, for example, to the Guardians of the *Republic* after their full course of dialectic.

5. Chiefly, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991), and *Socratic Studies* (1994) – the latter containing revised versions of a number of important earlier papers. It is to this latter work that I will be mainly turning.

6. (2015), 10.

7. In 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', *OSAP* 31 (2006), 1–47, and 'Socrates' Profession of Ignorance', *OSAP* 32 (2007), 1–35.

8. In her recent book *Knowledge and Truth in Plato,* Cambridge, 2014.

For either of these positions numerous passages from the early dialogues can be adduced, but Politis would prefer to set them both aside for a position somewhere in the middle, and I must say that I would agree with him. The great question, though, is: just how is that position to be formulated?

We are all familiar, no doubt, with the famous passage in the *Apology* (21b – 23b), where Socrates relates to the jury how he came to take on what he regards as his mission, which is to go about the city of Athens, questioning all those in society who have a pretension to knowledge or expertise, in some field or other, and to demonstrate to them, by the well-directed employment of the method of elenchus which he has developed, that they cannot give a coherent account of what they think they know – with the purpose, it must be stressed, of bringing them to a healthier frame of mind, and making them better persons. His official conclusion, let us remind ourselves, is fairly uncompromising:

> But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that in truth only God[9] is wise, and this oracle of his is his way of telling us that human wisdom (*anthrôpinê sophia*) has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless'. (23ab, trans. Tredennick, slightly emended).

But that is not in fact the whole story, even in the *Apology.* Later in the speech (29c – 30b), when Socrates is specifying to the jury that, with all respect to them, he is not prepared, even if he were offered a free pardon on this occasion, on condition that he give up his annoying life-style, to accept any such conditions, he makes what seems to me a most revealing admission: he is not actually concerned primarily to prove to himself and to others that no human has access to anything worthy of the title of knowledge; he is concerned rather to direct his fellow-Athenians to the care of what is truly valuable in them, their souls (29d):

> Well, supposing, as I said, that you should offer to acquit me on these terms, I should reply, 'Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than

9. I am conscious here that rendering *ho theos* as 'God' could be regarded as rather excessively monotheistic, and that it could be translated simply as 'the god', as referring to Apollo, but I think that Plato (whatever about Socrates) is really intending something more general by this expression, sc. 'the divinity'.

> to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop philosophizing and exhorting you and demonstrating (*endeiknumenos*) to everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, 'My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to understanding (*phronêsis*) and truth (*alêtheia*) and to your soul, that it may be as good as possible?' (trans. Tredennick, slightly emended).

It seems to me here that Plato has allowed Socrates' position to change significantly, and that in the process he rather gives the game away as regards Socrates' profession to be solely concerned with pursuing the meaning of the riddling utterance of Apollo; his mission is really a much more positive one, with the *elenchus* simply serving as its preliminary, 'softening-up' strategy.[10] His true mission is to bring his fellow-citizens to a better frame of mind, where they honour the goods of the soul above either those of the body or external goods, and care for their souls as the one truly valuable part of their persons.

This mission, moreover, involves a good deal of positive doctrine, or at least 'working hypotheses'. Indeed, Socrates, in the passage quoted above, speaks of himself as, not just 'philosophizing' (*philosophôn*) and 'exhorting' (*parakeleuomenos*), but also of 'demonstrating' (*endeiknumenos*) – which is a particularly strong didactic term to use. An *endeixis,* after all, is, in legal contexts, something like a 'writ of indictment', indicating the offence complained of, whereas in more general contexts it seems to mean something like 'proof' or 'demonstration'. The god

10. It has always seemed to me, I must say, that there is something fishy about Socrates' claim that it was Chaerephon's question to the god that started him on his sacred mission, and I doubt that the jury fell for it for a moment (nor would it have improved their mood!). For one thing, why on earth would Chaerephon have asked his question, and indeed have been such a fan of Socrates' in the first place, had not Socrates for some considerable time already been the Socrates that we all know and love, behaving in a thoroughly Socratic manner? I do not doubt that the incident with the Oracle took place, but the very fact that it did surely undermines Socrates' account of his motivation. In fact, it seems to me that we have here a good example of Vlastos' category of 'complex irony' (cf. *Socrates,* ch. 1, p. 31ff.): beneath this teasing story there lies a serious belief of Socrates', that he has been in some sense called by God to disabuse pompous technical 'experts' – and indeed men in general – of their false conceit of knowledge.

