MYLES BURNYEAT

Myles Fredric Burnyeat

1 January 1939 – 20 September 2019

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1984

by

MALCOLM SCHOFIELD

Myles Burnyeat was a profound and exceptionally influential scholar of ancient Greek philosophy, and an inspiring teacher. He worked especially in epistemology, stimulating revival of interest in Pyrrhonism, and making major contributions to the study of Plato's *Theaetetus*. He published classic studies of Aristotle's ethics and logic. On Aristotle's theory of soul, he took a radical stance emphasising as often a gulf between ancient and modern presuppositions. Latterly he wrote extensively on the *Republic*, and did innovative work on James and John Stuart Mill as Plato scholars. A Russian speaker, with *glasnost* he developed significant relationships with Russian scholars.

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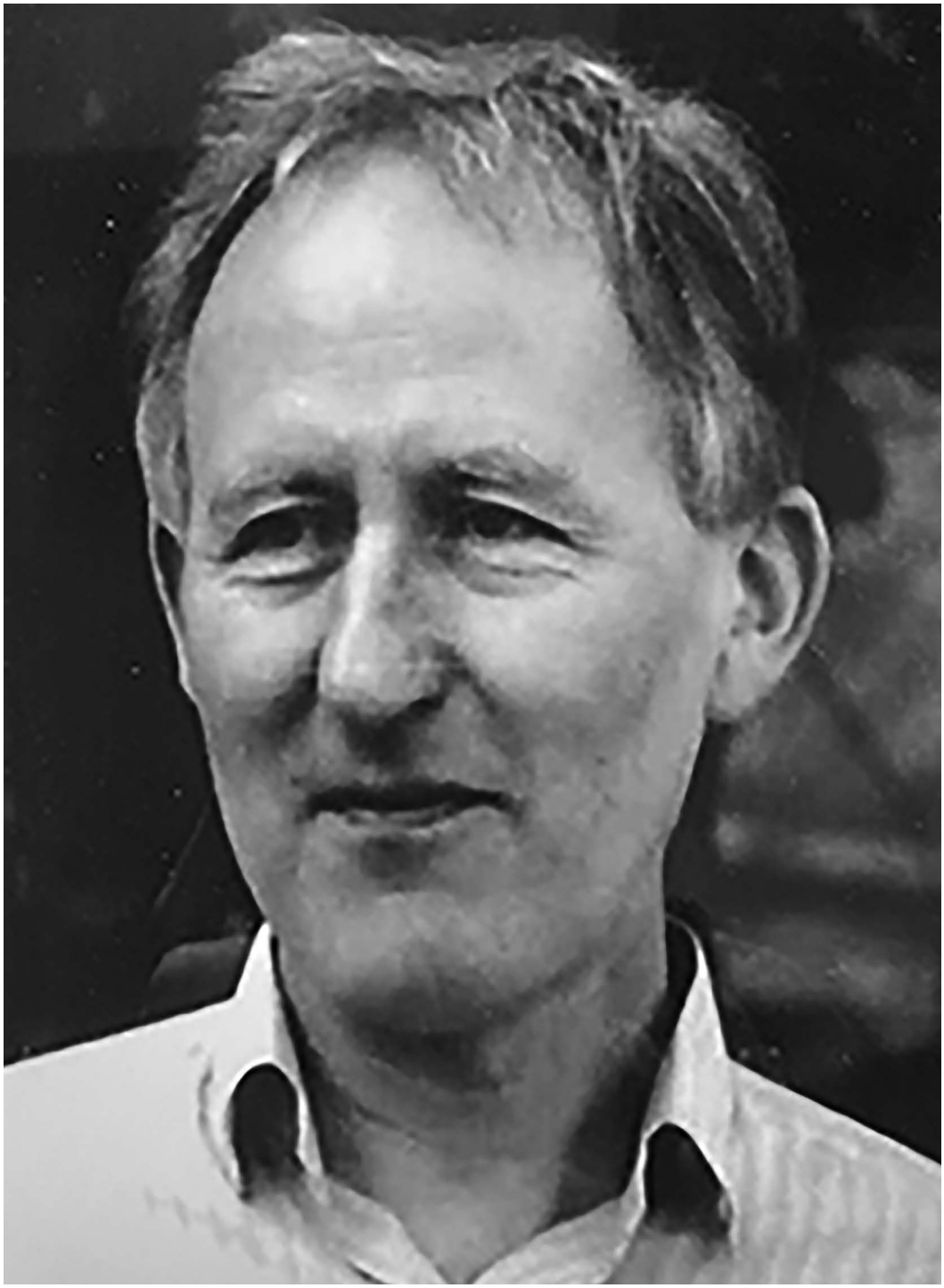

