



JOHN ACKRILL

John Lloyd Ackrill

1921–2007

JOHN ACKRILL (in professional contexts he insisted on ‘J. L. Ackrill’) had a powerful and far-reaching—it is tempting even to say permanent—influence on the way ancient philosophy is done in the English-speaking world and beyond. Ancient philosophers now take it for granted that the careful and sensitive exegesis of philosophical texts must go hand in hand with rigorous and sophisticated philosophical analysis. This was not always so: that it is now is very largely due to the work and example of three philosophers who led the way in the 1950s and early 1960s—Ackrill, Gwil Owen, and Gregory Vlastos (a trio of otherwise more dissimilar scholars it is perhaps hard to imagine). The contrast between their work and that of leading ancient philosophers even of the immediately preceding generation is striking. This is well illustrated in Ackrill’s first article, ‘ΣΥΜΠΛΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ’.¹ The article is devoted to the meaning of Plato’s claim at *Sophist* 259e that ‘it is because of the interweaving of Forms with one another that we come to have discourse’.² Ackrill confronts what would have been at the time the authoritative interpretation, that of W. D. Ross, that Plato means that every (declarative) sentence or statement involves a reference of some sort to at least two Forms. What is telling is how Ross and Ackrill react to the fact that the declarative sentences Plato uses as examples a little later in the dialogue do not involve any such reference. While Ross says that these sentences ‘do not illustrate

¹ *Symplokē eidōn* is a phrase in Plato’s *Sophist*, meaning ‘the interweaving of Forms’. The article was published in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London*, No. 2 (1955), 31–5. Citations of this and of Ackrill’s other articles are to the reprints in J. L. Ackrill, *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1997; rev. edn., 2001).

² Ackrill’s translation (*Essays*, p. 72).

Plato's thesis', and that the thesis (for that reason) is 'an overstatement',³ Ackrill urges that the examples straightforwardly *refute* Plato's thesis (so understood), and the thesis is for that reason not merely overstated, but simply false.⁴ There is a stark choice not seen, or ignored, by Ross: grasp the nettle and say that Plato's thesis is not only false but 'glaringly' so in the light of his own examples, or look for another interpretation of the thesis. In this case Ackrill finds another interpretation which is both plausible and compatible with the later examples; but the crucial point is not so much the correctness or otherwise of his interpretation as the lively demonstration of the fact that Ross approaches the text with something close to kid gloves—not for lack of philosophical acuity (Ross was a distinguished and influential moral philosopher), but through either a feeling of deference to Plato or a sense that philosophies of the past were not to be brought to the bar of contemporary standards of rigour. For Ackrill, on the other hand, the gloves are very definitely off. As Myles Burnyeat puts it in a different context, 'practising the history of philosophy as well as philosophy is not the same as practising the history of philosophy philosophically'.⁵ Note that in this particular case Ackrill's approach leads to new interpretative possibilities, and he is plainly keen that it do so;⁶ but the charity he exercises is the sensible charity of interpretation, and he does not try to suppose that everything the author in question said must be correct—indeed much of Ackrill's writing is devoted to exposing difficulties and problems which Plato and Aristotle face. The gloves-off approach can lead to a more just and illuminating critical assessment of the text as well as to fruitful new interpretations.

The commitment to a rigorous and sophisticated philosophical approach to ancient philosophical texts was revolutionary. It was to some degree inspired by the work of Gilbert Ryle, a leading figure in Oxford philosophy in the post-war period.⁷ Ackrill himself traced the origins of this shift—at least on this side of the Atlantic—back more broadly to the seamlessness of the Oxford philosophical community in the 1950s, in

³ W. D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 116 and 115.

⁴ 'ΣΥΜΠΛΑΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ', pp. 73–4.

⁵ Introduction to Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy. Edited and with an Introduction by Myles Burnyeat* (Princeton and Oxford, 2006), p. xiii.

⁶ Compare his remark about the interpretation of another phrase in the section of the *Sophist* under examination, *legoien ouden* ('they would say nothing'): 'taking ["to say nothing"] to mean "to speak falsely" we find Plato's argument weak, obscure, or pointless. It is surrounded by arguments which are cogent, clear, and highly relevant. This is a good reason to suspect that interpretation' (p. 76).