Dionysus, you may recall, in the prologue of Euripides' *Bacchae* (ll. 47–8), declares his (very grim) intentions in these terms:

> ὧν οὕνεκ᾽ αὐτῷ θεὸς γεγὼς ἐνδείξομαι
> πᾶσίν τε Θηβαίοισιν.
>
> Wherefore I shall *demonstrate* to him (sc. Pentheus),
> and to all the Thebans, that I was born a god.

and this he proceeds to do, with devastating effect. Otherwise, the verb is most commonly used by the orators (Demosthenes, Aeschines, Andocides, etc.) in legal contexts.

So this is an interesting verb for Plato to put into Socrates' mouth here. And it is clear from what Socrates says just below (29e) that he means business:

> And if any of you disputes this (sc. that one is not caring about one's soul) and professes to care about these things, I shall not at once let him go or leave him. No, I shall question him and examine him (*exetasô*) and test him (*elenxô*); and if it appears that, in spite of his profession, he has not attained to virtue (*kektêsthai arêten*), I shall reprove him for neglecting what is of supreme importance, and giving his chief attention to trivialities. I shall do this to everyone I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow-citizen, but especially to you, my fellow-citizens, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kinship. For this, I do assure you, is what God commands, and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to God.(trans. as above).

There is, thus, plainly a set of principles in accordance with which Socrates is proceeding. On the basis of this passage, one might formulate the main ones as follows:

1. *Man is composed of soul and body, but the true identity and value of the individual resides in his or her soul.*[11]
2. *One should cultivate the 'goods' of the soul (viz., the virtues), while striving to free oneself from excessive attachment to 'lower' goods such as wealth and good reputation.*

On the basis of discussions in other dialogues, such as the *Protagoras* (352a–361d) and the *Meno* (86c–89c)[12], one might feel justified in adding:

11. One may probably add a conviction that the human soul is immortal, on the basis both of his remarks at the end of the *Apology* (40c–42a), which admittedly contain an element of ambivalence, probably in deference to the range of beliefs within the jury, and of the comprehensive arguments in the *Phaedo;* but that does not imply any degree of certainty as to the nature of the soul's life after death.

12. Presented at 87a as an 'hypothesis', such as geometers propose on occasion.

> 3. *Virtue, or the virtues, have an intellectual basis, that is, they are forms of knowledge* (epistêmê)*, or products of knowledge; and vice is therefore a product of ignorance.*[13]

That is to say, there is a rational basis for virtuous conduct, such that (a) it can be taught (which is what Socrates, presumably, feels that he is doing – although, when challenged, he would deny that he knows what virtue is, and is merely seeking a definition of it), and (b) all vicious behaviour is actually the product of ignorance, leading to the conclusion that 'no one does wrong willingly'.

We may add, I think, a further principle, this time from the *Gorgias* (472e ff.), to other aspects of which dialogue I will turn in a moment, to the effect that:

> 4. *It is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it – and, if one inflicts injustice, it is better to undergo punishment for that than to escape it.*

This is propounded primarily to annoy the sophist Polus, which it certainly succeeds in doing, but there can be little doubt that Plato intends this to be a conviction held by Socrates.

Indeed, it is in connection with this principle that Socrates, later in the dialogue, makes certain assertions which have attracted a good deal of attention, not least from Gregory Vlastos himself,[14] and which, it seems to me, could well have encouraged Carneades to propound his formula of various degrees of *pithanotês.* At 507cd, in the course of a quite uncharacteristically long and impassioned speech, Socrates makes the following assertion:

> That, then, is the position I take (viz., that the temperate and good man will be supremely happy, and the intemperate and evil supremely unhappy), and I affirm it to be true, and if it is true, then the man who wishes to be happy must, it seems, pursue and practise temperance, and each of us must flee from indiscipline with all the speed in his power and contrive, preferably, to have no need of being disciplined, but if he or any of those belonging to him, whether individual or city, has need of it, then he must suffer punishment and be disciplined, if he is to be happy. (trans. Woodhead, lightly emended).

13. I realise, of course, that this proposition precisely forms the subject of an *aporia* both at the end of the *Protagoras* and in the *Meno,* but I would venture to assert that Plato intends us to conclude that this is indeed a principle that Socrates lives by.

14. 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', in (1994) 48–66; but cf. also (1991), 84.