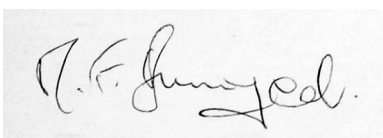

In 1964 Myles Burnyeat attended a two-hour lecture on Plato's *Theaetetus* by Bernard Williams, given in University College London. That lecture left him 'convinced that in the *Theaetetus* I had found a work of philosophy which would reward a lifetime's study'. It was in 1990 that he published the final fruit of his study of the dialogue and its exploration of the concept of knowledge. His 'introduction' (to a translation by M.J. Levett) was not the jointly composed definitive commentary he and Williams had envisaged in the 1960s: 'The dialogue will always leave you with more questions than you have answered'. Its 'readers are required to contribute more and more as the dialogue proceeds'. Of its three parts, diminishing in length but greatly increasing in difficulty, our job in the first, Burnyeat proposed, is to *find* the text's meaning, in the second to *respond* to it, and in the third to *create* from it a meaning which will solve the problem of knowledge: in short, to engage in strenuous philosophical reflection ourselves. His long discussion of that third section is, as he thought it had to be, extremely demanding, requiring the most attentive precision in appreciation of possible philosophical options, their attractions and drawbacks, while always attuned to the complex large issues at stake – about 'nothing less than the mind's relation to its objects', about 'the powers and prospects of the human mind'. This uniquely imaginative form of 'introduction', which has been described as 'the twentieth century's most influential book on the dialogue', truly is what it claims to be: help (increasingly challenging) for the reader, suggestively open-ended.[1]

By 1990 Burnyeat was a key figure in Classics and philosophy, with a distinguished chair, a global reputation, and an ever-growing list of collaborators and correspondents. Back in 1964 he was just beginning, having arrived in UCL the previous autumn to pursue postgraduate work in history of philosophy with Williams. That *Theaetetus* lecture was one of a number of pivotal moments in his life and career.

I

The life began on New Year's Day 1939, when Burnyeat was born the eldest child of Peter, who ran a ship-provisioning business, and Cherry (née Warburg), a talented potter. His parents had made their home in North Kensington, but after his father joined up, his and his sister Jane's early years were spent in rural Hertfordshire and Essex. In due course, he was sent to Bryanston School in Dorset, where he won a Minor Scholarship in Classics to King's College, Cambridge just before his 17th birthday, and then took his A-Levels the following summer. For the one hour of the week

[1] Burnyeat (1990a: xii-xiv, 68, 24); 'most influential book': S. Broadie, 'Laureation', University of St Andrews, 30 November 2012.

not wholly devoted to Greek, Latin, and Ancient History, one of the teachers got Burnyeat's class to read A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*. 'I was overwhelmed with enthusiasm', he recalled. '*This* was the sort of thing I had been longing for, without realizing it.' He then had one more year of school ahead of him, when he was made Head Boy and captained an undefeated Rugby XV.

Instead of Cambridge immediately, he elected to do his National Service next, in its final phase as it proved. He had already (at his father's insistence) been a Sea Cadet, and was able to serve in the Royal Navy, where he trained and qualified as a Russian interpreter. His parents had put pressure for something more practical. But the route he took was 'the best decision of my life'. These highly enjoyable two years (1957–9) proved transformative. One full year was spent in London. There he was based with other trainee interpreters in an elegant Kensington residence, where the first Aldermaston March was partly organised (he did the full distance), and with theatre sometimes in the evenings – it was the early days of George Devine's Royal Court. But he had been started off in Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists in Crail, the fishing village a few miles south of St Andrews, before the School of Slavonic Studies (for that London year), with a return to Crail and the final exam at the end. After initial struggles with Russian, for which however his training in Greek and Latin proved an advantage, 'a whole new area of the modern world opened up for me'. His teachers – 'aristocratic White Russians, Baltics, a Pole' – encouraged talk. 'The more, the better, so long as it was in Russian. Life became an endlessly argumentative seminar, on every subject under the sun. And that went on for eighteen months, becoming more sophisticated each week as our Russian grew into ever more subtle thoughts. An education like no other I have known or can imagine.' Others were then sent off to do other things, but he was retained to help with the teaching. Thereafter he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, to keep up his Russian, with an annual two-week refresher course and occasional stints as an interpreter. He was retired with the rank of Lieutenant Commander in 1974, after missing a course one year when their daughter Abigail was born to his wife Jane Buckley, a lecturer in education (there followed their son, Jake).

At Cambridge (1959–63) friends observed 'his infinite capacity for detail', and 'formidable powers of concentration and tenacious persistence in pursuing issues to the end', which could mean 'well into, and often right through, the night' (the student intensity never left him: in 1978, he 'stayed in bed, scribbling notes, all day every day', on Walter Burkert's revolutionary study of Pythagoreanism, *Weisheit und Wissenschaft*). In his first year, he discovered from John Raven's year-long introductory course how much 'wonderful philosophy' the ancient Greeks had generated – but was puzzled that no reference was made to any modern philosophers. For Part II he changed to the Moral Sciences Tripos. He had the good luck to be tutored in his last

year by Jonathan Bennett, then lecturing on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, who conducted his teaching as a collaborative research enterprise with his students. Burnyeat felt he was himself as much influenced, however, by the ancient historian Moses Finley, confessedly deaf to philosophy, but a 'wonderful, clever mind'.