⁷ Cf. Burnyeat, *The Sense of the Past*, p. xiv.

which there was ‘a strong feeling of shared activity—and of shared excitement at new ideas in the air’.⁸ Philosophers such as Ackrill, Elizabeth Anscombe, J. L. Austin, Paul Grice, Owen, David Pears, Ryle, and Bernard Williams were classically as well as philosophically trained, and it came to seem natural both to use new philosophical techniques and distinctions in interpreting Plato and Aristotle and to invoke their ideas in the discussion and development of the philosophical problems of the day. This might sound like a recipe for disastrous anachronism or a pillaging approach to ancient philosophy (grab what you think might be useful; it does not matter much if you mangle it in the process); but it was coupled with meticulous scholarship and a passionate interest in understanding and exploring the texts—Ackrill would have called his collected essays ‘Exegesis and Argument’ if a Festschrift for Vlastos had not already used the title.⁹ The charge of anachronism is indeed sometimes levelled at the ancient philosophy of this period, usually in relation to the rise of so-called ‘ordinary language philosophy’: the complaint is that Aristotle’s interest in appealing to ‘what we say’ (an interest not shared by his teacher Plato) was overplayed in being taken to mean that his method was very close to that of philosophers such as Austin and Ryle. This complaint is largely misplaced, as the approach of Ackrill and others was not restricted to, or even principally focused on, the ordinary language perspective. It is certainly true that the robust philosophical engagement with ancient texts which they championed involved frequent appeals to contemporary machinery:¹⁰ in explaining his new interpretation of Plato’s ‘interweaving of Forms’ thesis Ackrill quotes Peter Strawson’s recently published *Introduction to Logical Theory* first, and only then cites Aristotle in support of the point.¹¹ But if Ackrill is quick to characterise the theory underlying the *Sophist* as very like the sort of conceptual analysis thought to be the business of philosophy in his own day, he also hastens to say that this characterisation is indeed quick and needs much qualification and justification.¹²

⁸ Ackrill, *Essays*, Introduction, p. 2.

⁹ Ackrill, *Essays*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Cf. some of Ackrill’s methodological remarks in *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford, 1981, pp. 2–3): ‘[W]e may desire not only to gain some understanding of Aristotle, but also to understand better some of the philosophical problems he confronts. In this case we are entitled to engage him in argument as if he were a contemporary. . . . If one of his sentences or arguments provokes us to questioning of our own or to counter-argument, we need not feel guilty because we are approaching an ancient philosopher with modern weapons.’

¹¹ ‘ΣΥΜΠΛΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ’, p. 77; P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London, 1952).

¹² ‘ΣΥΜΠΛΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ’, p. 78.

Ackrill was born in Reading on 30 December 1921, the youngest child of Frederick William Ackrill, a primary school headmaster, and Jessie Anne Ackrill. He was educated at Reading School and at St John's College, Oxford, going up to St John's as a Sir Thomas White scholar to read *Literae Humaniores* in Trinity Term 1940, thus overlapping briefly with Peter Strawson, who took PPE Finals that term. At St John's Ackrill shared chilly rooms above the President's lodgings with John Wilton, later to be knighted for his services as a diplomat in the Middle East, and formed a wide circle of acquaintances at the college, including Kingsley Amis, Leader Hawkins and John Wain. War service intervened, and after taking a First in a shortened Classical Moderations course, he served with distinction for four years in the Royal Berks Regiment and on the General Staff. Characteristically, the memories of this period which he dwelt on reveal both his modesty and his quiet delight in the incongruous—in this case the unlikely role he found himself given of motorcycle dispatch rider. The tale of a wild ride across open country in France with dispatches for Montgomery—narrowly missed by a shell which permanently damaged his hearing—took second place to that of the afternoon outside his East Anglian training camp on which, taking a steep downhill lane too fast and ignoring a 'Slow' sign, he and his machine fell off a plank bridge at the bottom and had to be fished out of the stream by local villagers.

