

1-1-1998

Review of *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* by J. L. Ackrill

Owen Goldin

Marquette University, owen.goldin@marquette.edu

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 98.4.01

J. L. Ackrill, *Essays on Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Pp. viii + 229. \$60.00. ISBN 0-19-823641-7.

Reviewed by Owen Goldin, Marquette University.

J. L. Ackrill ranks with Gregory Vlastos and G. E. L. Owen as one of the most important figures responsible for the upsurge of interest in ancient Greek philosophy among Anglo-American philosophers of the second half of this century. At its best, this tradition of the study of ancient philosophy has been marked by attention to the arguments actually employed by ancient philosophers, a concern for clarity and precision, and a respectful stance towards the ancients as serious fellow philosophers, studied neither as historical curiosities nor authoritative sages. It has sometimes been criticized for what have been perceived as inherent limitations: inattention to the philosophical literary features of the texts, and a presupposition that the ancient philosophers were primarily preoccupied with only those questions on the current Anglo-American philosophical agenda.¹ But recent decades have shown that the Anglo-American approach has the resources by which it can move beyond any such limitations, and have confirmed the richness and depth of the tradition in the study of ancient philosophy in which Ackrill, Vlastos, and Owen have played such an important role.

Akrill is the sole surviving member of this triumvirate. He has influenced generations of scholars in ancient philosophy in his teaching at Oxford and in his serving as editor of the Clarendon translations and commentaries of Aristotle (of which his translation, with notes, of the *Categories* and *On Interpretation* is an outstanding representative), as well as through the introductory *Aristotle the Philosopher* and a handful of highly influential papers, most of which date from 1955-1975. *Aristotle the Philosopher* is primarily a collection of short discussions of selected passages and themes which serve as intriguing invitations to closer study. It is mostly in Ackrill's papers that one sees the close philosophical analysis and careful exegesis that has become the model for so many working in ancient philosophy. The present volume collects fourteen of these papers. They are united not by theme but through having either Plato or Aristotle as their focus. More often than not Ackrill is not attempting to convince the reader of a particular interpretation or philosophical point, but is raising questions and indicating problems that had been hitherto neglected. He has been enormously successful in this regard. These seminal papers remain required reading for those working in the field and are almost invariably cited in contemporary discussions of the themes that they discuss.

The only new paper is a short preface in which Ackrill reflects on the half century during which the study of ancient philosophy has flourished in the English speaking world. He notes that the field has undergone a healthy broadening of areas of interest and an increase in the philosophical sophistication. Less welcome have been the

pressures leading to too many quickly produced papers, and a general weakening of basic philological skills among many of those studying ancient philosophical texts.

There are six essays on Plato. "Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*: Remarks on 73c-75c" discusses Plato's argument that concept acquisition is possible only because the imperfect particulars remind the one who perceives them of the Forms of which they are images. Plato assumes that if the perception of A leads to thinking of B, A reminds the percipient of B. Ackrill calls this into question, for while one can be reminded only of what one knows, the perception of A can call to mind the thought of something not previously known. Hence one cannot appeal to concept acquisition to show that the soul existed prior to the body. Here, and elsewhere in the argument, Plato implicitly imports the assumption of some of the very teachings at issue. "Language and Reality in Plato's *Cratylus*" presents a paraphrase and analysis of a dialogue whose focus is the relations holding among mind, language, and reality. Ackrill wisely holds back from the temptation to immediately subject the dialogue to the battery of conceptual distinctions familiar from twentieth century philosophy of language. Instead, Ackrill works through the issues in the dialogue's own terms. Only when puzzles arise within the context of the argument as developed by Plato himself, does Ackrill show where and how the contemporary distinctions come to play. Ackrill's strategy gives intrinsic philosophical value to the study of Plato, insofar as it allows us to see the value of contemporary innovations that might otherwise be taken for granted. The same general strategy is followed in "Plato on False Belief: *Theaetetus* 187-200." This paper carefully analyzes Plato's discussion of how cognitive error is possible. In his tracing of the arguments, Ackrill shows that unresolved puzzles could be solved by less reliance on overly simple models of knowledge, and by employing Frege's distinction between sense and reference.

"*SUMPLOKE EIDON*" remains a definitive rebuttal of Ross's and Cornford's view that at *Sophist* 259e4-6 Plato says that every logos involves a kind of mixing of Forms. Ackrill shows that Plato is rather saying that logos is made possible by certain relations of incompatibility and entailment, relations which are the subject of philosophical study. Whether Ackrill is wrong to de-emphasize the ontological implications of the passage remains a matter of dispute. "Plato and the Copula: *Sophist* 251-259" offers a definitive argument against Cornford's view that blending is a symmetrical relation that holds among pairs of Forms that enter into combination. Ackrill argues that within the *Sophist*, Plato brings out the distinction between various uses of the verb to be: the copula, identity, and existence. The research of Kahn and Owen² on the semantics of EI)=NAI in philosophical Greek is generally acknowledged as having refuted the view that Plato recognizes (or even employs) the "is" of existence. Here, as elsewhere, I would have welcomed a note from Ackrill indicating whether he still maintains the views held in his earlier papers, and, if so, how he thinks the prominent challenges to these views are to be addressed. "In Defence of Platonic Division" counters Ryle's dismissal of the method of division as a serious philosophical strategy. Ackrill shows how Plato gives division an important role, not as a means of generating conclusions, but as a device by which one can clarify the relations that hold among concepts.