It was Finley who perhaps suggested and certainly facilitated (with Ernst Gombrich) a move to the Warburg Institute for graduate work from autumn 1963. Burnyeat concluded after just three days, however, that the Warburg was not the right fit for him – even if Finley had already spotted his interest in philosophy's *longue durée*. Bennett put him in touch with Williams, who duly became his supervisor at UCL, but took up a chair at Bedford College in autumn 1964. Burnyeat was appointed Williams' successor, as Assistant Lecturer, promoted to Lecturer from 1965. He flourished in the UCL philosophy department, and was on good terms with Tony Long in its department of Greek and Latin. Friendships developed particularly with Jerry Cohen, who taught a joint seminar with him from time to time, and with David Wiggins at Bedford College (in 1970 they published in *Tribune* a co-authored article entitled 'Homes before Roads'). With Ted Honderich he co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Philosophy As It Is* (1979). Richard Wollheim, the Grote Professor, was a nurturing Head of Department, and like Burnyeat himself a liberal left member of the Labour Party. Wollheim recommended Lord Reith, appointed Chairman of a Party Commission on Advertising, to enlist his young lecturer as Secretary – and in his first year of teaching Burnyeat found himself ferried round London in Reith's chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce.

His files contained folders for several of the UCL lecture series he gave in ancient philosophy: on the Presocratics, early and middle Plato, Aristotle's ethics, and already Pyrrhonism, destined to become a major preoccupation. After Richard Sorabji arrived in King's College in 1970, they particularly relished the two-hour joint intercollegiate lectures they gave annually, to audiences of a hundred or so ('one of the most exciting circumstances of my career', in Sorabji's words, adding *inter alia*: 'Myles is perhaps the most electric philosopher I have known'). They took turns at the lecturing, with the other posing questions, sometimes tending to the 'gladiatorial' according to Sorabji, to get the students going on serious discussion, even if not all could respond.[2] Then in the later 1970s Burnyeat started giving lectures regularly at the Architectural Association, whose brilliance was recalled nearly forty years later by an audience member. He also lectured for a couple of years in this period at the City Lit, as well as for London's Extra-Mural Panel, until to Sorabji's great regret he departed to a post in Cambridge in 1978.

[2] Sorabji (2005: 12).

In those fourteen UCL years he read voraciously as always (his personal library eventually contained 10,000 volumes). He also made notes on virtually every seminar or lecture he had attended or philosophical conversation he had had, deposited in a giant filing cabinet, and meticulously organised. From his earliest days at UCL he was working on research projects, too. One of the first was on the Presocratic thinker Parmenides. He developed a paper entitled 'Parmenides and eternity'. He argued about its claims with myself in the mid–1960s; kept letters about them from Gregory Vlastos (1975) and from Sorabji and Bob Sharples (Long's successor at UCL) of the later 1970s; and shared a 'draft' with Paul Kalligas a little after that time. But he never published it, though he returned to its theme in his contribution to the Festschrift for Sorabji (2005), focused on Numenius, 'the only witty Platonist after Plato himself', in which he ranged over much of the entire ancient Platonist tradition.[3]

Perhaps the most celebrated item in his unpublished oeuvre was a long draft article on Academic scepticism entitled 'Carneades was no probabilist', belonging also to the 1970s and early 1980s, which circulated widely in samizdat form, generated enormous interest, and was often cited. But he was never satisfied with it. The folder housing the drafts contains a covering note anticipating pressure for posthumous publication. He observes that the paper exists in two versions, neither finished; regards it as now part only of the history of a scholarly debate; and refers potential readers to a subsequent published article, for his 'later, less dramatic views of Academic (so-called) "scepticism"'.[4] He became notorious for refusing to rush into publication. He used to say that he could never have even got started in our contemporary academic world. Indeed, although he began what became a long career of book reviewing for the *Listener* (whose demise in 1991 he lamented) and *Times Literary Supplement*, and in due course the *New York Review of Books* and its London counterpart, there were otherwise only four philosophical publications in his first decade of teaching.

These included a first essay on the *Theaetetus*, 'The material and sources of Plato's dream' (1970),[5] and a study entitled 'Virtues in action' (1971), which appeared in a collection of essays on Socrates commissioned by Vlastos.[6] Burnyeat was also invited by Vlastos to spend the autumn term of 1970 in Princeton, where he gave a graduate seminar on Aristotle's ethics. A strong bond was forged between them (he was eventually to edit Vlastos's own posthumously published collected Socratic essays).[7] Such indications of a growing reputation were confirmed by Harvard's invitation for autumn term 1973, replacing G.E.L. Owen, who had just left for the Laurence Chair

[3] Burnyeat (2005a: 143–69; quoted phrase: 144).
[4] Burnyeat (1997a). 'Sceptics' was never a description Academics applied to themselves.
[5] Burnyeat (1970).
[6] Burnyeat (1971).
[7] Vlastos (1993).

in Cambridge. The 1971 article was an elegantly argued and incisively meditated treatment of various attempts by Socrates' interlocutors in the early Platonic dialogues (with reference also to similar moves in contemporary ethics) to explain virtues in terms of features of actions or of powers to perform them, concluding with the importance of giving priority to being over doing in our thinking about what it is to be courageous or generous.

