

Review

Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy

By Myles Burnyeat

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Myles Burnyeat has been a central figure in the scholarship of ancient philosophy since the 1970s. *Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy* is a two volume collection of Burnyeat's papers and includes the majority of his work published before 1996. The papers have been organised thematically. Volume I is comprised of 'Logic and Dialectic' (seven papers) and 'Scepticism Ancient and Modern' (six papers); volume II of 'Knowledge' (eight papers) and 'Philosophy and the Good Life' (eight papers).

A major focus of 'Logic and Dialectic' is self-refutation. Two papers focus on the charge as levelled against Protagoras and his doctrine that man is the measure. Interpretations of this thesis have differed. On the infallibilist interpretation Protagoras's thesis is:

(PROT) if x believes that p , then it is true that p .

However, while (e.g.) 'it is true that nothing is true' or 'it is known that nothing is known' are self-contradictory, (PROT) requires a second assumption if one is to obtain a contradiction: (PROT) needs to be believed false by someone. Since (PROT) does not *by itself* entail its own contradiction, in what sense then is it *self-refuting*? In the following: that 'the view [...] advance[d] conflicts not with itself but with the way [one] advances it' (1:10).¹ This, as Burnyeat observes, is akin to pragmatic self-refutation (a proposition is pragmatically self-refuting when it is falsified by its mode of presentation, e.g. shouting 'I am not shouting'). However, the ancients extend the notion of self-refutation further: it includes not only the way in which a view is presented, but the way in which it would be advanced in a dialectical debate. This is why, for instance, the thesis that there are no reasons was deemed self-refuting: dialectical

¹ Numbers in parentheses are page references to the book indicating volume and page number.

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discourse requires one to rationally support one's assertions and one cannot both talk the talk and walk the walk in dialectically defending or rationally supporting said thesis. In this section, Burnyeat also examines Plato's response at *Theaetetus* 171a-c to the relativist interpretation of the Protagorean claim:

(PROT*) if x believes that p , then it is true for x that p .

The puzzle lies in determining how, from Protagoras's assumption of (PROT*) and that (PROT*) is believed false by its opponents, it follows that Protagoras must concede that (PROT*) is false for him or even false *simpliciter*. Burnyeat's solution is difficult to summarise briefly (and I don't think it yields a successful self-refutation) but turns upon Protagoras's position requiring that each person live in their own (Heraclitean) private world and truth be relativised to that world. In other papers in this section Burnyeat examines Antipater's view that 'nothing can be apprehended' does (or maybe should) not include itself with its scope, the ancient *sofistes* and its dialectical context, and offers two important papers on evidence and non-deductive inference. As regards this last, Burnyeat argues that for Aristotle an enthymeme is not, as usually thought, an incomplete deductive syllogism (missing either a premise or a conclusion), nor even a non-deductive syllogism, but rather simply a 'relaxed argument', and gives a fascinating account of how the popular misconstrual might have come about.

In 'Scepticism Ancient and Modern', Burnyeat examines ancient Pyrrhonism. The Pyrrhonist aims at *epochē* (the suspension of belief) and Burnyeat emphasises that the Pyrrhonist targets not merely knowledge or knowledge-claims, but belief in general. Ancient scepticism was not, Burnyeat indicates, *insulated* from ordinary life: the sceptic had to live his scepticism. Burnyeat here examines a controversial topic: the scope of the sceptic's *epochē*. The controversy arises in part because Sextus often writes that the Pyrrhonist suspends belief about everything, but sometimes seems to allow the sceptic certain beliefs so long as they are not of a certain forbidden kind (characterised on at least one occasion as being 'scientific' beliefs). Burnyeat argues that we should see the Pyrrhonist as suspending beliefs not only concerning the highfalutin claims made in the natural sciences, but with regard to any 'claims as to real existence' (1:210). Burnyeat then seems to broaden this characterisation by going on to say that 'every statement making a truth-claim falls within the scope of scientific investigation because [...] it will still use concepts which are the subject of theoretical speculation' (1:337). This might seem to ill fit those occasions where Sextus writes