The phrase translated "this is the position I take" is *houtô tithemai,* that is to say: "Such is my *thesis*", and Socrates declares this thesis to be true (*alêthê*). A little further along in this speech (508e–509a), he lays things on the line even more forcefully – before then seeming to row back significantly:

> These facts, which were shown to be such as I stated them sometime earlier in our previous discussion, are buckled fast and clamped together (*katekhetai kai dedetai*) – to put it somewhat crudely – by arguments of iron and adamant (*sidêrois kai adamantinois logois*) – at least so it would appear as matters stand. And unless you or one still more vigorous than yourself can undo them, it is impossible to speak aright except as I am now speaking. For what I say is always the same: *that I do not know how these things are* (*hoti egô tauta ouk oida hopôs ekhei*), but I do know that, of all whom I have ever met either before or now, no one who put forward another view has failed to make himself a laughing-stock (*katagelastos einai*). (trans. as above).

So what, one might ask – and many have asked! – is going on here? On the one hand, Socrates is absolutely convinced that he is right about his thesis; one can hardly improve on its being bound by *logoi* of iron and adamant![15] But on the other hand, he disclaims *knowledge* of how things really are, and is prepared to envisage, albeit perhaps with a certain measure of irony, someone coming along even more vigorous – or how ever one might best render *neanikôteros:* perhaps 'more bumptious'? – than Callicles, who might contrive to dissolve these *logoi.* All he is sure of, as he says, is that he has never come across anyone, in all his years of practising the elenchus, who did not tie himself in knots, and become a laughing-stock (*katagelastos*), in trying to maintain the opposite thesis. So, is this knowledge or is it not? Gregory Vlastos, it seems to me, has, in the essay just mentioned ('Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge'), provided a most plausible formula for resolving this quandary – though I believe that it has not commended itself, perhaps inevitably, to all members of the tribe of philosophers.[16] Vlastos leads into his solution by

15. The phrase is somewhat reminiscent of the specification in the *Meno* (98a) of 'true opinions' (*doxai alêtheis*) needing to be 'bound down by the calculation of a reason' (ἕως ἄν τις αὐτὰς δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ).

16. Alexander Nehamas, for one, who says (Nehamas [1998], 74): 'A central problem with this view is that the notion of a "philosophical" knowledge as Vlastos understands it is systematically articulated only in the middle and later writings of Plato and in the works of Aristotle'. True enough, perhaps, but it seems to me that

presenting a rather effective illustration, as follows (p. 46):

> Consider the proposition, "Very heavy smoking is a cause of cancer." Ordinarily I would have no hesitation in saying that I know this, though I have not researched the subject and have not tried to learn even half of what could be learned from those who have. Now suppose that I am challenged, "But *do* you know it?" Sensing the shift to the stronger criteria for "knowing" the questioner has in view, I might then freely confess that I don't, adding perhaps, "If you want to talk to someone who does, ask N." – a renowned medical physiologist who has been researching the problem for years. By saying in this context, "He knows, I don't," I would not be implying that I had made a mistake when I had previously said I did know – that what I should have said instead is that all I had was a true belief. The conviction on whose strength I had acted when I gave up smoking years ago had not been just a true belief. I had reasons for it – imperfect ones, to be sure, which would not have been nearly good enough for a research scientist: in his case it would be a disgrace to say *he* knows on reasons no better than those. But for me those reasons were, and still are, good enough "for all practical purposes"; on the strength of those admittedly imperfect reasons I had made one of the *wisest* decisions of my life.

This delightfully personal testimony seems to me to set out the situation very well – with the modification, perhaps, that Vlastos' 'renowned medical physiologist' will be Socrates' god Apollo, or God in general, rather than any mortal expert. Vlastos wishes to emphasise that we are not here concerned with a distinction between 'knowledge' and 'belief (*pistis*), as set out, for example, at *Rep.*V 477e. His claim would be that, for all practical purposes, he *knows* – he does not just *believe* – that heavy smoking is very bad for you – and so, I submit, do all of us, including many of those who have not yet given up the weed! But we all, or most of us, readily admit that we are not fully acquainted with all of the technical details as to why nicotine does such dreadful things to our internal organs. And the same could be said of a wide range of facts about our everyday world which we 'know' for all practical purposes.[17]

So Vlastos proposes a distinction between knowledge of the most comprehensive type, which comprehends not only

this Vlastonian distinction is at least implicit in the *Gorgias* passages discussed here.