II

A turning point came in the academic year 1974–75, when he took a year's leave, thanks to a research fellowship from the Radcliffe Trust. The year proved astonishingly fruitful. Burnyeat wrote, or in two cases finished off, four major essays, and did the groundwork for three more published papers. Most were on the *Theaetetus*, and most were subsequently reprinted, usually by other scholars in edited collections, sometimes in translation. The earliest was a study split into two for publication, devoted to consideration of 'Protagoras and self-refutation' (1976), which Burnyeat made the first two chapters in his own collected papers.[8] The topic is an argument found in various forms in several Greek philosophers, claiming to show that 'Man is the measure of all things', the doctrine of the 5th-century BC sophist Protagoras, is self-refuting. The first of the paired papers dealt with Sextus Empiricus. It sent the philosophical community two necessary messages, both leitmotifs of Burnyeat's work in philosophy and its history. The twinning with a paper on the *Theaetetus* served notice that later Greek philosophy was as deserving of serious exploration and engagement as were Plato and Aristotle. At the same time Burnyeat's discussion suggested that philosophers might need to realise that their contemporary toolbox of distinctions (here between a proposition and the act of asserting it) might not quite work for philosophy in other eras, despite sophisticated formulations that might look very similar: 'logic at this period had not yet lost its connection with dialectic and disputation'.

The second Protagoras paper was inspired by that Williams lecture of 1964 on the *Theaetetus*. It dealt with the argument that, on the basis of his doctrine that 'Man is the measure' of truth, Protagoras himself must agree that his opponents' contention that that doctrine is false entails that it is indeed false: it refutes itself. The effectiveness and validity of this argument had already been long debated. Some judged it vitiated

[8] Burnyeat (1976a & 1976b; quoted clauses: 55, 195); collected essays: Burnyeat (2012) (most of those of Burnyeat's papers mentioned that were published up to and including 1998 may be found in the two 2012 volumes).

by failure to include in its formulations of claims of truth and falsehood the relativising qualifiers with which Protagoras specifies for whom a judgement is true or false. Others had argued: 'No amount of manoeuvring with his relativising qualifiers will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion.' Burnyeat's defence of this latter view was developed in unprecedented depth, with assured command of text and context, and with penetrating exploration of alternative hypotheses about the way the argument works. Perhaps its most distinctive element was his insistence (which he never abandoned) that even relativised truth must be true of a 'world', even if a world special to the individual for whom it is true (as Protagoreanism postulated) – and truth about such worlds is 'truth absolute'. Few readers thought Burnyeat's assessment altogether right, even if headed in the right direction. Some thought it quite wrong. Its stature was from the start unquestioned, and it remains the one essential reference point on its topic.

Next off the drawing board was 'Plato on the grammar of perceiving' (also 1976), tackling a problem – pointed out by Williams in that 1964 lecture – in interpreting the contrast highlighted at the end of Part I of the dialogue between seeing 'with' and seeing 'through' the eyes.[9] The ultimate focus was 'Plato's achievement in arriving at the first unambiguous statement of the difficult but undoubtedly important idea of the unity of consciousness'. What Burnyeat presented along the way was a patient and subtle demonstration of exactly what the 'with'/'through' distinction amounted to and how it helped Plato articulate that idea, performed with what was to be the hallmark of his scholarship: a command equally and inseparably of the philosophical issues at stake and their history, and of the philological, literary, and both detailed and strategic argumentative dimensions of the text in ancient context. The article's classic status was immediately recognised.

Together with his treatment of self-refutation arguments, it established or consolidated perceptions that Burnyeat was becoming a major force among a body of highly talented scholars of Greek philosophy in the rising generation. These were reinforced by the respect and authority he commanded by the weight of the oral contributions he made in philosophical gatherings. He was a loyal, supportive, and approachable figure in groups to which he belonged, even if he could sometimes be fierce with what he regarded as intellectual sloppiness or unpreparedness. In particular, a group started in London by G.E.L. Owen on his return to England drew in colleagues from several institutions. It met monthly on Saturday afternoons in term to work through the central Book Z of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (and subsequently the

[9] Burnyeat (1976c; quoted clause: 49).

following two books). Burnyeat acted as principal note taker, and in due course prepared published versions.[10]

Further products of his Radcliffe Fellowship quickly appeared. One essay pursued self-refutation into the anti-sceptical Epicureanism of Lucretius.[11] Three focused on the *Theaetetus*'s introductory philosophical discussion. They announced the versatility of his ambition, as well as his view of the many kinds of demand Plato makes on readers. Their titles, and the vehicles chosen for their publication, already indicate that variety. 'Socratic midwifery, Platonic inspiration' appeared in a Classics journal, where the subject matter resonates with a number of strains in Greek literature – and indeed concepts such as self-laceration and the operation of unconscious forces in the mind, brought to bear upon themes in Greek poetry and tragedy by modern scholarship, eventually get deployed.[12] 'Examples in epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G.E. Moore', and its placement in the Royal Institute of Philosophy's house journal, indicate determination to contribute to a contemporary as well as an ancient philosophical conversation, accessible to a wide interested readership.[13] Finally, the leading international history of science journal was the home selected for 'The philosophical sense of Theaetetus' mathematics'.[14]

His mind had not been wholly preoccupied with scepticism and the *Theaetetus*, however. The year 1980 saw another publication in ethics: an essay entitled 'Aristotle on learning to be good', a final outcome of the Radcliffe Fellowship. Here he presented a magisterial synoptic account, drawn from many passages scattered throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, of the good man's development. This highly accessible paper immediately established itself as a classic study of the topic, more anthologised and translated than anything else he wrote. It remains perhaps the best-known and most read of all his writings.[15]