Ackrill was given early release to return to Oxford in September 1945; his philosophy tutors at St John's were Paul Grice and John Mabbott. After taking a First in Greats (Philosophy and Ancient History) in 1948, he declined a Civil Service appointment in favour of an Assistant Lecturership in Logic at the University of Glasgow, and in the following year accepted the newly established University Lecturership in Ancient Philosophy at Oxford. The terms of this post included an initial two-year study period to work, *inter alia*, on subjects the Lecturer was required to teach, such as the Presocratic philosophers. Permitted to conduct this study abroad, Ackrill went first to Berne, where he did not enjoy the academic environment,¹³ and then to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he did—working with Harold Cherniss, who was to become a close friend. Subsequent visits to Princeton in 1955 and 1964 cemented a close friendship with Vlastos as well. Back in Oxford, he resigned his post to accept a Tutorial Fellowship at Brasenose College in 1953, in succession to Geoffrey Warnock; Owen was appointed to the University Lecturership in Ancient Philosophy which Ackrill thus

¹³ Cf. Ackrill, *Essays*, Introduction, p. 5.

vacated. In August of that year Ackrill married Margaret Walker Kerr. She was born in Perth in Western Australia in 1928 to Cyril Kerr, a chartered surveyor and estate agent, and Nancy Walker Kerr. She took a Double First in History and English at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 1948, and then worked as a research assistant at Armidale College in New South Wales. In 1949 she won a Hackett Scholarship from UWA, and came to Lady Margaret Hall to read for a B.Litt. in Modern History, which she was awarded in 1951. She first met Ackrill in Berne while travelling in Europe; they were married in Perth two years later. Margaret has had a distinguished academic career in business and economic history. They have three daughters, Judith, Marion and Alice, a son, Robert, and two grandchildren.

Ackrill remained at Brasenose for the rest of his academic career. A Tutorial Fellow from 1953 until 1966, his undergraduate pupils included David Wiggins and Michael Woods. In a piece for the Brasenose magazine to mark Ackrill's retirement, Woods wrote 'John's tutorials seem to me, in retrospect, to have been a paradigm of the best sort of Oxford, one-to-one, tutorial. In an unflamboyant, exacting, but in no way intimidating manner you learned how to philosophise . . . There is no question of any official "line" or doctrine. Whatever position you adopted, John would show that there were problems with it, and your perspective slowly changed as he quietly clarified, reformulated and developed your own rather inchoate thoughts.'¹⁴ Woods himself was elected to a Tutorial Fellowship at Brasenose in 1959: Ackrill insisted that no one else would do. Woods combined serious engagement with ancient philosophy with equally distinguished work in the philosophy of language; just as Oxford was one of the most exciting places to be for ancient philosophy in the nineteen-sixties, seventies and eighties, the team of Ackrill and Woods made Brasenose one of the most exciting places to be in Oxford. The two remained colleagues and close friends until Woods's early death in 1993.

To this period belongs Ackrill's first book, *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*,¹⁵ to which I shall return below. Ackrill also published a pair of seminal articles on Plato's *Sophist*, 'ΣΥΜΠΛΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ' and 'Plato and the Copula: *Sophist* 251–259',¹⁶ and the first of a number of highly influential papers on Aristotle, 'Aristotle's Distinction between

¹⁴ *The Brazen Nose*, 24 (1989), p. 10.

¹⁵ Oxford, 1963.

¹⁶ For the first of these papers see above, n. 1; the second appeared in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), 1–6.

