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CARNEADES, A FORERUNNER OF WILLIAM JAMES'S PRAGMATISM

By RALPH DOTY

"... I think," wrote William James in 1907, "that the second stage of opposition, which has already begun to express itself in the stock phrase that 'what is new is not true and what is true not new' in pragmatism, is insincere."¹ He may have been thinking of an article which had appeared in *The Monist* for 1906, in which Stephen S. Colvin traced the ancestry of pragmatism back to ancient Greece and went on to suggest that pragmatism was merely a compound of four older philosophies: subjectivism, pluralism, empiricism, and utilitarianism.² What is striking about Colvin's critique is not so much what he says as what he omits: he does not accuse James of the skepticism or probabilism of the New Academy, although the charge would have been valid; for what is usually called the "pragmatic" theory of truth was developed, not by William James, but by the founder of the skeptical New Academy, Carneades of Cyrene, in the second century before Christ.

A pragmatic theory is that the truth of an idea or belief is its predictive value: if events occur as our belief predicts they should, the belief is true. As James puts it:

True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as. . . . The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*.³ (James's emphasis)

This is echoed by Carneades, according to Sextus Empiricus:

... Just as in ordinary life when we are investigating a small matter, we question a single witness, but in a greater matter several, and when the matter investigated is still more important we cross-question each of the witnesses on the testimony of the other—so likewise, says Carneades, in trivial matters we employ as the criterion only the probable presentation, but in greater matters the irreversible, and in matters which contribute to happiness the tested presentation.⁴

¹ William James, "The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders" in *Philosophical Review*, 17 (1908); reprinted in *The Meaning of Truth* (New York, 1927), 181.

² Stephen S. Colvin, "Pragmatism, Old and New" in *The Monist*, 16 (1906).

³ William James, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, 1907), 201.

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, I, 195, tr. by R. G. Bury (Cambridge, 1961).

Carneades demonstrates the relationship among the three criteria by the following example: a man enters a barn at night, and, seeing something coiled on the floor, he has the impression that he sees a snake there. This is the “probable” being applied. But the man notes that the coil does not move, which leads him to reflect that it may be a rope someone has left in the barn. This is the “irreversible” criterion which is reached by comparing his experience with past experiences (in this case, with ropes and snakes). Yet the man realizes it is a cool night, and on such nights snakes are less active; he therefore secures a stick and prods the coil until he has satisfied himself that it is indeed a rope. He feels secure in this decision because he has tested it.⁵

Like James, Carneades developed his theory in opposition to the established opinion of his times that truth is an inherent and self-certifying property that exists independently of our knowing it. This was the theory of the Stoics, Carneades’s adversaries, no less than of the rationalists who confronted James. Zeno, the Greek founder of Stoicism, held that true perception announced itself by a feeling of certainty called *catalepsis*, “grasping” or “comprehension”:

... he would display his hand in front of one with the fingers stretched out and say, “A visual appearance is like this”; next he closed his fingers a little and said, “An act of assent is like this”; then he pressed his fingers closely together and made a fist, and said that that was comprehension (and from the illustration he gave to the process the actual name of *catalepsis*, which it had not had before). . . .⁶

Chrysippus held that *catalepsis*, although an experience of the perceiver, was produced by the object perceived: “Ce n’est donc pas la raison qui, d’une façon ou d’une autre, rend la représentation comprehensive; ce caractère est immanent à l’image; elle le possède avant toute activité de la raison.”⁷ Hence the Stoic criterion of truth was not the experience of *catalepsis* itself but the object capable of producing it, the *phantasia cataleptike*.