III

At a conference on Stoic logic in Chantilly organised in September 1976 by Jacques Brunschwig, Burnyeat and Jonathan Barnes took a walk round the water. Their conversation resulted in a colloquium held in March 1978 at Oriel College, Oxford. This became the first of a regular sequence of Symposia Hellenistica, which have done

[10] Burnyeat & others (eds) (1979) and (1984).
[11] Burnyeat (1978a).
[12] Burnyeat (1977a).
[13] Burnyeat (1977b).
[14] Burnyeat (1978b).
[15] Burnyeat (1980a).

much to help generate philosophical work of high quality on the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics. The subject chosen for the occasion was epistemology, and Burnyeat contributed a powerfully argued paper (delivered also in Amsterdam, at the University of Essex, and at several North American universities), asking the old question 'Can the sceptic live his scepticism?' Modern scepticism has typically been scepticism about the possibility of knowledge. Burnyeat's first concern was to make clear that the ancients (like Hume) took belief, not knowledge, to be the more important focus for sceptical questioning. His final conclusion was that Hume was right to answer 'No': to live without belief, as the Pyrrhonist claims he lives, would require him so radically to detach himself from himself as to abolish any possible human life. He was aware that others read Sextus very differently, as distinguishing between dogmatic belief, particularly about matters subject to theoretical investigation, from which the sceptic is free, and belief reflecting a non-dogmatic attitude to experience, which does enable him to live an ordinary life. But he himself saw no basis in Sextus (or indeed otherwise) for a notion of belief cut loose from a claim to truth and from responsiveness to reason.[16]

That issue Burnyeat continued to explore in discussion with others, above all Michael Frede, for some years to come. He and Frede both published further attempts upon it in an edited collection of 1984, and in 1997 they together edited a volume collecting five major published contributions to the debate: both Burnyeat's papers, two of Frede's, and one by Barnes.[17] Burnyeat also at this time commissioned essays by other scholars on scepticism in both antiquity and later philosophy, which he published in an edited collection that included his own 'Can the sceptic?' and a seminal article from 1929 by Pierre Couissin, translated by himself and Jennifer Barnes.[18]

Meanwhile in 1979 he had delivered as a Dawes Hicks Lecture of the British Academy an extended assault on the idea that conflicting appearances give irresistible reason to embrace relativism or scepticism, or resort to sense-data: a notion common in antiquity and especially prominent in Pyrrhonism, but in much subsequent philosophy too, down to Berkeley, Russell, and recently in ethics J.L. Mackie, for example.[19] Then in 1983 came an essay he entitled 'Idealism and Greek philosophy: what Descartes saw and Berkeley missed'.[20] In it Burnyeat made one of his most ambitious and admired attempts, arresting in its originality, to diagnose the sort of thing that makes ancient Greek thought radically different from modern philosophy. The key he proposed there is what he called the assumption of realism. The Greeks never

[16] Burnyeat (1980b: 20–53).
[17] Burnyeat (1984); Burnyeat & Frede (1997).
[18] Burnyeat (ed.) (1983a).
[19] Burnyeat (1979).
[20] Burnyeat (1983b).

considered it open to question *whether* there is an 'external world'. All philosophers, even the Pyrrhonists, assumed that the challenge is to explain *how* we access reality, taken to be distinct from our minds – or else (as with the sceptics) to show that we have no reliable means of achieving such access. He argued that a 'decisive shift of perspective' was first achieved by the exposure and questioning of the assumption in Descartes' 'hyperbolical doubt'.[21]

Ancient Pyrrhonism was now attracting more interest among scholars of philosophy than ever before in recent times. But Burnyeat was also developing one of the most important and influential ingredients in his interpretation of the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptualisation of knowledge, in three articles of the early 1980s. First was a provocative paper on Socrates' treatment of testimony before a jury (at the end of Part II of the *Theaetetus*), presented with a reply from Barnes at the joint summer session of the Mind Association and Aristotelian Society in 1980.[22] By 1982 he had a draft of 'a sort of sequel', on Augustine's treatment of learning and teaching in *De Magistro*. The final version, a nuanced, learned essay that gave a masterly treatment of the teasing to and fro of Augustine's dialogue, was delivered in 1987 to the joint session, under the title 'Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*', as his Presidential address to the Mind Association.[23] In a longer paper focused on the *Posterior Analytics* (1981), Burnyeat had elaborated on the suggestion, widely if not universally embraced, that for Aristotle as for Plato, true knowledge is best interpreted as 'understanding', construed as a synoptic grasp of key explanatory connections. He gave it the indicative title 'Aristotle on understanding knowledge'.[24]

Other articles (1982) turned to matters of logic with a bearing on epistemology. 'The origins of non-deductive inference' preferred Aristotle to the Stoics.[25] 'Gods and heaps' was an innovative study of the non-canonical form of sorites argument deployed by the Academic Carneades against Stoic theology.[26] But for a visit to the University of California at Santa Barbara in January 1983, he composed a short paper in a very different mode. He entitled it: 'Is an Aristotelian philosophy of mind still credible?' A revised version began to circulate widely, and objections to its argument, published as well as unpublished, proliferated. Finally, professing reluctance, he published it in 1992. What had caused a greater stir than anything else he ever wrote was

[21] Burnyeat (1982a; quoted phrases: 40). Against 'decisiveness', Richard Sorabji argued that a Neoplatonist style of idealism, with some affinities with Berkeley's, was propounded in antiquity by Gregory of Nyssa: Sorabji (1983: 287–96).

