11
STOIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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Introduction

According to Plutarch, the Stoics endorsed the following analogy:

> Just as in the sea the man an arm's length from the surface is drowning no less than the one who has sunk five hundred fathoms, so even those who are getting close to virtue are no less in a state of vice than those who are far from it.… [T]hose progressing remain foolish and vicious right up to their attainment of virtue.
>
> (*Comm. Not.* 1063a–b/LS 61T)[1]

Compare the student of Stoicism who is working to become a better person with the evil villain who has no interest in improving. We might think that the student is a better person than the villain, but the Stoics deny this. Everyone who is not a virtuous, wise "sage" is equally vicious, miserable, and foolish, just as everyone below the water's surface is drowning. Only the wise person can breathe.

This extends to epistemology as well as ethics. Only wise people have scientific knowledge. They never make a mistake in judgment, and they have no mere opinions. On the other hand, everyone else is ignorant and foolish. They know nothing, and they only have mere opinions. In fact, they are insane, as Stobaeus reports: "They [the Stoics] also say that every inferior man is insane, since he has ignorance of himself and of his concerns, and this is insanity" (*Ecl.* 2.68,18–19/LS 41I). Thus, the Stoics divide people into two main types: the vicious, insane, and ignorant masses who possess no scientific knowledge and the virtuous, sane, and knowledgeable sages.

Although everyone within the ignorant masses are equally vicious and equally ignorant, the Stoics still discriminated among vicious and ignorant people. Just as everyone below the surface is drowning, but some people are closer to the surface than others, so too everyone who is not wise is ignorant and vicious, but some people are making moral and epistemological progress. The villain and the diligent student of Stoicism have relevant differences, and the student can reasonably hope to become a wise person. As Diogenes Laertius reports, "inferior men become good" (7.91/LS 61K). But how? What steps should an ignorant student of Stoicism take to rid themselves of mere opinion and become knowledgeable?

This chapter has two aims. First, I intend to explain the epistemological differences between the wise Stoic sages and the rest of humanity. To that end, I will describe several intellectual faculties that compose the mind, according to the Stoics—focusing specifically on the faculties of *impression* and *assent*. Impression establishes a relationship between a subject and the external world, and assent allows the subject to make judgments on the basis of that relationship. Next, we will define the concepts of *opinion* and *scientific knowledge*, since only the unwise possess opinion, and only the wise possess scientific knowledge. Because of this, one might assume that the wise and unwise share no cognitive states in common and access the world in two fundamentally distinct ways. However, both groups of people experience *cognitive impressions*, which give rise to the state of *cognition*. Thus, unwise students of Stoicism share something in common with the Stoic sage, which provides the means of making epistemic progress. Hence, my analysis of the Stoic cognitive impression will lead us into the chapter's second aim: I will offer a speculative account of how a student of Stoicism should use an understanding of Stoic epistemology to make epistemic progress.

Impression and Assent

According to the Stoics, the human soul, or mind, is a corporeal substance that permeates the body. This is important for them, since they claim that only bodily things can be causes or affected by causes. So, the soul's corporeal nature allows it to be affected by the outside world, and to cause certain events within the body.[2]

The soul is responsible for all the characteristic activities of human beings—reproduction, meaningful speech, sensation, and cognitive abilities. The Stoics compare it to an octopus, having a command center, or "leading part," where the cognitive faculties reside, and tentacles that spread out from that leading part constituting the other human faculties. For example, the sense of sight is the corporeal substance of the soul spreading from the leading part, which is located near the heart, to the eyes.[3]