Energeia and *Kinēsis*'.¹⁷ One of the main concerns of the *Sophist* is a set of puzzles about being and not-being (*on* and *mē on*), arising from the contention of the Presocratic philosopher Parmenides that we cannot think or talk coherently about 'what is not'; these puzzles are central to the dialogue since the interlocutors are inclined to take falsehood to be the trademark of the sophist and they see a close connection between what is false and what is not. Just what the puzzles are, and how Plato deals with them, are highly controversial. In 'Plato and the Copula' Ackrill argues that Plato's key move is to distinguish three different senses of the verb 'is' (*einai*)—an existential sense (to say that the stone-carvers of Rapa Nui are no more is to say that they no longer exist), a sense in which 'is' signifies identity ('Rapa Nui is Easter Island') and a predicative sense, in which 'is' functions as the copula ('Rapa Nui is far away'). Ackrill's principal argument for holding that Plato drew the latter distinction is the claim (highly significant in itself) that the *Sophist* carefully distinguishes predicative statements from identity claims. His conclusions have been hotly debated over the subsequent four decades, and much work has been done on whether the idea of distinct 'senses' of *einai* is the right way to explain how the verb functions in existential, predicative and identity statements.¹⁸ In the Festschrift for Ackrill, Lesley Brown wrote 'These articles combine boldness of argument with exceptional clarity and economy of expression'; and it is still true now, as she wrote then, that 'the articles remain essential reading for all students of the dialogue'.¹⁹

Of 'Aristotle's Distinction between *Energeia* and *Kinēsis*', Ackrill says, 'This essay is primarily aporetic and destructive. Some of the relevant passages are examined, and some difficulties are raised. The aim is to stimulate, not to close, discussion of the problems.'²⁰ This approach is

¹⁷ In Renford Bambrough (ed.), *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London and Henley, 1965).

¹⁸ See especially, but inter alia, G. E. L. Owen, 'Plato on not being' in Gregory Vlastos (ed.), *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays, Vol. I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Garden City, NY, 1971; reprinted in Owen, *Logic, Science, and Dialectic: Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (London, 1986)); Charles H. Kahn, *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek (Foundations of Language, Supplementary Series 16)* (Dordrecht and Boston, 1973); David Bostock, 'Plato on "is not"' (*Sophist*, 254–9), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2 (1984), 89–119; Lesley Brown, 'Being in the *Sophist*: a syntactical enquiry', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 4: *A Festschrift for J. L. Ackrill*, ed. Michael Woods (Oxford, 1986), 49–70; Michael Frede, 'Plato's *Sophist* on false statements', in Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992); Jan Szaif, *Platons Begriff der Wahrheit* (Freiburg and Munich, 1996; second edn., 1998); Job van Eck, 'Plato's logical insights: on *Sophist* 254d–257a', *Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2000), 53–79.

¹⁹ Brown, 'Being in the *Sophist*', p. 49.

²⁰ Ackrill, 'Aristotle's distinction', p. 142.

characteristic of much of Ackrill's work on Aristotle. His focus here is on a passage in *Metaphysics* Θ.6 in which, as Ackrill understands the passage, Aristotle draws a distinction between two types of things one does: *energeiai* (activities) such as seeing and hearing, which Aristotle characterises as 'complete at any time', and *kinēseis* (motions or changes or processes) such as building a house, which are only complete when a certain end (in this case: the house) is reached.²¹ Aristotle proposes a 'test' for this: if one can at any time while *X* is doing something say that *X* has done it, it is an *energeia*. Thus while someone is seeing London Bridge she can be said to have seen it; but this is not true of her building a house. A key application of this distinction, as Ackrill sees it, is in Aristotle's account of pleasure and enjoyment in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle associates the idea that pleasure is a *kinēsis* with Plato, and argues against him on the basis that 'pleasure is complete at any moment'. Ackrill argues that Aristotle's distinction is in trouble: a central example of a *kinēsis*, walking, appears to pass the 'test' for being an *energeia*, since at any time at which *X* is walking it is also true that she has walked. Its status as a *kinēsis* can be maintained by understanding walking as 'walking from *A* to *B*'—but if that move is made then other things which Aristotle insists are *energeiai* may lose their claim to that status: hearing may be hearing a symphony, enjoying may be enjoying a poem. This 'destructive' piece has been enormously fruitful in sparking debates about Aristotle's ontology of action and process, about his philosophy of mind and theology, and even more widely about the nature of Aristotle's appeal to what one can truly say and its relation to analytic philosophy; Burnyeat's recent article describes it as 'seminal' and 'pioneering'.²²