[22] Burnyeat (1980c).

[23] Burnyeat (1987a).

[24] Burnyeat (1981). Indebtedness to Barnes' writings, here and in the following two articles, was warmly acknowledged.

[25] Burnyeat (1982b; quoted material: 203, 238).

[26] Burnyeat (1982c).

his representation of Aristotle's theory of sense perception, claiming inheritance from Philoponus, Aquinas, and Brentano, as involving '*no physiological process* which stands to a perceiver's awareness of colour or smell as matter to form. The most basic effect on the perceiver is identical with an awareness of colour or smell.' His immediate target was the functionalist interpretation of the theory, particularly as proposed by Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam, which as he saw it needed Richard Sorabji's account of the relation between Aristotelian body and soul (very different from his own) as its basis. Once again, he was proposing that the presuppositions of ancient Greek philosophy, despite its richness and sophistication, often set it at a distance from any modern philosophical agenda.[27]

The mid 1970s to early 1980s were undoubtedly the most intensely concentrated and influentially productive continuous period in writing philosophical scholarship (mostly on interconnected epistemological themes) during Burnyeat's entire career. At the same time, he was publishing as many book reviews as ever (including a jewel given the title 'Message from Heraclitus'),[28] and of course teaching, in London, in Cambridge, and (in the early 1980s) in a string of visiting appointments in the USA: at Berkeley, UCLA, and Cornell as well as Santa Barbara (he thrived on synergy). His publication record over that whole period speaks for itself, and indeed spoke to the Fellows of the British Academy, who elected him to their number in 1984.

IV

Burnyeat had moved in 1978 from UCL to a lectureship in the Faculty of Classics in Cambridge. There were obvious pluses and minuses in switching from a philosophy to a Classics department and from London back to Cambridge. A main attraction was the exchange of a solo position in ancient philosophy for membership of a strong clutch of colleagues with a wide range of interests in Greek philosophy and science (Geoffrey Lloyd, G.E.L. Owen, Malcolm Schofield, David Sedley). He was not enamoured of the ethos of the more traditional Cambridge colleges. In 1977, however, Robinson was in its first year of existence as a college. Charles Brink, chairman of the trustees who oversaw its creation, was alerted to the possibility of recruiting Burnyeat to the fledgling College's teaching strength. The move to Cambridge was thus made financially possible by his simultaneous election to a Fellowship and lectureship in philosophy at Robinson. There he relished being part of a small group of Fellows who

[27] Burnyeat (1992a; quoted passage: 15). A sequel appeared soon after, in its final English version as Burnyeat (1995). For the debate: Caston (2005). See further Section V below.
[28] Burnyeat (1982d).

took on the shaping from scratch of a new and less hierarchical collegiate community. He had spacious and comfortable rooms at 5 Adams Road, their tobacco aroma and paraphernalia (including big tailor's scissors) recalled evocatively by Jake. Here he gave his classes and undergraduate supervisions from a battered leather armchair he had brought with him from UCL, along with a no less battered small blue suitcase which housed books and papers in use. The rooms he shared precariously, as an inveterate pipe smoker in that period (later he took snuff), with his memorably enthusiastic mongrel Jenny, whom he carted around Cambridge on his bike in a knapsack. One of his first Robinson students has written:[29]

> Supervisions with Myles were extraordinary … [They] were oases of calm study, the piles of books on the floor, the paper strewn desk, the pipe puffing all adding to the focus, which was wholly devoted to the subject matter, the thinking. To a keen young philosophical mind, his gentle encouragement to go deeper, to find the nuances, to articulate my passion for the subject, and the chance to be guided through the stumbling blocks, produced capsules of time I have never experienced before or since. … He somehow alchemised time itself; each supervision with him gave me access to an infinitely deep pool of knowledge, experience, learning, and profound intellectual pleasure.

Mutatis mutandis, much like time spent reading, talking, and walking with their father experienced by Abigail and Jake.

In 1984 came a further significant change in Burnyeat's academic circumstances, when he became Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy in succession to Owen, who had died at the age of 60 two years before. He was by now one of the best-known figures in the field, much in demand on many fronts. Colleagues and enquirers everywhere wanted to discuss philosophical problems with him. For Bryan Magee's BBC2 television series *The Great Philosophers* (autumn 1987), it was Burnyeat with whom the conversation on Plato was conducted. He often gave a talk on the charge of impiety levelled against Socrates. There was invariably a majority vote of 'Not guilty' by audiences at the outset. By the end, the majority verdict was no less invariably 'Guilty' as charged. Burnyeat had argued that the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* patently did *not* believe in his city's gods.[30] He made fewer contributions to the literary weeklies. But 'Sphinx without a secret', his devastating critique in the *New York Review of Books* of Leo Strauss's treatment of Plato and its development into a cult and a political ideology, prompted an indignant reaction from leading Straussians and the support of Gregory Vlastos in the same journal (also privately communicated gratitude from