17. I would adduce, as one such instance, my 'knowledge' that human actions are responsible for global warming. I do not wish to say merely that I *believe* this, or that I *conjecture* it; I know it. But of course I am not an expert on the mechanics of climate change, so I do not know$_c$ *all* the whys and wherefores of this; I merely know of people who do.

the given fact, but also the whole range of *reasons* which cause it to be the case, and a more provisional, but still thoroughly serviceable, level of knowledge, which results from years – or even a lifetime – of maintaining a given principle against all comers (this works primarily, it must be said, in the case of *ethical* principles) without meeting anyone who can confute one. He sets out the distinction as follows (*loc. cit.* pp. 55–6):

> I shall use "knowledge$_C$ to designate knowledge so conceived (sc. a comprehensive knowledge of causes as well as facts) using the subscript as a reminder that infallible certainty was its hallmark. Now whatever Socrates might be willing to say he *knows* in the domain of ethics would have to be knowledge reached and tested through his own personal method of inquiry, the elenchus; this is his only method of searching for moral truth. So when he avows knowledge – as we have seen he does, rarely, but unmistakeably – the content of that knowledge must be propositions he thinks elenctically justifiable. I shall therefore call it "elenctic knowledge," abbreviating to 'Knowledge$_E$.'

As I say, I find this a most useful distinction, even if it is not one ever made explicitly by Socrates himself in the dialogues. But my purpose here is not so much to defend it as a valid strategy for solving the conundrum of what degree of certainty Socrates actually attributed to the principles by which he lived, as to consider to what extent it might have influenced the position adopted by one of his more distinguished later followers, Carneades of Cyrene, head of the Academy in the latter half of the second century BCE.[18]

III. Carneades

We find quite an extensive account of Carneades' epistemology in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* I (= *Against the Mathematicians* VII) 159–189,[19] and I propose to base myself largely on that, though

18. The attempt by Arcesilaus, founder of the 'New Academy' to co-opt Socrates as a sceptic has been well discussed by A.A. Long [1988]; while his effort to co-opt Plato in the same role has been argued for by Julia Annas [1992]. Arcesilaus' position, however, insofar as we know it, seems to have been a good deal more absolute than that of Carneades, in the direction of 'suspension of judgement; (*epokhê*) and 'equipollence' (*isostheneia*); cf. Sextus, *AM* 7. 150–8; Cicero, *Fin.* 2. 2; *De Orat.* 3. 67. See also the useful discussion by Richard Bett [1989].

19. Also a summary account in *Pyrrh. Hyp.* I. 226–31, which transposes the two higher stages of *pithanotês,* and is in general less accurate. On Carneades' position in general, I am much indebted to the detailed discussion of James Allen [1994], though he does make rather heavy weather of the precise formulation of the three

with due attention also to Cicero's *Academica* 2. We must recognise at the outset, of course, that all evidence as to the philosophical position maintained by Carneades (as would be the case for any member of the sceptical Academy) is fraught with uncertainty and the possibility of distortion, as, for one thing, he did not, as a matter of policy, commit his views to paper, and for another, the body of works which preserve his (probable) views, compiled by his faithful follower Clitomachus, have themselves not survived, and are being relayed to us by other sources, whether generally sympathetic, such as Cicero, or with something of an axe to grind, as is the case with Sextus. However, in the case of Sextus, one can at least be reasonably assured that he is not making up the most distinctive features of Carneades' position out of the whole cloth, as he quite specifically makes use of technical vocabulary to describe the various levels of 'persuasiveness', or *pithanotês,* in the Carneadic scheme, and these are largely confirmed by evidence from Cicero.[20]

There is also the problem, presented to us by Cicero in the *Academica* (2. 78; cf. also 139), that there was a dispute among Carneades' pupils as to whether he actually maintained the views that he propounded, or merely advanced them for the sake of argument; his pupil Metrodorus, the teacher of Philo of Larissa, maintained the former, while his chief pupil, and recorder of his opinions, Clitomachus maintained the latter – indeed Clitomachus is on record (ap. Cic. *Acad,* 2. 139) as declaring that "he had never been able to understand what Carneades did accept". I think that we should go with Clitomachus on this one,[21] as I would discern here a good piece of evidence of Carneades' concern to maintain what he would have seen as a Socratic position: one may advance views of varying degrees of plausibility, but one always

stages of probability! Such subtleties are, fortunately, not germane to my main thesis.