There are eight essays concerning Aristotle. "Aristotle's Theory of Definition"

remains one of the best introductions to *Posterior Analytics* 2.8-10. Ackrill's careful and incisive essay goes to the heart of the exegetical and philosophical issues that are at stake in interpreting Aristotle's difficult account of the relations holding between the stages of scientific inquiry into phenomena, the explanations at which one arrives, and the definitions by which these explanations are expressed. "Change and Aristotle's Theological Argument" clarifies the structure of Aristotle's argument in *Physics* 8 for an unmoved mover. Ackrill explains how Aristotle takes the existence of a world of change as a given on which any inquiry into physics must rest. Aristotle argues for the existence of a deity as a precondition of such change. "Aristotle's Distinction between *Energeia* and *Kinesis*" closely examines the relevant texts in which the two kinds of actuality are distinguished. Ackrill points to what he takes to be a fundamental confusion. By Aristotle's test (does "x-es" entail "has x-ed"?) walking is an *energeia*, but walking to Reading is not. Likewise, by the same test enjoying is an *energeia*, but enjoying a symphony is not. But in each case, are we not talking about the same action, albeit differently described? "Aristotle's Definition of *Psuche*" points to a crucial difficulty in Aristotelian hylomorphism. Is the matter of a living thing the organized body, or a mass of undifferentiated stuffs? If it is the former, then the matter of a living body, which has the potentiality for the inherence of form, cannot exist prior to the form, and it is not clear how Aristotle can solve the problem of how the generation of a substance is possible. If it is the latter, then it is not clear why Aristotle defines soul as the form of a body so organized as to engage in life activities. Ackrill's essay has been an impetus for much recent research in Aristotelian metaphysics. Gill and Whiting have persuasively argued that Aristotle is clear on the distinction between two kinds of matter: matter, which exists prior to substantial generation, and functional matter, which is the proper substrate for the form of a living body and provides the preconditions for the actualization of the life-faculties.³

"Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*" deals with a central issue in the study of Aristotelian ethics: how do we reconcile Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* as a life of virtuous, practical activity with Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* as primarily found in theoretical thought? Ackrill clearly and persuasively argues for an inclusivist reading of Aristotle's ethical thought. When Aristotle tells us that good actions are for the sake of *eudaimonia*, he means that they serve as its constituents. Aristotle need not be read as positing one single activity that is the final end of human life, to which all other ends serve as mere means. In "Aristotle on 'Good' and the Categories" Ackrill argues that in NE 1.6 Aristotle does not account for the equivocity of "good" by appeal to the fact that the predicate "good" can belong to any of the ten categories. He is rather making a more general point: that there are many kinds of features that one would mention in explaining why "good" is predicated of a thing. Aristotle is indicating that there is a conceptual diversity in goodness. "Aristotle on Action" examines conceptual difficulties involved with the notion of voluntary action. Ackrill shows how Aristotle's account of what makes an action voluntary is in many cases inconclusive. Much seems to depend on how the action is described, and it is not clear which of the possible descriptions is to have priority. Ackrill points to a significant difficulty, but surely this is an example of the sort of imprecision that Aristotle takes to mark ethics in general (NE 1.3.1094b11-27). Such matters are not ultimately to be solved through logical analysis but by virtue of the well-trained eye

of the *phronimos*. "An Aristotelian Argument about Virtue" indicates defects in the argument of NE 3.5.1113b3-14, in which Aristotle argues that, because the exercises of the virtues are up to us, the virtues, too, are up to us. Ackrill notes that Aristotle has at his disposal better arguments to the effect that it is reasonable to hold people accountable for their character.

Although many of these papers are otherwise easily available, their collection in a single volume is to be welcomed. The book serves as a fitting testimonial to the career of one who has had a key role in shaping the study of ancient philosophy as it is pursued today.

NOTES

1. Ackrill himself has been criticized on just this point. Thus E. Halper, in "Ackrill, Aristotle, and Analytic Philosophy," *Ancient Philosophy* Vol. 2 No. 2 (1982), pp. 142-151, criticizes *Aristotle the Philosopher* for Ackrill's assumption that Aristotle is an ordinary language philosopher. "... Aristotle is not self-consciously engaged in linguistic or conceptual analysis... Rightly or wrongly, he thinks that he is making claims about the world" (148). But Ackrill nowhere claims that either he or Aristotle is interested in language for its own sake. Rather, he takes Aristotle to (correctly) believe that an investigation of how we normally talk about reality is a necessary prerequisite for resolving metaphysical issues which concern the world itself.
 2. C. Kahn, "The Greek Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being," *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966), pp. 245-65 and *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek* (Dordrecht, Neth., 1973); G. E. L. Owen, "Plato on Not-Being," in *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, NY, 1970, repr. South Bend, IN, 1978), pp. 223-67, repr. in G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science, and Dialectic*, ed. M. C. Nussbaum (Ithaca, NY, 1986), pp. 104-37.
 3. M. L. Gill, *Aristotle on Substance: The Paradox of Unity* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 126-138; J. Whiting, "Living Bodies," in M. C. Nussbaum and A. O. Rorty, edd., *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 75-91.
-