We will be concerned with several faculties residing in the leading part of the soul—that is, the mind. One of those faculties is *phantasia*, which is often translated as *impression* or *appearance*. Impression establishes a link between a subject and the external world. When an external object interacts with a sense organ, a change occurs in an animal's soul. When this change reveals both itself and its cause, it is an impression. For example, suppose that an observer stands in front of a tree. The tree then interacts with her sense organs in such a way that it causes a change in her soul.[4] As a result of this change, the observer becomes aware of the tree. Furthermore, she becomes aware of the change itself, just as one becomes aware of light by observing an illuminated object. Thus, when a change is caused by an external object's impact on the sense organs, and that change is accompanied by awareness of the external object and the change itself, an impression occurs in the leading part of the soul.[5]

While sense perceptions are paradigmatic examples of impressions, the Stoics also posit non-sensory impressions that are "obtained through thought." (DL 7.50/LS 39B4) Through reasoning, a change can be produced in the soul by the soul itself, which reveals something about the world. Still, even in such cases, the impressions required to formulate those thoughts are furnished by the senses. To see this, consider the Stoics' list of mental abilities by which people come to think of existing things: direct sensory confrontation, similarity, analogy, diminution, transposition, combination, opposition, transition, and "naturally" (DL 7.53/LS 39D). These abilities seem to operate on the already-present contents of one's mind, which are originally provided by sense perception. For example, if I see a bust of Socrates, I will think of Socrates the man through the faculty of analogy. This non-sensory

impression of Socrates reveals (or at least aspires to reveal) the man Socrates. However, to have this impression, I first needed to have the sense impression of the bust of Socrates. Consider another example: suppose I think of the incorporeal void that exists outside of the cosmos. I think of this impression by its opposition to corporeal, bodily substance. So, I first needed to have sense impressions of bodies to have an impression of the void. In these cases, my sensory impressions are the foundations for the non-sensory impressions. We can conduct similar analyses for other non-sensory impressions. Thus, although the Stoics do posit non-sensory impressions, sense impressions play a foundational role in their epistemology in so far as the non-sensory impressions are formed from mental activities on sensory impressions. Given this, the Stoics endorse a kind of empiricism.

The impressions of rational and non-rational animals differ. The key difference seems to be that the content of rational animal's—that is, a human being's—impressions is expressible in language. Hence, when you or I observe a tree, we might have an impression whose content is *this tree is tall*, while the impression of a non-rational animal is not articulable. Thus, the impressions of fully-developed, rational human beings are also called *thoughts*. Thoughts have linguistic content, and so only the rational animal's impressions have meaning, are capable of being true or false, and can be rationally evaluated.[6]

To have an impression or thought is not the same as forming a belief, according to the Stoics. Imagine that you are standing in front of a tree, and the tree causes you to have an impression whose content is *this is an oak tree*. Merely having this thought is not the same as endorsing it and taking it to be true. At this point, we might say that you are only entertaining this thought; it is still up to you whether to affirm its content. Impressions are necessary for forming beliefs about the world, but they themselves are not beliefs.

Suppose you are entertaining the thought that *this is an oak tree*, and you affirm its content. As a result, you form the belief that *this is an oak tree*. Your ability to do this is a function of *assent*, which the Stoics claim is another faculty residing in the leading part of the soul. According to the Stoics, when one assents to an impression that *p*, one forms a belief that *p*. Thus, the faculty of assent provides human beings with the ability to make judgments about the world. However, this faculty also provides human beings with the ability to be selective about the beliefs we form. Consider the thought that *this is an oak tree*. Perhaps you acknowledge some reason to doubt your reliability in classifying trees—either the light is not bright enough to make out the tree clearly, or you do not have much experience distinguishing oaks from similar trees. Because you acknowledge your unreliability, you do not form a belief on the basis of your impression; you withhold your commitment. The Stoics say that your ability to withhold your commitment to this proposition also comes from your faculty of assent. Hence, they maintain that the faculty of assent gives human beings the ability to form beliefs on the basis of their impressions or to stop themselves from forming those beliefs. Assenting to an impression forms a belief, and withholding assent from an impression does not.[7]

Now, more often than not, people do not deliberately and consciously assent to impressions. When someone perceives the world in normal conditions, they will assent to many impressions automatically and form the corresponding beliefs. Even if the faculty of assent makes believing or withholding belief in a proposition within our power, we do not need to consciously and deliberately form every belief. Automatic assents are still up to us, just as much as conscious and deliberate assents, according to the Stoics. Still, at some level, human beings can take a step back from any impression and withhold their assent.