In 1966, despite initial reluctance to take the post (prompting Owen to offer some brisk advice), Ackrill became the first holder of Oxford's Professorship of the History of Philosophy.²³ He caused a small stir by invoking a university rule which enabled him as the first holder of the chair to remain at Brasenose rather than move to Keble, the college associated with the new professorship, evoking in the Warden of Keble, Austin Farrer, some feeling of having been wrong-footed.²⁴ In this period

²¹ Θ. 6 1048b18–35. On the curious provenance of this passage, see now Burnyeat, 'Kinēsis vs Energeia: a much-read passage in (but not of) Aristotle's *Metaphysics*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 34 (Summer 2008), 219–92.

²² Burnyeat, 'Kinēsis vs Energeia', p. 219, n. 1 and p. 246.

²³ This post has now been renamed the Professorship of Ancient Philosophy.

²⁴ Farrer wrote to the Principal of Brasenose: 'If the College [Keble] were not sorry to lose the prospect of Mr Ackrill's membership, it would not have the occasion, which it has, to

he was the leading light of the Oxford Aristotelian Society. This distinguished reading group, almost invariably devoted to the close reading of an Aristotelian text, had been founded by Ingram Bywater in 1883; after its cessation with Bywater's retirement from the Regius Professorship of Greek in 1908 it was revived in the 1920s and 1930s by Harold Joachim and J. A. Smith, during which time it served as the nursery for *The Oxford Translation of Aristotle* edited by Ross.²⁵ Revived again after the war, the Society continued to meet until the 1980s, latterly in Brasenose in a room across the quad from Ackrill's own. Of its meetings Ackrill wrote, 'Proceedings were slow and gentle. The text was read sentence by sentence, textual difficulties were teased out, silences for thought often occurred.'²⁶

Although he had no enthusiasm for administration, Ackrill served as Senior Treasurer of the Brasenose Junior Common Room, and subsequently as the college's Vice-Principal (1978–80). He was made a Fellow of the Academy in 1981, and continued as Professor of the History of Philosophy until his retirement in 1989. He was elected to an Honorary Fellowship at St John's in 1996. As a professor, Ackrill continued to give tutorials to undergraduates, and he helped bring about a famous change in the regulations so that the professor concerned, rather than the University, received the colleges' payments for tutorials. The main focus of his teaching, however, was graduates, and in his regular graduate classes on Plato and Aristotle (with the occasional series devoted to Plotinus), as a doctoral supervisor, and as advisor to the many visiting students from overseas who flocked to Oxford to work with him, he oversaw more than a generation of them; a substantial number of his students went on to become distinguished ancient philosophers. Woods's description of Ackrill's tutorial style (quoted above) characterises his work with graduates equally well. He read students' work with meticulous care; in discussion his questions were highly Socratic—an apparently minor or irrelevant question led gradually and inexorably to a point of major concern. He took enormous pains to help and encourage the student to improve and clarify his or her own work, and was never concerned to promote (or even to reveal) his own views on the topic in question. He and

congratulate you on retaining him where he is.' I am grateful to Richard Cooper and Harry Judge for this quotation.

²⁵ *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English under the Editorship of W. D. Ross*, 12 vols. (Oxford, 1912–54).

²⁶ Memoir of Gwilym Ellis Lane Owen, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 70 (1984), 481–99, at p. 484. With characteristic understatement Ackrill went on to observe, 'This was not really Owen's cup of tea.'

Margaret fostered the graduate community further by memorable lunches and teas at their home in Charlbury Road.

