BOOKS RECEIVED

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTS*

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ACKRILL, J. L. *Aristotle the Philosopher*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. 160 pp. $7.95.—Ackrill has written an enthusiastic and provocative introduction to Aristotle’s philosophy of a type hitherto neglected (cf. Abraham Edel’s recent *Aristotle and His Philosophy*, [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1982]). The book is neither a comprehensive presentation of Aristotle’s thought nor a more limited sketch of its various parts through the perspective of some crucial Aristotelian insights. Its aim is to incite the reader to an independent reading of Aristotle by providing a philosophically stimulating guide to some of Aristotle’s more persistently interesting ideas and arguments. No attempt is made to cover all the ground of Aristotelian philosophy, but rather to discuss philosophical problems raised by Aristotle which Ackrill finds particularly piquant. Ackrill manages, nonetheless, to consider problems from most subdivisions of philosophical inquiry. The author denies that Aristotle’s writings constitute a set of doctrines, and the entire book stands for the claim that Aristotle can be argued with “as if he were a contemporary” (p. 2). Thus Ackrill frequently criticizes the Aristotelian positions he reports, or mentions alternative views. Aristotle’s antiquity is granted some advantage, however, for Ackrill finds Aristotle close enough to philosophy’s beginnings to tackle philosophical problems in a brilliant way without an overly-technical language or method.

The book takes the following course. An introductory chapter sets out Ackrill’s goals, summarizes Aristotle’s life and work, and discusses areas of philosophy where Aristotle and contemporary philosophers meet (formal logic, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, ethics, philosophical logic). Chapter two presents general features of Aristotle’s philosophical method using six particular philosophical problems for illustration (weakness of will, *eudaimonia*, the possibility of a body of infinite weight, memory, future events, and the possibility of a first or last change). This chapter displays excellent traits which mark the entire book. Ackrill gives long sections of Aristotle’s texts in fresh translation, interspersing helpful explanatory comments where necessary; his discussions of the texts abound with examples, allusions to modern scientific and philosophical developments, and other amplifying material; he strives to point out what Aristotle leaves unsaid and where he seems to fall short. The remaining chap-

* Books received are acknowledged in this section by a brief resume, report, or criticism. Such acknowledgement does not preclude a more detailed examination in a subsequent Critical Study. From time to time, technical books dealing with such fields as mathematics, physics, anthropology, and the social sciences will be reviewed in this section, if it is thought that they might be of special interest to philosophers.

This short notice cannot discuss the adequacy of Ackrill’s interpretations of Aristotle. The chapter headings and topic labels mentioned above, however, serve to indicate that Ackrill is approaching Aristotle with the categories of contemporary analytic philosophy (‘our ‘analytic philosophy,’” p. 113). Ackrill assumes that there are perennial philosophical problems, and that Aristotle’s discussions of them can be removed from their archaic settings and reformulated without loss—perhaps with historical loss, but not philosophical loss (p. 3)—in the terminology of analytic philosophy. For example, Aristotle’s Physics IV, 10-14, discussion of time is “pure philosophising without any dogma or archaism” (p. 130), while the Physics I-II discussion of the principles of change is explicated as conceptual analysis (“Aristotle here seeks the general structure of the very concept of change, he picks out the most elementary ideas involved in any talk of change,” p. 26) and the relation of soul and body is spelled out in terms of alternate descriptions of a single thing’s history (p. 76). Elements of Aristotle’s thought not amenable to such analytic reformulation tend to get ignored or de-emphasized. Aristotle’s claim of direct cognition of things with reflexive cognition of mind is never developed and Aristotle is presented as providing descriptive metaphysics unwittingly relative to ancient Greek linguistic or conceptual perspectives (pp. 26, 113). The distinction between active and passive mind never gets mentioned.

The ways in which Ackrill attempts to display Aristotle’s philosophical relevance are various and stimulating. He points out ideas of Aristotle which are still in use. He distinguishes methodic strategies and argument forms which transcend their archaic employment in the Aristotelian texts. He emphasizes the difference between science and philosophy and carefully argues that Aristotle’s faulty scientific views are irrelevant philosophically. For instance, Aristotle’s preference for the heart as the center of consciousness is shown to be inconsequential to his philosophical claims (p. 57). In all of this
the perspectives of contemporary analytic philosophy remain the norm for philosophical relevance as well as the mode of explication and the basis for criticism. The result is always interesting, but a certain asymmetry intrudes. Ackrill explains and relishes the extent to which Aristotle agrees with us, and he argues against Aristotle frequently, but he is rarely specific about how we might enable Aristotle's texts to argue against us. Aristotle is philosophically important to the extent that he fits on a map whose contours are determined by current interests in analytic philosophy. Presently those contours are fairly broad. For instance, Ackrill points out that with the demise of logical positivism Aristotle's views on essence, real definition, and natural kinds are "once more respectable and fascinating" (p. 99). Ackrill's book is a fine guide to ideas of Aristotle which are respected today from a determinate perspective, and as such it is a joy to read. But it is less successful as a guide to the respectable ideas of Aristotle which though perhaps unfashionable might measure our philosophical inquiry. This would seem to be the inevitable outcome of consigning the understanding of Aristotle on his own terms to mere historical scholarship. Ackrill contends rightly that Aristotle should be argued with, but it is not clear from this book how to keep the argument from being slightly one-sided.—Kurt Pritzl, The Catholic University of America.

ANTON, J., editor. Science and the Sciences in Plato. New York: Caravan Books, 1980. xvi + 127 pp. n.p.—Almost everyone believes that the sciences have progressed tremendously since antiquity. It thus seems that only devout classicists would bother with the study of ancient science, not to mention with the study of ancient science as transfigured by characters in a Platonic dialogue. However, this transfiguration already mitigates the charge of irrelevance. For what may be true of empirical science is not necessarily true of the philosophy of science. Many of the same problems which preoccupy contemporary philosophers of science also preoccupied the ancients. Does science have an "a priori" character, and if so, how is the a priori connected with the empirical? Does science reveal "essential truths" buried in the empirical, or must it always operate under the constraints of imperfect sense perception, so remaining in the realm of the "phenomenal"? There is no reason to assume that Plato's contributions to our understanding of such difficult questions are out of date. Hence the essays comprising the present volume should be of interest not only to Plato scholars but, ultimately, to philosophers of science as well.

As Anton notes in the Introduction, Plato's position on the meaning of "science" has not always been praised, due to its (apparently) extreme anti-empirical character. The four papers in this volume—three of which center on the remarks about "astronomy" in Rep. VII—demonstrate, by means of their diverging interpretations alone, how controversial is the task of distinguishing between apparent and