We should also note that certain impressions are called *impulsive* by the Stoics. These impressions are the basis of action. For example, when I see a piece of cake, I might entertain the thought *that piece of cake is good such that pursuing it is the right thing to do*.

If I assent to this impression, I will have an impulse to pursue and eat the cake, which will cause me to act. The Stoics claim that this faculty of impulse, along with the faculty of impression, separates animals from non-animals. Again, in rational animals, impulsive impressions will have linguistic content, and again, the faculty of assent provides them with the power to believe or withhold belief from that content. Thus, whether we assent to impulsive impressions, and thus whether we view certain objects as worth pursuing or actions as the right thing to do, is up to us.[8]

We are interested in determining the epistemological differences between a wise person and the rest of us, according to the Stoics. The differences do not lie in the faculties of impression, assent, or impulse themselves. Just like the ignorant masses, the wise person's soul is affected by impressions, and they can assent and withhold assent from those impressions. Just as the ignorant assent to certain impulsive impressions, and thus act in accordance with those impressions, so too do wise people. So, the difference between wise people and the rest of us does not consist in having different mental faculties. Rather, the difference between these types of people must reside in how these faculties are used.

Scientific Knowledge and Opinion

The wise person does not differ from the unwise person in virtue of their possession of a distinct mental faculty. All people possess the faculties of impression, assent, and impulse, Instead, the wise person differs from the unwise person in virtue of how they use these faculties. To see this, we will investigate the Stoic analysis of scientific knowledge, opinion, and cognition. On these, Sextus Empiricus presents the following account of the Stoics' views:

> The Stoics say that there are three things which are linked together, scientific knowledge, opinion, and cognition. Scientific knowledge is cognition which is secure and firm and unchangeable by reason. Opinion is weak and false assent. Cognition in between these is assent belonging to a cognitive impression … Of these they say that scientific knowledge is found only in the wise, and opinion only in the inferior, but cognition is common to them both.
>
> (*M* 7.151–152/LS 41C1–5)

According to the Stoics, only wise people have scientific knowledge, and only inferior, unwise people have opinion. Scientific knowledge is a type of assent called *cognition*. Opinion is a type of assent. Therefore, both scientific knowledge and opinion are types of assent.

Let us recap what we know about assent. When a human being receives an impression, it is up to him whether to endorse its content. When he does, he assents and forms a belief. When he does not, he withholds his assent and does not form a belief. Therefore, because knowledge and opinion are kinds of assent, they are also kinds of belief.

According to this report, beliefs are formed from assents with two levels of strength: weak and strong. Weak assent is not defined in this report. In another report, weakness is related to being "changeable" (*Ecl.* 2.111,20–21/LS 41G2). This would appropriately contrast with the "strong" assent of scientific knowledge, which is "secure and unchangeable by reason," according to Sextus. Someone with a mere opinion that something is the case is prone to changing their mind. For example, if I have an opinion that *this is an oak tree*, then someone could bring forth an argument, whether it is good or bad, that could cause me to change my mind. Perhaps they could state that trees with the features I am observing are

actually dogwood trees, or perhaps they could raise doubts about my expertise in tree classification. If any such argument would cause me to withdraw my assent and change my mind, then that assent is weak.