20. *Ac.* I. 99–104. There is, admittedly, the disquieting possibility that Sextus is actually deriving his information here, not directly from Clitomachus, but rather from the *Kanonika* of Antiochus of Ascalon, since Antiochus is suddenly quoted, on a detail of doctrine, at §162, and Antiochus would have an axe to grind as well; but once again, there is no reason here for Antiochus to be making up details of doctrine.

21. Admittedly, Rudolf Hirzel, who first raised this question back in [1883], pp. 162–80, opts for Metrodorus, followed by most later authorities. Pierre Coussin, however [1923, 104f.] opts for Clitomachus, and I would agree with him. A.A. Long has some useful remarks to make on this question in [1967], 73–5, as does Bett [1989], 83–90, and Thorsrud, in Bett [2010].

maintains the overall position that one cannot absolutely stand over anything (cf. *Gorg.* 509a: "I do not know how these things are.").[22]

So, with these provisos, let us look at the text. We may note at the outset, however, a distinction of some significance between the respective fields in which Socrates and Carneades are applying their rules of persuasiveness: Socrates is concerned primarily with the field of ethical principles, not with ordinary cases of sensory perception; Carneades, primarily because of his desire to counter the Stoics, is concerned rather with the criteria for persuasiveness in ordinary cases of sensory perception;[23] however, we may be permitted to assume, I think, that he extended these principles to the moral sphere – as, of course, did the Stoics.[24] At any rate, Sextus begins as follows (§159), presenting Carneades as an uncompromising sceptic:

> His first line of argument, directed at all opponents alike (sc. not just the Stoics), is that by which he establishes that there is absolutely no criterion of truth – neither reason, nor sense-perception, nor mental presentation (*phantasia*), nor anything else that exists; for these things, one and all, play us false. (trans. Bury, modified).

He backs up this position by a complex argument reported by Sextus in the following sections (§§160–5), which we fortunately need not dwell on in the present context,[25] but which involves insisting on the irreducibly subjective element in, first, sense-perception, then *phantasia,* and finally reason (*logos*), since it is

22. He may also, it seems to me, have been influenced to some extent by Socrates' remarks at *Tht.* 150b-d, where he is describing his role as a midwife. It is at any rate interesting that the Anonymous Theaetetus Commentator (admittedly from a rather later period) interprets Socrates as saying here, when he declares that he is "barren of wisdom", that the sort of wisdom he lacks is that which other people attribute to the great sophists, but which he himself would attribute to God alone (54. 23–38).

23. Indeed, it may be said that the Stoic theory of the cognitive impression throws down the gauntlet to the Platonist position that the fluidity of objects in the physical world and the imperfection of our sense-organs make certainty at the physical level impossible, thus forcing the Platonists to meet them on this field of play.

24. Gisela Striker makes this point well in [1996], 107.

25. Although we may note the probable dependence of Carneades' assertion of the need for the *aisthesis* to be set into motion by an external stimulus, and thus being only really operative as a sense-organ when it is 'disturbed' being presented by something 'evident' (*enarges*), on Socrates' exposition of the 'Protagorean' position in *Tht.* 153b-154b. The fact that it would seem to us that Socrates is giving a distinctly ironic account of a whole array of previous philosophers, "with Homer as its captain" (153a2), need not deter the New Academics from taking this as a Socratic doctrine.

dependent on the first two. This should establish Carneades as a thorough-going sceptic, but this is far from the whole story. Even a sceptical philosopher must conduct his life on certain principles, after all, and Carneades has a strategy for this.

Sextus continues (§166):

> These were the arguments which Carneades set forth in detail, in his controversy with the other philosophers, to prove the non-existence of the criterion; yet, as he too finds himself solicited (*apaitoumenos*)[26] for a criterion for the conduct of life and for the attainment of happiness, he is practically (*dynamei*) compelled on his own account to frame a theory about it.(trans. Bury, modified)

And Sextus now proceeds to set this out (§§167ff.).[27] What we find is an ascending series of three degrees of *pithanotês*, consisting of (a) the basic *pithanê phantasia*, or 'persuasive presentation'; (b) the presentation that is 'persuasive and not contradicted' (*pithanê kai aperispastos*); and (c) the presentation that is not just persuasive and not contradicted, but 'thoroughly checked out' (*pithanê kai aperispastos kai diexôdeumenê*) – this last verb signifying something like 'inspection from every angle'.