Of the works Ackrill published in this period I shall mention just three: his two most influential articles on Aristotle and his 1981 book *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford).²⁷ In 1974 Ackrill delivered the Academy's Dawes Hicks Lecture on Philosophy, 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*'.²⁸ The central concern of Aristotle's ethics is the question 'what is the best life for humans to live?', or as he puts it 'what is *eudaimonia*?'. In *Nicomachean Ethics* X Aristotle appears to many commentators, including Ackrill, to claim that the best life is one devoted as far as possible to a single activity, the intellectual contemplation (*theōria*) of eternal truths. So when in Book I Aristotle claims that 'the good for man turns out to be the activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete',²⁹ some commentators suppose that he is anticipating this view. The main contention of Ackrill's lecture was that this is not so—that here, inconsistently with Book X, Aristotle is claiming that the best life is one made up of a plurality of activities, each valued for itself, expressing the various virtues of intellect and character of which human nature is capable. This conclusion was not new, but Ackrill put it on a new footing—and as a consequence changed the whole debate about Aristotelian *eudaimonia*—in at least two ways. The first was to provide an elegant solution to a problem felt by many before him. Earlier in Book I Aristotle locates *eudaimonia* at the top of a hierarchy of ends, and says that other ends, even if sought for their own sake, are also sought for the sake of *eudaimonia*, but not vice versa. If we construe 'for the sake of' as introducing an instrumental or means–end relationship, *eudaimonia* will emerge as something quite separate from our other ends—some distinct psychological condition or some dominant activity such as *theōria*. Ackrill's insight was that 'for the sake of' in this context also covers 'a relation like that of part to whole, the relation an activity or end may have to an activity or end that includes or embraces

²⁷ A bibliography of Ackrill's publications can be found in the *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* Festschrift (see above, n. 18), to which should be added *A New Aristotle Reader* (Oxford, 1987) and his *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* and several of the essays it contains, which were published after the Festschrift. Terence Irwin has made the point that Ackrill's reviews (over thirty are listed in the Festschrift) 'are essential reading for anyone who wants to grasp the range and depth of his interests and his knowledge' (obituary for Ackrill, *The Independent*, 21 Dec. 2007).

²⁸ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), 339–59.

²⁹ 1098a16–18, Ackrill's translation ('Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*', p. 193).

it'.³⁰ His illustrations of the point are characteristically straightforward and low-key: 'one may think of the relation of putting to playing golf or of playing golf to having a good holiday. . . . It will be "because" you wanted to play golf that you are putting, and "for the sake of" a good holiday that you are playing golf; but this is because putting and playing golf are *constituents of* or *ingredients in* golfing and having a good holiday respectively, not because they are necessary preliminaries.'³¹ Second, his careful analysis of the crucial texts delineated the issues with a new clarity and rigour: every subsequent discussion of them starts with Ackrill.

'Aristotle's Definitions of *Psuchē*', published in 1973,³² has been at least as influential. In the *De Anima* Aristotle considers what it is for something to be alive—in Greek, to be *empsuchon*, or equivalently, to have a soul (*psuchē*). Although he thinks a general definition cannot be given, he does offer a general characterisation of the soul as the 'form' of the body.³³ Aristotle's *hylomorphism*—the idea that the relation of the psychological³⁴ to the physical is to be understood in terms of *form* and *matter*—is one of his most famous views. Aristotle's use of matter and form pervades both his natural philosophy and his metaphysics: it is no surprise that they turn up here too. Yet Ackrill raises—in what he describes as 'a simple, or even simpleminded, way'³⁵—a profound difficulty for their application to the account of living organisms. His main contention is that matter and form can only begin to bear the heavy explanatory load which Aristotle expects of them in cases in which each can be picked out independently of its involvement with the other. Thus it may be illuminating to treat a bronze sphere as a composite of the bronze (the matter) and sphericity (the form), and to see building a house as the imposition of a certain functionally defined structure upon bricks, timber, etc. In the case of living organisms, however, Ackrill argues that one cannot identify the matter in question—whether the organic parts of an animal, or its flesh and blood—independently of its possessing the form (i.e. independently of being parts of a living organism). Moreover, he argues, Aristotle himself is committed to just this view, since he takes

³⁰ 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*', p. 183.

³¹ 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*', pp. 183–4.

³² *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 73 (1972/73), 119–33.

³³ *De Anima*, II. 1 412a19–21.

³⁴ Though as I have said, Aristotle is concerned with not only with the mental, but with being alive generally.