that the Pyrrhonist may make (seemingly truth) claims about appearances; however, Burnyeat urges that while we might take claims regarding appearances (e.g. ‘it appears to me that *p*’) to be straightforwardly truth-evaluable, the ancients did not: “‘Truth’ in these contexts means truth as to real existence, something’s being true of an independent reality’ (1:263). Another central concern here is the motivation of the sceptic’s *epochē*: Pyrrhonism was as much an ethical stance as an epistemic one. What shall it profit a man to lose his beliefs? The answer is the tranquillity (*ataraxia*) which follows fortuitously upon achieving *epochē*. Why this occurs is not clear, but Burnyeat urges something like the following: while hunger may make the Pyrrhonist desire food, lacking beliefs as to whether food, hunger, and the like are good or bad, the sceptic’s lack of food is meant to trouble him less (and its provision also delights him less). Though Burnyeat does not put it quite like this, the sceptic emerges as something of an anti-agent, akin to the notion of a *wanton* that we find in contemporary discussions of responsibility. In this section we also find a study of the novelty of Descartes’ sceptical moves in the first *Meditation* (and why, *pace* Berkeley, we do not find either idealism or the hyperbolic doubt of the first *Meditation* among the Greeks), and an exploration of why many philosophers have been impressed by conflicting appearances: why the fact that *x* appears *F* to some but not to others should prompt the thought that *x* is not *really* (whatever this might mean) *F*, and thus inspire subjectivism, anti-realism, etc.

I turn now to the first section of the second volume: ‘Knowledge’. In one important paper we find Burnyeat examining the distinction drawn between true belief and *epistēmē* at *Theaetetus* 201a-c. Drawing attention to several seeming inconsistencies in a short section of the *Theaetetus*, Burnyeat argues that Plato conceived of *epistēmē* not as (e.g.) justified true belief, but rather as *understanding*. A second paper examines Aristotle’s conception of *epistēmē*. Here Burnyeat begins by a close reading of *Posterior Analytics* 71b9-15 where Aristotle claims that *epistēmē* requires an awareness of causes or explanations (*aitiai*) and ‘that it is not possible for this to be otherwise’. Rather than taking Aristotle to restrict the scope of *epistēmē* to necessary truths (as is traditional), Burnyeat proposes that, for Aristotle, ‘what gets explained [are] [...] *general* regularities and connections: lawlike regularities in the modern jargon, necessary connections in Aristotle’s [...] understanding is constituted by knowing the explanation of necessary connections in nature’ (2:123–4). As with Plato, Burnyeat is keen to emphasise Aristotle’s interest in *understanding* and to distance Aristotle from (what Burnyeat takes to be a

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modern) interest in justification (e.g. 2:124, 135). A third paper, on Augustine's *De Magistro*, defends a similar view with regard to Augustine's interest in *scientia*; Augustine's thesis that no man teaches another should be understood as 'no man can teach another to understand something' (2:178). In this section we also find two important papers tackling mathematical matters. The first addresses Theaetetus's contribution to the study of incommensurable proportions in geometry and the role this plays in the *Theaetetus*; the second examines why mathematics is often viewed by Plato as *the* science and its objects (numbers, shapes, etc.) are viewed as *the* metaphysical and explanatory grounding principles of everything else. We also find here a discussion of the use of examples in the Socratic search for definitions, what Socrates's account of himself as a barren midwife in the *Theaetetus* amounts to, and another important paper on the *Theaetetus*: 'Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving'. Here Burnyeat examines the distinction drawn at *Theaetetus* 184c between the eyes being that 'with' which we see (dative construction) and being that through (*dia*) which we see. The question turns on what it is that is doing the seeing and the unity of the perceiving subject; of the two constructions, the latter is to be preferred as it emphasises that it is not *S*'s eyes that see. While Plato gets this right, he goes wrong in supposing that it is *S*'s mind (rather than *S*) that sees. As Burnyeat puts it: 'in terms of the model of the wooden horse, is it not true that all Plato has done is replace the band of warriors by a single [inner] warrior?' (2:97).

The final section: 'Philosophy and the Good Life', contains papers on Socrates's conception of virtue, a study of moral education in Aristotle, an influential investigation of the relation of reason and passion in the *Phaedrus* (this is the one previously unpublished paper in the collection), a discussion of the opening words of Plato's dialogues, and several miscellanea: a review of a book on Heraclitus, a lecture on Socrates's impiety, a brief article concerning the Greeks on human rights, and an (amusing) attack on Leo Strauss.² While this fourth section is not without interest, it is slight in comparison with the first three.