Before, however, Sextus turns to the discussion of these, he introduces a significant feature of Carneades' theory:

> The presentation, then, is a presentation of something (*tinos phantasia*) – namely, both of that *from which* it comes and that *in which* it occurs; that from which it comes being, let us say, the externally existent sensible object, and that in which it occurs being, for instance, a man. And such being its nature, it will have two aspects (*skheseis*), one in its relation to the object presented (*to phantaston*), the second in its relation to the subject experiencing the presentation (*ho phantasioumenos*).
>
> Now in regard to its aspect in relation to the object presented it is either true or false – true when it is in accord with the object presented, but false when it is not in accord. But in regard to its aspect in relation to the

26. 'Solicited by whom?', one might ask. Sextus (who may here, in fact, be reproducing Antiochus) may mean 'by the Stoics', 'by his own pupils', or even by Reason itself. One may easily imagine, at any rate, that Carneades felt some pressure to provide a formula according to which one could live. Bett discusses this briefly, in an appendix to his article [1989], 93–4.

27. The tone of Sextus' remarks here could simply reflect his own attitude – he does not, after all, regard Carneades as being a true sceptic, since he does not regard Academics as true sceptics; but the tone could also be borrowed from Antiochus, in whose interest it would be to show that force of circumstances compelled Carneades to advance a long way towards (at least modified) certainty.

> subject experiencing the presentation, the one kind of presentation is apparently true, the other apparently false; and of these the apparently true is termed by the Academics 'impression' (*emphasis*) and 'persuasiveness' (*pithanotês*) and 'persuasive presentation'; while the not apparently true is denominated 'mis-impression' (*apemphasis*)[28] and 'unconvincing and unpersuasive presentation' (*apeithês kai apithanos phantasia*); for neither that which appears false, nor that which, though true, does not appear so to us, is naturally convincing to us.

This account, though somewhat peculiar, has much of interest. It is odd, perhaps, to distinguish two sources of unclarity in an act of perception, the objective and the subjective. Surely, one might think, if a given sense-perception is obscure, it is the fault of the perceiving organ (defective eyesight or hearing), or its situation (too far away, light too dim); the object is what it is. But this is not necessarily so. One may have objects that are naturally obscure (a venomous toad that looks like a stone, perhaps) or deliberately deceptive (*tromp l'oeil* effects, wax fruit, and so on). In fact, I would discern here an influence, whether remote or direct, from that passage of the *Theaetetus* (156a-157b), a continuation of that mentioned above (n. 20), where Socrates is (rather tendentiously) setting out a 'Protagorean' theory of sense-perception, involving states of flux on the part of both subject and object, as they come together momentarily to produce a sensation. It may seem obvious to us that Socrates is being ironic here, but it was not obvious to young Theaetetus, and it may well not have been obvious to the Platonists of the New Academy.

At any rate, we have here the possible sources of unpersuasiveness in impressions equally divided between subject and object. Carneades' purpose in making these distinctions, as emerges in what follows (§§169–72), is to exclude as *kritêria* all sense-impressions that exhibit any degree of deceptiveness or obscurity, arising either from the subject or the object. We are left, then, with "that which is manifestly true and provides a sufficiently clear impression" (ἡ δὲ φαινομένη ἀληθὴς καὶ ἱκανῶς ἐμφαινομένη) to serve as our *kritêrion*.[29] But within this broad definition, as it

28. This is a notable technicality. The word has a 'normal' meaning of 'misleading' or 'confusing impression', as e.g. in Strabo, *Geogr.* X 2. 12, which would approximate to what is meant here, namely, a sense-datum that contains some obscure or misleading aspect.

29. It is worth noting, I think, in this connection that the second-century CE

emerges, there are various degrees of plausibility, as follows.

First of all, it seems (§176), Carneades made the point that no presentation (*phantasia*) is isolated from others, but they come linked together in a kind of chain (ἁλύσεως τρόπον ἄλλη ἐξ ἄλλης ἤρτηται), and these other *phantasiai* may either reinforce, or at least not contradict, the original one, clear and plausible as it may have been, or they may go against it. If the former is the case, we move up to the next stage of plausibility, the 'persuasive and non-contradicted' (*pithanê kai aperispastos*):

> So whenever none of these presentations disturbs our faith by appearing false, but all with one accord appear true, our belief is the greater. For we believe that this man is Socrates from the fact he possesses all his customary qualities – colour, size, shape, conversation, dress, and his position in a place where there is no one exactly like him. (§§177–8).