³⁵ 'Aristotle's definitions of *Psuchē*', p. 163.

the parts of an organism to be defined functionally, in such a way that the hand of a corpse is no more of a hand in the strict sense than the hand of a statue is. The account of living beings as composites of matter and form threatens to collapse. The brief and understated exploration, at the end of the essay, of what he calls ‘the root of the difficulty’,³⁶ reveals the depth—and breadth—of the problem Aristotle faces: much recent work, not only on *De Anima* but on matter and form in Aristotle’s metaphysics more generally, takes its starting point from Ackrill’s supposedly ‘simpleminded’ discussion.

In the Middle Ages Aristotle was often called simply ‘the Philosopher’, and although his title ‘*Aristotle the Philosopher*’ alludes to this, Ackrill emphatically distances himself in his book from the conception of Aristotle as ‘the master of those who know’:³⁷ ‘What really characterises Aristotle as a philosopher is not the number and weight of his conclusions (his “doctrines”), but the number and power and subtlety of his arguments and ideas and analyses.’³⁸ Ackrill then subjects this point—that it is Aristotle’s arguments which matter—to an iteration. Just as we should not approach Aristotelian texts primarily with the idea of learning Aristotle’s doctrines, we should not approach them primarily with the idea of learning his arguments: ‘It seems to me both enjoyable and rewarding to engage in philosophical argument *with* Aristotle. Just as a tyro flautist enjoys the technique and performance of a master, so we enjoy the refinement, conciseness and suggestiveness of Aristotle’s arguments—and we enjoy them the more, the more we engage ourselves in them.’³⁹ Despite this, Ackrill thinks that there is a difference between ‘gain[ing] some understanding of Aristotle’—a purely historical matter, in his view—and the project he wishes to introduce to his readers: ‘understand[ing] better some of the philosophical problems he confronts’. Only the latter, he thinks, entitles us to use contemporary thoughts and concepts. The book certainly lives up to its methodology: the ten chapters range over a great deal of Aristotle’s work—change, explanation, logic, metaphysics, and so on—but always proceed by probing, challenging and questioning rather than by expounding or summarising: the result is an unsurpassed introduction to being engaged in argument with Aristotle.

Ackrill’s approach to writing, like his personality, perhaps belies his enormous influence on ancient philosophy and its practitioners. It is well

³⁶ ‘Aristotle’s definitions of *Psuchē*’, p. 171.

³⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, 4. 131.

³⁸ *Aristotle the Philosopher*, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

captured by two remarks: the first is from a review of Ackrill's first book: 'Mr Ackrill never raises his voice';⁴⁰ the second is by Ackrill himself, on the subject of transatlantic air-travel: 'there can be dangers in too much rushing around'.⁴¹ In his prose, as in his conversation, he was measured and quite unconcerned with self; he combined quiet understatement with a passion for clarity and a razor-sharp precision. (I recall his asking me once who I thought would succeed him as Professor of the History of Philosophy; to my unguarded reply, 'I'm not sure—perhaps someone like *N*', he immediately responded 'and apart from *N* who *is* like *N*?'.) A Brasenose colleague aptly spoke of him as having 'a temperament that was scrupulously rigorous and discriminating, in the appraisal of people and ideas as of texts', but added, 'just beneath that crisp surface lay a deep seam of kindness spiced with sharp and ironic humour'. He was not one either for the grand gesture or the sweeping statement, and had a deep distrust of any attempt to be *definitive*. At its most extreme this took the form of the view he sometimes expressed (if with some irony, not altogether tongue in cheek) that the scholarly literature on ancient texts positively ought to avoid developing answers and solutions, since what would then be left for the next generation to do? Instead philosophers should work to enable the next generation to see the problems vividly so that they could come up with answers for themselves. This was slightly reminiscent of Aristotle's belief—not unparalleled in the ancient world—that civilisation is periodically destroyed by earthquakes and floods, and that the truths of science and philosophy are lost and rediscovered over and over again; while not, of course, subscribing to this belief, Ackrill did hold that studying ancient philosophy was not so much a matter of the steady accumulation of truth as the constant rediscovery of problems and questions. Of course all philosophers are devoted to questions *and* answers, so Ackrill's passionate devotion to the former was a matter of degree; but it verged on a difference in kind from the approach of some others, including Owen and Vlastos. Some of his papers, such as those on Plato's *Sophist* and on Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, do offer a robust defence of a particular interpretation of the text and of the wider strategies of the work; but even in these cases Ackrill's approach was by way of close examination of particular texts and problems. As a reviewer put it, '[Ackrill] is an expert at the precise incision, which is far from saying that he only does minor

⁴⁰ Renford Bambrough, review of *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*. *Translated with Notes*, in *Mind*, 76 (1967), 141–2, at p. 141.