[29] Shea (2020).
[30] Burnyeat (1997b).

some younger scholars in the USA).[31] He reprinted it (like 'Message from Heraclitus', also an *NYRB* piece) in his collected papers. Strauss's reading of the *Republic* was subsequently to be a minor target of a short article, appearing in Wollheim's Festschrift as 'Utopia and fantasy: the practicability of Plato's ideally just city'.[32]

With new institutional responsibilities, his academic life inevitably diversified. He played an increasingly prominent part in the life and work of the Faculty of Classics; and although in later years he might protest that he was a philosopher, not a classicist, it is indicative that when the Faculty could celebrate final completion of its new building in June 1990, it was to Burnyeat that his colleagues turned for the address at the inauguration.[33] In the University at large he was active around this same time, particularly with the logician Timothy Smiley, in opposing with some success introduction of more managerial structures. His main concern, however, was naturally the promotion of the study of ancient philosophy, especially in Cambridge. One might say that he started with himself. Initially he evidently devoted much of his own research time to completion of long-delayed work on the *Theaetetus* book.[34] He fostered a succession of Cambridge PhD students, including Angie Hobbs, Dominic Scott, Thomas Johansen, Melissa Lane, Verity Harte, and Noburu Notomi, today themselves well-known Plato and Aristotle scholars (also supervising for the Open University Barrie Fleet's edition of Plotinus *Ennead* III.6). And he welcomed many visiting practitioners of the subject.

In 'First words', his valedictory talk in 1996, he spoke of what he felt most distinctive about his entire eighteen years in Cambridge:[35]

> It has been a very special experience to have belonged to a group that has met together every week in term-time …, with a changing population of graduate students and visitors, to explore the entire range of ancient philosophy from Xenophanes in the sixth century BC to Simplicius in the sixth century AD, with all and sundry in between. It made ancient philosophy in Cambridge a continuous adventure into the unknown which was simultaneously a continuous re-education in the known.

Through intellectual example, he often assumed leadership in discussion. Sometimes at the first session of term he would propose a hypothesis, perhaps startlingly far-reaching, about how best to read the text ahead (as for example with the first Plotinus attempted: *Ennead* V.1), which could be tried out in future weeks.

[31] Burnyeat (1985).
[32] Burnyeat (1992a).
[33] Burnyeat (1990b); a shorter version had appeared in the *TLS*, 15–21 June 1990.
[34] He also arranged for the publication of Gilbert Ryle's famous unpublished paper 'Logical atomism in Plato's *Theaetetus*', the same year as his own 'Introduction' to the dialogue eventually appeared.
[35] Burnyeat (1997c: 1–2). A footnote listed the remarkable number of texts studied.

In his own work, some earlier preoccupations were taken further. For the 1990 Symposium Aristotelicum, pursuing his interest in non-deductive inference, he composed an authoritative study of the enthymeme and its fate in the history of logic, which made better sense of Aristotle's attachment to its theoretical soundness as an instrument for persuasion than anything in the existing literature.[36] His final contribution to a Symposium Hellenisticum (in summer 1995) saw him returning both to self-refutation and to Carneades and the Academics, in a supple and delicate treatment of decidedly refractory material, entitled 'Antipater and self-refutation: elusive arguments in Cicero's *Academica*'.[37]

Two Platonic dialogues besides the *Theaetetus* came to bulk larger. In 1995 and 1996 he lectured on the *Euthydemus*, Socrates' encounter with eristic sophistry (also explored in the reading group). He saw this dialogue as much closer in its theoretical ambitions and insights to the *Republic* and especially to Plato's later work than was generally supposed. There was eventually to be a publication: an elegant essay entitled 'Plato on how not to speak of what is not' (aptly dedicated to Jacques Brunschwig), which against the *idée reçue* made a powerful case for interpreting the dialogue as already anticipating the key element in the much-admired solution to the problem developed in the late *Sophist*.[38]

Above all, an immersion in the *Republic* began, that from then on became often dominant in his work. Burnyeat had delivered Cambridge's 24-lecture course on the central books of the *Republic* in the academic years 1983–6; and in summer 1984 at the Symposium Aristotelicum he contributed a paper entitled 'Platonism and mathematics: a prelude to discussion' (of the critique of Platonist metaphysics in Books M and N of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*).[39] This was one of the richest of all his writings, wide-ranging, and radical too, in the many challenges it posed for the focus and presuppositions of much modern English language Plato scholarship. 'The choice between an Aristotelian and one of the Platonist accounts of mathematics', he proposed, 'is simultaneously a choice as to which sciences we should take as most fundamental to our understanding of the world and its goodness.' Mathematics and mathematical education were for him integral, not merely psychologically and methodologically preliminary (as was generally supposed in Anglophone scholarship), to the 'grand vision' of the *Republic*. Plato's intimations of the vision culminated, as he saw it, in references to 'the Unwritten Chapter', that nomenclature deliberately echoing Aristotle's mention of 'unwritten doctrines', and establishing contact with

[36] Burnyeat (1994).
[37] Burnyeat (1997a).
[38] Burnyeat (2002a).
[39] Burnyeat (1987b; quoted material: 213, 217).

the Plato of the Tübingen school, usually ignored or dismissed in the Anglo-American literature. There the identity of Good and One, and the mathematical structure of (for example) justice and health, would have been expounded.