On the other hand, someone with scientific knowledge that *this is an oak tree* is secure in their belief; no one could cause them to change their mind. Now, we should note that this is not merely because the person with knowledge is subjectively certain of their belief. Although such a person is certain, there is more to strong assent than this. For we would not claim that a stubborn person's refusal to give up their unjustified belief, because they are subjectively certain of it, is a case of scientific knowledge. Rather, strong assent is an achievement; it entails that there are no rational grounds available that could or should cause someone to change their mind. Of course, very few people will be in such an epistemic position. Hence, very few people are capable of strong assent, and very few people possess scientific knowledge, according to the Stoics.

Thus, weak assents are normal. Most people assent weakly whenever they form a belief. On the other hand, someone assents strongly when, even while behaving in an epistemically responsible manner, there are no available arguments that could cause her to change her mind. Thus, all cases of strong assent are cases of scientific knowledge.

It follows from this that scientific knowledge is true. For one could not assent strongly to a false impression. Hence, Stobaeus says that the "the wise man never makes a false supposition" (*Ecl.* 2.111,18/LS 41G1). It also follows that assents to false impressions are opinions. What about cases in which someone assents weakly to a true impression? Are such assents opinion or some other state? Here, our evidence seems to be split. According to Sextus Empiricus's report above, opinions must be both weak and false. However, other pieces of evidence suggest that a weak assent to a true impression is a form of opinion.[9] The latter interpretation seems to align more with common sense, in which true opinions are possible. For example, imagine that someone predicts that an event will occur, on the basis of limited evidence. He admits that his assent to the impression that the event will occur is weak, for someone could cause him to change his mind if they provided him with more evidence. However, assume that the event will actually occur. So, his prediction and assent are true. This is not an instance of knowledge; it seems to be a case of true opinion. So true opinions seem possible, within the Stoics' conceptual scheme. But, of course, while common sense might state that there are true opinions, there is no guarantee that the Stoics approve of common sense. And no evidence explicitly states that the Stoics posited true opinions. Thus, like good Stoics, we should withhold judgment on the question of whether the Stoics allowed for true opinions.

At this point, we have established one difference between how the wise person and the unwise person use their faculty of assent. Wise people only assent strongly; they never assent weakly. Still, strong assent is an achievement. Because of this, it is not immediately available to everyone. So it is unclear exactly how the student of Stoicism should go about developing the ability to assent strongly. To understand this, we should turn toward analyzing the third epistemic state listed by Sextus: cognition.

Cognition and Cognitive Impressions

Sextus Empiricus tells us that scientific knowledge is a form of *cognition*, and that both the wise and unwise alike have this epistemic state. Like opinion and scientific knowledge, cognition is an assent. However, it is not defined in terms of the relative strength of the assent. Rather, it is defined in terms of the type of impression being assented to: a cognitive impression. Since scientific knowledge is a form of cognition, all instances of

scientific knowledge will be assents to cognitive impressions. According to Stobaeus, at least, any assent to a non-cognitive impression will be opinion (*Ecl*. 2.112,3/LS 41G4). It follows that "the wise man … does not assent at all to anything non-cognitive" (*Ecl*. 2.111,18–19/LS 41G1).

Since the Stoic sage is the epistemological ideal, there must be some combination of features possessed by cognitive impressions that guarantee their positive epistemic status. As a student of Stoicism begins his education, of course, even if he manages to assent to only cognitive impressions, and even if he appears to assent strongly, there will be circumstances that could cause him to change his mind. Thus, his assents will still be too weak to qualify as scientific knowledge. But as he gains experience assenting to only cognitive impressions, he will eventually protect his beliefs against all counterfactual challenges to the point where his assents will become strong. Thus, the key to epistemological progress for the student of Stoicism lies in being able to assent to only, and possibly all, cognitive impressions.