² Ostensibly this too is a book review. Some highlights: 'When Strauss comes near an abstract argument [...] he passes by without stopping to examine its logic [...] There is much talk in Straussian writings about the nature of 'the philosopher' but no sign of any knowledge, from the inside, of what it is to be actively involved in philosophy [...] Exegesis is Strauss's substitute for argument.' (2: 294–5).

Certain topics have been subject to long-standing disagreement: for instance, the scope of the sceptic's *epochē*, the nature of his *ataraxia*, or how precisely the self-refutation at *Theaetetus* 171a-c might work. There are minor industries in the secondary literature dedicated to offering objections or challenges to Burnyeat on various points here and there. However, it is perhaps more relevant to note the objections one could raise regarding certain views of Burnyeat's which have been widely followed. For instance, one might question Burnyeat's thesis that the ancient conception of truth meant 'truth as to real existence, something's being true of an independent reality' (1:263) and his claim that subjective appearances (e.g. it appears to me that *p*) were not viewed as truth-evaluable. Similarly, while Burnyeat's emphasis on the ancient conception of *epistēmē* as understanding seems broadly right, the nature of understanding is left substantially under-determined. Perhaps especially worth questioning is the view (which has become near-orthodoxy) that the ancients were interested in understanding *at the expense of* justification (e.g. 2:113–14) insofar as one might wonder at the rightness or coherence of this position. What if, for instance, understanding requires justification: what if an explanans acts as a justifier? If so, then Burnyeat's attempt to distance ancient epistemology from twentieth-century concerns requires more artful qualifications than those we are sometimes offered (e.g. at 2:135–40).

However, what is apparent from reading this collection is the meticulous scholarship that went into the writing of these papers and how rewarding they are to read even thirty or forty years after they were published. Burnyeat's work shows that philosophical rigour need not preclude close textual reading or literary and historical sensitivity. One can appeal both to the texts of Thucydides and to the tools of Frege in attempting to understand the philosophers of the past. It is perhaps especially the use of literary and historical aspects to illuminate the philosophical that is a defining feature of much of Burnyeat's work and demonstrates a way in which the scholarship of the history of philosophy may avoid both anachronism and antiquarianism. Such an enterprise can serve as more than a *divertissement* and good history of philosophy can actually be enlightening not just about history, but about philosophy. Many of these papers have shaped the scholarship of ancient philosophy, but some of Burnyeat's work has also had significant resonance in contemporary discussions. One need only look to the revival of interest in Pyrrhonism, or else at the recent surge in interest among epistemologists in *understanding* and its value; one will often find Burnyeat's name somewhere in the footnotes of such discussions.

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Two brief complaints: first, several important papers (both published and unpublished) from the relevant period were not included in the collection.³ The influence of these papers is such that they deserve inclusion. Second, an introduction, noting how and whether Burnyeat saw his views as developing would have been welcome. These niggles aside, it should be observed that this is an excellent collection and exemplary as far as editions of collected papers go. While all but one of the papers have been previously published, the book provides a substantial service in presenting them together. This facilitates access (some of the papers are hard to find) and also offers a view of Burnyeat's work as a whole, allowing the reader to trace development and interconnections in several areas. The volumes are excellently produced and have the virtue of discretely indicating the original pagination and page divisions (a feature which greatly facilitates referencing and deserves wider adoption). For the specialist in ancient philosophy, these are papers that will be consulted again and again; for the non-specialist, these volumes offer an excellent overview of the work of an authoritative and distinguished scholar of ancient philosophy. Anyone with a serious interest in ancient philosophy will want to own this.

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³ For instance, 'Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? (A Draft)' and 'How Much Happens when Aristotle Sees Red and Hears Middle C? Remarks on De anima 2.7-8', both published in M. Nussbaum and A.O. Rorty (eds), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Ideally, influential and widely circulated unpublished papers, such as 'Carneades was no Probabilist' or some of Burnyeat's writings on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, might also have been included.