If we try to conjure up a real situation,[30] let us suppose that we observe, from the other side of the street, our colleague Socrates emerging from a pub that we know that he does not normally frequent – let us say, Whelan's on Wexford Street (in Dublin) – whereas we know him to be a habitué of O'Neill's in Andrew Street.[31] So we look again, closely. And now, as we focus more carefully, either we observe that after all it is *not* Socrates: the hair is slightly wrong, the walk is slightly wrong, this figure is a bit taller, nose not quite so snub; or, conversely, we are confirmed in our original impression: it *is* after all very like Socrates. So we cross the road to confront him, and find that, after all, the walk, the talk, the nose, the dress are all correct.

Neopythagoreanizing Platonist Numenius of Apamea – no friend of the sceptical New Academy – in his treatise *On the Unfaithfulness of the Academy to Plato* (Fr. 26, 103–111 Des Places) reports that Carneades distinguished between the 'ungraspable' (*akatalêpton*) and the 'unclear' (*adêlon*), asserting that, while nothing is 'graspable', in the Stoic sense, not all things were unclear. States of affairs that are 'clear' would presumably correspond to the highest degree of the 'plausible'.

30. Ancient critics, as represented by Sextus (*AM* 7. 253–7) preferred to adduce mythological examples, viz. Admetus demurring at the clear presentation of his wife Alcestis, when brought back from Hades to him by Heracles, and Menelaus, similarly demurring at the clear presentation of Helen in front of him when he reached Egypt on his journey home; but I prefer to adduce a 'real life' example.

31. I venture, for the purpose, to transpose Socrates to contemporary Dublin; the reader can make appropriate adjustments. O'Neill's is a respectable public house in the vicinity of Trinity College, much frequented by certain of the faculty; Whelan's is a somewhat louche bar in another quarter of the city, frequented by the younger set, and hosting performances of popular music.

We are now, I should say, at the *aperispastos* stage. All the subsidiary *phantasiai* look good, the light is favourable, and one's own sense-faculties seem to be in good working order. But we could still be faced with a very clever and accomplished Socrates-impersonator, intent on sowing confusion among Socrates' friends and admirers. What we now need is some background information as to why Socrates is found emerging from Whelan's instead of propping up the bar, or holding court in his favourite corner, in O'Neill's. And that is why we probe for background information. We now learn from him that he was drawn away from his usual haunts down to Whelan's to meet a fellow who was alleged to hold interesting views on moral questions, and that he had just finished having a stimulating conversation with him on the nature of justice, which had only just been broken off because this chap suddenly remembered that he had another urgent engagement, and had hurried off.

Now that we have fully probed the background to this unexpected presentation, we have arrived, I would suggest, at a *phantasia* which is 'thoroughly checked-out' (*diexôdeuomenê*), and that, Carneades suggests to us, is as far as we need to go for the purpose of living a coherent and rational life: we have no need of Stoic *katalêpsis,* which is not attainable by ordinary mortals anyway.

Sextus gives the following description of this final stage (§§181–2):

> Still more trustworthy than the irreversible presentation, and yielding a level of judgement that is supremely perfect (τελειοτάτην ποιοῦσα τὴν κρίσιν), is that which, in addition to being irreversible, is also thoroughly checked out. What the distinctive feature of this is we must next explain. Now in the case of the irreversible presentation it is merely required that none of the presentations in the concurrence should disturb (*perispân*) us by a suspicion of its falsity, but all should be manifestly true and not implausible; but in the case of the concurrence (*syndromê*) which involves the 'checked-out' presentation, we scrutinize attentively each of the presentations in the concurrence – just as is the practice at meetings of the assembly (*ekklêsia*), when the people (*dêmos*) makes inquiry about each of those who desire to be magistrates or judges, to see whether he is worthy to be entrusted with the magistracy or the judgeship.

With the help of this effective example – drawn, interestingly, from the practice of Classical Athens, the *dokimasia* of incoming magistrates, which was indeed a searching process, rather than from anything that Sextus could have met with, I think, in the Roman Empire of the second century A.D. – Sextus reinforces his characterization of the highest stage of the Carneadic criterion.