How does a student of Stoicism develop this ability? Clearly, he should develop some understanding of what cognitive impressions are. So that is where we will turn first. Chrysippus, the third leader of the Stoics, included both preconceptions and sense perceptions as types of cognitive impressions.[10] We are familiar with sense perceptions, or sense "impressions" in Stoic terminology. Preconceptions are naturally-developed concepts that arise from sense impressions. So, we should note that cognitive impressions are not intellectual achievements in and of themselves. In normal conditions, all people will experience cognitive impressions. For example, when observing a tree in normal lighting conditions, I will have a cognitive impression with the content *this is a tree*, and I should assent to this impression. Another example: when developing my rational capabilities, I experience many sense impressions of a tree. Eventually, I form a preconception of a tree, which is an impression that *trees are F*. I will experience and assent to this impression naturally, and thus it is not an intellectual achievement either.[11]

Since they are not the achievements of the wise alone, all people experience cognitive impressions. Thus, assenting only to cognitive impressions is something within each of our power. However, people also experience non-cognitive impressions. For example, when dreaming, I might assent to the impression that *this is a tree*. In my dream, my perception of the tree might be vivid. As a result, it might appear to be cognitive from within the dream. Of course, it is not cognitive, since it is not veridical. Or perhaps I see a person at a distance and form an impression that *that person is my friend*. Even if this impression turns out to be true, because of the distance, this impression isn't guaranteed to be true. So, it is non-cognitive. Because human beings regularly experience both cognitive and non-cognitive impressions, we need some means of discriminating between them.

To that end, let us discuss the Stoic definition of the cognitive impression. Note that this is a topic that has generated a great deal of scholarly interest and debate. In discussing this definition, I will present what I see as the most viable interpretations of this definition, but I would note that these are not the only interpretive options available.[12]

Sextus first presents the following analysis: "a cognitive impression, so [the Stoics] say, is one which is true and of such a kind that it could not turn out false" (*M* 7.152/LS 41C4). Clearly, cognitive impressions must be true, since the wise person assents to them. Furthermore, they are guaranteed to be true; they have some combination of features that entail that they could not possibly be false. Later, this analysis gets expanded and this combination of features is specified. What follows is the standard definition of the cognitive impression:

> A cognitive impression is one (1) which arises from what is and (2) is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with that very thing that is, (3) of such a kind as could not arise from what is not.
>
> (*M* 7.248/LS 40E3)

According to this report, there are three necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient for an impression to qualify as cognitive. If an impression meets these conditions, then one ought to assent to it. If an impression does not meet these conditions, then one should not assent to it. What exactly do these conditions entail, and how can a student of Stoicism use them to recognize which of their impressions are worthy of assent?

First, let us examine (1): cognitive impressions arise from what is. This might mean that cognitive impressions only arise from existing things. If someone has an impression that is caused by a "figment" of their imagination, as Chrysippus called it, then their impression will not be cognitive.[13] For example, if someone hears the wind outside, sees a shadow, imagines a non-existent ghost, and then has an impression with the content *a ghost is here*, then their impression will be non-cognitive. For one's impression will be caused by a non-existent figment, and it will not reveal an existing object.

A problem for this "existential" interpretation of (1) is that, according to the Stoics, non-existent objects cannot cause anything.[14] In the example described above, a figment of someone's imagination does not cause him to have an impression that *a ghost is here*. What actually happens, according to Stoic physics, is that some existent object affects the subject's senses, his mind interprets this input, and then the external object and his mind cause him to have an impression with the content *a ghost is here*. Even though this impression misrepresents the external object, it is still necessarily caused by an existing thing. Given these considerations, it might seem like (1) is uninformative. No impressions can arise from non-existent objects, so no impressions will fail to meet (1).

As a result of this problem, we might search for an interpretation of (1) that allows impressions to fail to satisfy this condition. One option is to understand "what is" to mean "what is true": cognitive impressions must arise from a true state of affairs or a state of the world represented by a true proposition. In the example of the impression that *a ghost is here*, this arises from existent objects—the wind, the shadow, a mind. However, it does not arise from what is true. The following propositions are true: *the wind is blowing, this object is causing a shadow.* Yet the causal process that generates the impression does not preserve the truth of these propositions. Thus, this false impression is non-cognitive. According to this understanding, (1) entails that a cognitive impression is caused correctly.