⁴¹ Ackrill, *Essays*, Introduction, p. 9.

surgery.⁴² All these qualities were reflections of his character—modest, kind, unfailingly courteous, his intense seriousness lightened by good humour and a quiet wit. His love for his family, and his quiet pride in their achievements, also shone through: conversations begun with Aristotle or Faculty matters always turned at some stage to them.

I have left until last what is perhaps the most important aspect of Ackrill's enduring influence, his editorship of the Clarendon Aristotle Series. The series was founded by J. L. Austin, who like Ryle, Owen and Ackrill sought to encourage especially good graduate students to work in ancient philosophy. He believed that those who had not studied Greek would benefit from new translations of key texts which aimed at a high degree of faithfulness to the original, and which were accompanied by a philosophical commentary; he also thought that works of this kind would help to disseminate Aristotelian ideas and arguments more widely among professional philosophers. Austin died in 1960 before any volumes were published, and Ackrill took over the editorship, a post he held for the next four decades. The first volume was by Richard Robinson, on *Politics* III and IV;⁴³ the second, published in 1963, was Ackrill's own on the *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*,⁴⁴ two early works concerned with foundational issues in Aristotle's philosophy of language and metaphysics. His translation set a standard for faithfulness and elegance which few others have met; the brief commentary is illuminating and incisive—in characteristic fashion his principal aim is to help readers to think about these texts for themselves rather than to insist on particular interpretations. It has had, and continues to have, a profound influence on work in these areas of Aristotle's thought, and is one of the most cited modern works on ancient philosophy in the English-speaking world. Over the next two decades a further nine volumes were published, on texts from *Analytics* to *Eudemian Ethics*. In 1988 a new commissioning editor at OUP urged Ackrill to commission more volumes, and suggested the appointment of an assistant editor; over the next twelve years, with the help of the present author, Ackrill oversaw the publication of nine new works, covering, inter alia, a number of books of the *Metaphysics*, the remaining six books of the *Politics*, and *On the Parts of Animals*; most of the earlier titles were published in new editions or with supplementary material. Ackrill

⁴² T. K. Johansen, review of Ackrill's *Essays*, in *Classical Review*, 49 (1999), 275.

⁴³ *Aristotle's Politics Books III and IV*: Translated with Introduction and Comments (Oxford, 1962).

⁴⁴ See above, n. 15

retired from the editorship in 2001, having created an unrivalled resource for professionals as well as graduates: the twenty volumes published under his editorship have had a huge impact on Aristotelian studies, through their contributions to scholarly and philosophical debate, by stimulating new work both in well-trodden areas and in relatively neglected ones, and in the standards they have set for lucid translation and careful philosophical exegesis.

Ackrill died on 30 November 2007. He will be remembered by ancient philosophers around the world not so much for his—undoubtedly important—interpretations of Plato and Aristotle (he would have been appalled if he were), as for his questioning spirit,⁴⁵ his passion for the rigorous philosophical study of the texts, and his generosity and kindness to his students and colleagues. His description of Aristotle is a fitting description of the man himself:

As he goes on to clear things up, he continues to operate dialectically, that is, by trying out objections to what he has himself said, and by raising new questions. He often recognises that obscurities remain, that what has been said is perhaps true enough, but not yet clear. He has a keen eye for difficulties and an insatiable appetite for argument, and he is never disposed to rest on his oars.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ It is no accident that he begins the last paragraph of the final essay in the second edition of his *Essays* (revised edn., p. 251) with the sentence ‘I end on an interrogative note.’

⁴⁶ Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher*, p. 11.