One of the examples that he adduces (§§186–8; cf. also *PH* I.227–8), which seems to go back to the New Academicians themselves, is that of the coil of rope in the darkened room, which we may adduce to supplement that of Socrates coming out of the wrong pub.

The scenario is that "on seeing a coil of rope in a darkened room, a man jumps over it, conceiving it for the moment to be a snake, but turning back afterwards he enquires into the truth, and on finding it motionless, he is already inclined to think that it is not a snake" (this we may take to represent the basic *pithanê phantasia*), "but, as he reckons, all the same, that snakes too are motionless at times, when numbed by winter's frost,[32] he prods at the coiled mass with a stick, and then, after thus testing (*ekperiodeusas*) the presentation received, he assents to the fact that it is false to suppose that the body presented to him is a snake."

Here in fact the two higher stages of raising the plausibility of the presentation seem rather to be conflated by Sextus, and might be unpacked as follows: first, one pokes at the coiled mass, and gets no reaction; then, perhaps, one goes and gets a lantern (as one should have done in the first place!), and takes a good look at it, before picking it up and putting it on a shelf.

And indeed it is just such procedures of looking, checking, and then reassuring ourselves by further supplementary actions that make up much of our daily existence, without ever attaining to the certainties of the Stoic Sage.

IV. Conclusion

But we have dwelt long enough, perhaps, on the details of Carneades' proposals for a serviceable criterion. Let us return to the reason that I have focused on this aspect of his thought. Carneades, we must recall, is concerned to counter the challenge of the Stoics, and of Chrysippus in particular, that refusal of assent (*synkatathesis*) – since it is impossible, as they would argue, to have an impulse (*hormê*) towards something without assenting to its actuality, or to the truth of a proposition about it – must lead to total inactivity (*apraxia*). His response to this[33] is to propound, *as a thesis*, a schema of three ascending levels of *pithanotês* which may serve as a non-dogmatic criterion for living. I emphasise 'as a

32. I.e. it may be hibernating.

33. Well discussed by Gisela Striker in [1980/1996], 105–115.

thesis', as I would hold, as I remarked earlier, to the tradition passed down by Clitomachus, rather than that attributed to Metrodorus, that Carneades advanced his philosophical positions always 'dialectically', never committing himself to them absolutely, so as to preserve his sceptical stance (cf. Cic. *Acad.* II. 78: *magis disputatum quam probatum*). This position is dramatized most forcefully in the famous incident that took place during his service on an embassy from Athens to Rome in 155 B.C., recounted by Cicero in *Rep.* III. 9, where he argued with equal force and ingenuity in favour of and against justice on consecutive days – thus deeply shocking his Roman audience, who had been much impressed by the first speech!

My thesis in this paper is that Carneades is able, in adopting the stance that he did, that is to say, being prepared to propound a high degree of belief in selected presentations (what one might venture to equate with Vlastos' 'Knowledge$_E$'), on this basis to conduct his life rationally and attain happiness (*eudaimonia*), while holding himself aloof, at one remove from his interlocutors, to such a degree that his most faithful pupil and recorder, Clitomachus, can assert, as we have seen, that he was never at any stage of his association with him certain as to what his Master believed. Even so did Socrates seem to tease and baffle Plato and his other followers – though Plato's reaction is to get his own back by creating, with brilliant literary artistry, a semi-fictional 'Socrates'–figure who can be made to say, at various stages of Plato's own philosophical development, whatever Plato wants him to say.

We have here an interesting parallelism: Socrates has his recorder and interpreter, Plato, from whose brilliant portrayals of his Master, happily preserved to us in full, Carneades, and we ourselves, including Gregory Vlastos, can derive what conclusions we wish about Socrates' true beliefs; and Carneades in turn has his recorder, the faithful Clitomachus – "pretty smart", remarks Cicero rather snidely (*Acad.* II. 98), "as being a Carthaginian" (*homo et acutus, ut Poenus, et valde studiosus ac diligens*) – whose works – four books of 'memorabilia', it would seem (*ibid.* 99) – are unfortunately lost to us, but of which we can recover something from Cicero and from Sextus. I would suggest that, from a combination of the passages that I quoted at the outset, especially those from the *Apology* and the *Gorgias,* Carneades was able to derive a stance that preserved a balance between Stoic dogmatism and total *epokhê,* thus enabling him, in Myles Burnyeat's phrase, to 'live his scepticism', while contriving to baffle his immediate followers, as well as, of course, ourselves.

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