No matter how we interpret (1), this condition entails that the Stoics built an *externalist* requirement into their definition of the cognitive impression. These kinds of impressions must be generated correctly: by an existing object in a way that preserves truth. Thus, students of Stoicism must consider *how* their impressions are formed when determining whether to assent. They should regularly check on their mental state and surroundings. Are they feeling normal? Are they suffering from any psychological or physical changes? Are the external conditions normal? Irregularities in the circumstances in which an impression is formed should require them to withhold their assent.[15]

Let us turn to the second condition: cognitive impressions must be stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is. Sextus provides us with the following example of an impression that fails to meet this condition (*M* 7.249/LS 40E5). Orestes was insane, and he had an impression that was caused by an existing object, Electra. However, the impression had the content *this is a Fury.* Thus, even though the impression was caused by an existent object, it did not accurately portray that existing object. Given Orestes' madness,

his mind interpreted the input from the outside incorrectly. This understanding of (2) should thus be read in conjunction with the earlier, existential understanding of (1): a cognitive impression must be caused by an existing object, and it must represent *that very object* the way it truly is.[16]

Furthermore, (2) doesn't just state that a cognitive impression represents an external object accurately, it represents it *exactly*. So, it is possible that an impression could be generated correctly, while still failing to represent its object exactly as it is. When observing a type of object for the first time, for example, someone might fail to notice features of the object that are essential for grasping what it is. Even though her body and perceptual system is functioning correctly, and her mind is sharp, the subject's lack of experience with objects of that kind cause her to miss out on something. Thus, the second condition demands that cognitive impressions have an appropriate level of detail, which sources sometimes describe as "clarity" and "distinctness."[17]

Again, this condition seems to require that the student of Stoicism attend to his level of experience when evaluating his impressions. When observing trees, is he an expert on classifying oak trees? If so, his impressions that *this is an oak tree* and *this is not an oak tree* are probably cognitive; they will represent the relevant details of the tree with clarity. If he is not experienced in tree classification, then he should doubt his initial impressions about such trees.[18]

However, the linking of this second condition with clarity and distinctness also seems to build an *internalist* requirement into the Stoics' definition of the cognitive impression. As Sextus says, "just as the seals on rings always stamp all their markings precisely on the wax, so those who have cognition of objects should notice all their peculiarities" (*M* 7.251/ LS 40E6). A perceiver should be able to recognize when an impression represents all of the peculiarities of an object. Cognitive impressions will have a level of detail such that someone experiencing the impression should be able to distinguish it from less detailed, non-cognitive impressions. The following discussion will illustrate this.

The third condition requires cognitive impressions to be of such a kind that could not arise from what is not. Compare two impressions. The first is cognitive: it is correctly caused by an existing object and a true state of affairs such that it represents that object and state of affairs with precision and accuracy. Let it have the content *this object is F*. The second impression is false, but it has the same content: *this object is F*. Perhaps, in the latter case, someone experiences this impression in a particularly vivid dream. As stipulated, these two impressions have the same content. So they are indiscernible. But if a cognitive and non-cognitive impression can be indiscernible, then there are no cognitive impressions. At the very least, the Stoic sage will have no means of discerning the impressions worthy of assent from those from which they should withhold assent. So, no impressions would be worthy of strong assent—assent which is unshakeable and secure. Someone could always generate good reasons to doubt one's beliefs.

The Academics raised other counterexamples against the Stoics' definition of the cognitive impression, which focused on the supposed indiscernibility of similar objects.[19] Consider someone having an impression that *this man is Castor*. Standing in front of her is one of a pair of twins, Castor and Polydeuces. So if the man is Castor, her impression will be true, and if the man is Polydeuces, her impression will be false. However, if Polydeuces and Castor are indiscernible, then the impressions of the two men will be indiscernible. But surely a perceptual impression of Castor (or Polydeuces) is a cognitive impression, if experienced under normal conditions, with a normal mindset, when one is familiar with both men. But then a cognitive impression would be indiscernible from a false impression. And if a false impression can be indistinguishable from a true, cognitive impression, then

the Stoics have a major problem. Thus, it appears that the Stoics countered such arguments by adding the third condition. There are some true impressions that are of such a kind that could not arise from a false impression.