Against this theory of knowledge the skeptics of the Academy refer to our actual experience, pointing out that we do in fact often experience certainty, or what we take as certainty, in our perceptions and then find out that we were wrong:

... whereas you, when you have been deeply affected, acquiesce, assent, approve, hold that the fact is certain, comprehended, perceived, ratified, firm, fixed, and are unable to be driven or moved away from it by any reason, I on the contrary am of the opinion that there is nothing of such a kind that if I assent to it I shall not often be assenting to a falsehood, since truths are not separated from falsehoods by any distinction, especially as those logical criteria of yours are non-existent.⁸

In support of this argument the skeptics adduce many examples of presentations of compelling clarity which are nevertheless false, such as dreams which can be recognized as such only afterwards, when we compare them with waking reality.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187-89.

⁶ Cicero, *Academica*, II, 145, tr. by Rackham (Cambridge, 1961).

⁷ Emile Bréhier, *Chrysippe* (Paris, 1923; reprinted 1969), 97.

⁸ Cicero, *Academica*, II, 141.

In such cases, it is not the clarity of the perception that compels our assent but the result of comparing it with other perceptions. In the same way, we often cannot distinguish two similar perceptions, such as eggs of the same size or twins, unless we can put them side by side and make a comparison.⁹ In such instances we must have recourse to some other criterion than *phantasia cataleptike*.

How, then, can one decide what is real and what is not? Carneades pointed out that in everyday life men use more than one criterion. This led him to the aforementioned three criteria or truth-tests, arranged in a series corresponding to the degree of probability of each, which he calls the *pithanon* (probable), *aperispastos* (irreversible), and the *diexodeumene* (tested). And as the example of the man and the coil of rope shows, there is a rough correspondence between Carneades's "probable" and the correspondence test of truth, while the "irreversible" corresponds to the coherence test and the "tested" to the pragmatic truth-test.

Carneades was a skeptic, and that is why he presented his theory as one of degrees of probability rather than as a test of truth. In his controversy with the Stoics, he used the term "truth" as they used it, to indicate an absolute quality inhering in a presentation and, once perceived by us, incapable of being questioned or denied. Truth in this sense Carneades would not accept. Nor would James:

The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. . . . Meanwhile, we have to live today by what truth we can get to-day.¹⁰

And what truth we can get today is a theory verified by observation, like the "tested" presentation of Carneades:

We must find a theory that will *work*; and that means something extremely difficult; for our theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. It must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly.¹¹ (James's emphasis)

The first point worth noticing in this description is its emphasis on verifiability: the pragmatic truth-test is judging the truth of a proposition by predicting the results of its truth and then testing for those results. But this is exactly what the man in Carneades's example is doing when he prods the coil to see if it moves. Carneades's "tested" presentation, then, is a very early formulation of the pragmatic truth-test.

Second, James points out that the end to which a theory must lead is a *sensory* one: I take this to mean, in the context of his discussion, that it should agree with our actual sense-impressions or at least not contradict them. Although

⁹ Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, I, 402-11; Cicero, *Academica*, II, 84-90.

¹⁰ William James, *Pragmatism*, 222-23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

our sense-impressions alone may not always suffice to convince us of the validity of our perceptions, they nevertheless serve as a basis for checking our theories, as in the case of Carneades's "probable" presentation. That is to say, both James and Carneades acknowledge the correspondence test of truth and grant it a place within their respective schemata of verification.

Third, both James and Carneades acknowledge the coherence test of truth, the latter as his "probable and irreversible" presentation, the former by his insistence that a theory that will work "must mediate between all previous truths." James makes this position even clearer by admitting that "When circumstantial evidence is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing. Just as we here assume Japan to exist without ever having been there, because it *works* to do so, everything we know conspiring with the belief, and nothing interfering. . ." ¹² (James's emphasis).

Both philosophers, then, present a truth-test consisting of the verification of an hypothesis by empirical methods, and both regard this as one of three truth-tests—the others being correspondence and coherence. Each truth-test has its own particular area of applicability; we are not required to see Japan nor to perform an experiment to verify its existence. Yet both James and Carneades consider that the pragmatic truth-test produces a more trustworthy result than either correspondence or coherence. "True ideas," says James, "are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify."