At this point, the Academics and the Stoics disagree about whether there are any such impressions. The Academics claim that any putatively cognitive impression is such that it could have been false. In response, the Stoics will dig in their heels: a false impression cannot convey the level of clarity and detail required for an impression to be cognitive. For example, despite the assertion to the contrary, the Stoics will say that Castor and Polydeuces are not indiscernible. If the wise Stoic sage knows the two men, then she should be in a position to distinguish them. If not, then she will not have a *cognitive* impression that *this man is Cator* or *this man is Polydeuces*, and so she should suspend judgment.

According to the Stoics, a cognitive impression is thus true and guaranteed to be true. Because of the causal process that brings it about, and as demonstrated by the clarity and detail present within the impression, it could not possibly be false. Human beings experience cognitive impressions under normal circumstances, when they perceive objects in ideal or normal perceptual conditions. Hence, they are not intellectual achievements. An assent to a cognitive impression is not automatically scientific knowledge, since the unwise assent to cognitive impressions as well. Rather, the epistemic achievement consists in being able to discern cognitive impressions, assent to them, and withhold one's assent from non-cognitive impressions. For in these circumstances, one's assent becomes strong and secure. On the other hand, assenting to non-cognitive impressions raises the possibility that someone could reasonably raise doubts about even one's cognitions. Thus, the key to epistemological progress consists in not only assenting to cognitive impressions, but also withholding assent from non-cognitive impressions. In the following section, I will make some final, speculative remarks about how the wise person is capable of doing this, and how the student of Stoicism should aim to do so.

Epistemological Progress

The wise person is not all-knowing. Her superior epistemic status does not consist in being omniscient. Rather, it consists in being able to react in the epistemically correct way to all of her impressions. She assents with strength and conviction when her impressions are cognitive; otherwise, she does not assent at all.

What can we say about the intellectual characteristics of the wise person, which allow her to be so unshakeable? First, she likely is an expert at attending to how her impressions are formed—both the external circumstances in which the impressions were generated and her own state of mind. She can discriminate between ideal and non-ideal circumstances. Furthermore, she is an expert in the phenomenology of impressions—she can recognize the clarity and detail that are worthy of assent. Counterarguments to her beliefs will not cause her to withdraw her assent, unless they can demonstrate that the circumstances, her mental state, or the phenomenology of her impressions were somehow defective. But since she is an expert in determining these things, there are no such counterarguments available.

Armed with this definition and understanding of cognitive impressions, one means of achieving wisdom is clarified. Every person experiences cognitive impressions regularly; in normal circumstances, perceptual impressions are cognitive. The student of Stoicism should focus on the circumstances surrounding the production of such impressions. What is the state of their sense organs? What is the position of the sense object in relation to the sense organ, with respect to light, media, and other factors that influence perception? What is one's state of mind? In attending to these factors, one will gain experience and eventually

expertise in distinguishing between ideal and non-ideal perceptual circumstances. In ideal circumstances, their impressions are worthy of assent; otherwise, they are not.

A student of Stoicism should also attend to their level of expertise in various subjects. If their impressions include advanced concepts, then they should consider whether they are in a position to judge in accordance with those concepts. Think of someone beginning to learn music who hears an A note. If their impression of the sound states *that's an A note*, then they should consider their level of expertise. If they have reason to doubt their abilities, they should withhold their assent. If not, they should assent.

A student of Stoicism should also investigate the phenomenology of their impressions that are formed in ideal or normal perceptual circumstances. They should notice the clarity and detail present in such impressions, since those impressions will be cognitive. Eventually, they will gain experience recognizing the distinctive marks of cognitive impressions that are lacking from other impressions that are similar, but not similar enough.

Thus, for the Stoics, it appears that one method for swimming to the surface and gaining scientific knowledge is regularly focusing one's awareness on oneself, one's experiences, one's circumstances, and one's own level of expertise in various subjects. Becoming an expert in these factors that produce impressions will lead to one assenting only to cognitive impressions. In turn, this will guard one's belief against challenges. Finally, this will give rise to strong assents and scientific knowledge—one aspect of being the virtuous and wise Stoic sage.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, I will adopt the translations of Long and Sedley 1987. In addition to my citations of primary sources, I will also provide references to the locations of these sources in this anthology. These references will be formatted in the following way: "LS 45A" refers to Long and Sedley 1987, Chapter 45, Text A; "LS 39A3–4" refers to Long and Sedley 1987, Chapter 39, Text A, Sections 3 to 4.
2 On the Stoics' claim that only bodies can be causes or affected by causes, see, e.g. Cicero, *Acad.* 1.39/LS 45A. On the Stoics' claim that the soul is corporeal, see, e.g. Nemesius, 78,7–79,2/LS 45C. For more on this topic, see Nawar's chapter in this volume, "The Stoic Theory of the Soul."
3 See Aetius, *Plac*. 4.21.1–4/LS 53H.
4 For an explanation of how this occurs, see DL 7.157/LS 53N.
5 On the nature of impressions, see DL 7.50/LS 39A3; Aetius, *Plac*. 4.12.1–5/LS 39B.
6 See e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 8.70/LS 33C; DL 7.51/LS 39A6.
7 On the faculty of assent, see Cicero, *Acad.* 1.40/LS 40B1; 2.37–38/LS 40O; 2.145/LS 41A; Plutarch, *Stoic. Rep.* 1056e–f/LS 41E.
8 On impulses, see, e.g., Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.86, 17–87,6/LS 53Q.
9 Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.112,2–4/LS 41G4.
10 See DL 7.54/LS 40A.
11 On preconceptions, see, e.g. Cicero, *Acad.* 2.30–31/LS 40N
12 On the Stoic definition of the cognitive impression, see, e.g. Annas 1990; Frede 1983; Frede 1999; Long and Sedley 1987; Perin 2005; Nawar 2014; Reed 2002; Sedley 2002; Shogry 2018; Striker 1990; Striker 1996.
13 See Aetius, *Plac*. 4.12.5/LS 39B6. Note, however, that Aetius seems to suggest that mental activities that are not caused by "impressors" and are merely caused by figments are not genuine impressions. However, Sextus Empiricus's discussion in *M* 7.247/LS 40E1 suggests that mental activities of this kind might be actual impressions.
14 See Sedley 2002: 137
15 See similar discussions in Shogry 2018.
16 This is the favored interpretation of Nawar 2014: 7.
17 See, e.g. DL 7.46/LS 40C3.
18 Note that, according to Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics distinguished expert impressions from those of non-experts (7.51/LS 39A7).
19 See, e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.410/LS 40H4. For more on this topic, see Aikin's chapter in this volume, "Skeptical Responses to Stoics and Epicureans on the Criterion."

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Further Reading

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Brouwer, R. (2014) *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Book-length treatment on Stoic wisdom, with discussions of knowledge and moral and epistemological progress.)

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Long, A. A. and Sedley, D. N. (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Helpful translations of relevant reports on Stoic epistemology, with commentary, in Volume 1, Chapters 39 to 42.)

Meinwald, C. (2005) "Ignorance and opinion in Stoic epistemology," *Phronesis* 50(3), 215–231. (A discussion of the relation between the states of ignorance, opinion, cognition, and scientific knowledge, in relation to wise and unwise people.)