And here it is that James and Carneades part company. For James's test is a test of truth, and truth for him is the product of empirical verification; Carneades, on the other hand, rejects truth as being beyond our knowing and offers merely a test of probability: "In fact his first argument, aimed at all alike, is that by which he establishes that there is absolutely no criterion of truth—neither reason, nor sense, nor presentation, nor anything else that exists; for these things, one and all, play us false." ¹³ Both apply the same method, but they call their results by different names.

The distinction between the truth of James and the probability of Carneades is, in this regard, largely semantic. For James's statement, cited earlier, regarding the unattainable nature of absolute truth shows that he used the word "truth" to mean something different from the rationalists who criticized him. For them, truth was unchanging, absolute, and independent of the knower. For James, however, truth is a product of verification. Thus it is not necessary to have all possible evidence for a judgment to be made: ". . . an idea may practically be credited with truth before the verification process has been exhaustively carried out—the existence of the mass of verifying circumstance is enough." ¹⁴

For James, then, truth is not an absolute quality, independent of the knower. For the Stoics, the *phantasia cataleptike* was not dependent on the knower for its compelling clarity. Because the *phantasia cataleptike* is the criterion, our only means of knowledge, to reject it without proffering a definition of truth independent of this criterion is to reject the possibility of knowing. And this is the position of Carneades. Rather than reject the definitions of his opponents

¹² *Ibid.*, 207.

¹³ Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 159.

¹⁴ William James, "Professor Pratt on Truth" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1907); reprinted in *The Meaning of Truth*, 164.

in favor of a new formulation, as James does in his definition of truth, Carneades accepts his opponents' definition and therefore rejects their theory, calling his own criterion "the tested" rather than "the true."

One further distinction needs to be made. Although Carneades and James both talk about "truth," they are concerned with truth in different subjects of inquiry. James concerns himself with the truth of ideas or theories; Carneades, however, is attacking a Stoic doctrine about the truth (or, more precisely, the accuracy) of our perceptions. Although Carneades's schema of verification could be extrapolated to deal with the truth of our ideas (indeed, this is the substance of James's application of his pragmatic truth-test), Carneades himself shows no particular interest in a wider application of his methods. The reason is, of course, that Carneades, being a skeptic, was not interested in developing any sort of system of philosophy; his intent was rather to demonstrate the inadequacy of such systems. Indeed, from reading Sextus Empiricus one gets the impression that even the slight concession represented by a criterion of probability was rather an embarrassment to Carneades: "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, himself requires a criterion for the conduct of life and for the attainment of happiness, he is practically compelled on his own account to frame a theory about it. . . ." ¹⁵

Thus the differences in scope between the truth-tests of Carneades and those of William James are accounted for by their different aims. Because Carneades was primarily concerned with refuting the Stoic criterion, he limited himself to the field with which it dealt and did not explore the application of a criterion beyond the realm of sense-perception. James, on the other hand, approaches the question of the nature of truth from the empirical standpoint of how ideas are verified, and as a result the scope of his inquiry extends beyond what is present to sense but can, like the existence of Japan, be known despite its remoteness.

Carneades and William James agree in spirit, however, if not in the direction of their respective approaches to the problem of truth. It might reasonably be asked whether or to what extent the skepticism of the New Academy may have been an influence on James, but an answer would be difficult to find. Certainly there were several editions of Sextus Empiricus available to James, in which he might have read the arguments of Carneades, but there is quite a difference between showing that a philosopher *might* have read a book and showing that he *did* read it. I prefer to explain the similarities between Carneades and James as a case of convergent evolution: both confronted opponents whose theories of knowledge were at variance with our everyday experience, and both opposed such theories by holding that instead of asking how the criterion of truth ought to be defined, we should ask how people actually go about the process of verification. In formulating a description of this process, both philosophers discovered a plurality of criteria furnishing different degrees of probability and applicable in different situations. And inasmuch as both James and Carneades reserve the highest place for the theory that has been tested and corroborated,

¹⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 166.

the similarity of their conclusions makes each philosopher the supporter and corroborator of the other's reasoning.

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