From 1989 onwards, Burnyeat was also developing ideas in a quite different area, worked up into talks he was invited to give, often as lectures on named foundations, particularly in the USA (where in 1992 he was elected Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences). By 1990 he had an illuminating trio for delivery at Cornell and Johns Hopkins, under the titles 'Ancient Freedoms', 'Anger and Revenge', and 'Happiness and Tranquillity'. He repeated them in Buenos Aires and at Notre Dame in 1993, and in 1996 at Berkeley. They met with an enthusiastic reception. But although for a stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin during the academic year 2004–5 he proposed to develop them into a book (*The Archaeology of Feeling*: the echo of Foucault signals their intent), together with a fourth on philosophy and physiognomy, other commitments intervened.[40]

The late 1980s and early 1990s were the era of *glasnost*. An exchange scheme was funded (by George Soros) between the Universities of Cambridge and Leningrad. Burnyeat was the first Cambridge academic to seize the opportunity. He made a two week stay in Leningrad in April 1991, after a welcome by a friendly group of Classicists and philosophers. The visit triggered renewal of his passion for things Russian, and delight in discovery that he could still speak the language. He much admired the knowledge of ancient Greek he found there, and the commitment – long sustained in inauspicious circumstances – to studying particularly the Neoplatonists and Plato's *Laws* (on which he had interesting observations). He wrote journalistic pieces about his experiences in *urbs Sancti Petri*, and returned as often as he could, giving lectures and seminars, and joining the editorial board of the new ancient philosophy journal *Hyperboreus*. He conceived a particular regard for the senior scholar Alexander Zaitsev; and he translated for publication an important article on silent reading in antiquity by A.K. Gavrilov (acknowledging help from Irina Levinskaya and his second wife, the poet Ruth Padel), adding a short piece of his own on the topic.[41] He also paid academic visits elsewhere in eastern Europe: to Budapest (1998), Sofia (1999) (both written up in the *TLS*), and Sarajevo (2000), *inter alia* giving seminars on Plato's *Crito*. In 2001, however, tensions within the St Petersburg Classics department impinged on the translation of an article of his own, and he felt he had to sever relations with it. Nonetheless Russia remained on his agenda. In 2003, he visited Siberia with Ruth (investigating tiger conservation) and their daughter Gwen.[42]

[40] They will appear in their original lecture form in Burnyeat (forthcoming).
[41] Gavrilov (1997) & Burnyeat (1997d).
[42] Burnyeat (2004a).

V

In the mid–1990s, it was suggested to Burnyeat by Isaiah Berlin and his old friend Jerry Cohen, now a successor to Berlin in the Chichele chair of political theory at Oxford, that he think of applying for a Senior Research Fellowship in philosophy shortly to become available at All Souls. By this time, for one reason or another of a kind familiar to modern academics, he was finding little opportunity for sustained work of his own. He applied, and was elected from 1996. He once described his period at All Souls as 'paradise'.

Work on the *Republic* on a different scale became possible. The magnificent published versions of two responses he made to further invitations to lecture make that immediately apparent. He gave three Tanner Lectures at Harvard in December 1997. 'Culture and society in Plato's *Republic*' was an extended and wide-ranging exploration of a topic never much before pursued in the large literature on its treatment of art and artists (although standard problems of interpretation were examined afresh too). Burnyeat offered a powerful and highly original study focused on the dialogue's concern (not least, as he saw it, in the Cave passage of Book 7) with the insidious effects of culture, its registers and modes of operation, on the shaping of both society and individual psychology. He laid stress – not only by the dedication to Reith's memory – on the contemporary urgency he saw in Plato's insights.[43] 'Plato on why mathematics is good for the soul', presented to a British Academy symposium the following year, elaborated at length on the epistemological and metaphysical vision of the *Republic* first argued for in 'Platonism and mathematics'.[44] These two eloquent essays, written for the interested general reader as much as for students and scholars, constitute a summation of what he thought most important to understand about the dialogue as Plato's greatest work.

Another paper addressed to a wider potential readership had first been developed as a Cambridge undergraduate lecture for a course on Classics in the nineteenth century. This was 'The past in the present: Plato as educator of nineteenth-century Britain'. It was designed to explain the part that Jowett and before him the Philosophical Radicals – heroes for Burnyeat not least for their fostering of the 'Godless College of Gower Street' – played in restoring Plato to the reading and intellectual formation of educated Britons from long general neglect.[45] James Mill has a walk on part only here. But in Burnyeat's 2000 Master Mind Lecture to the British Academy (much of it devoted to the *Republic*), he has a starring role as the rediscoverer of the sceptical

[43] Burnyeat (1999).
[44] Burnyeat (2000).
[45] Burnyeat (1998).

Plato in modern times, counterpoised with Plotinus and the Neoplatonist systematic Plato – with both however seen as philosophical responses Platonic in spirit. Burnyeat's own generous appreciation of Plato's many different meanings for different readers in different eras shines through.[46]

He referred in the printed version to two further pioneering essays of his published at this time. One was a study of James Mill's developing engagement with Plato, and his influence on George Grote as well as his critique of Thomas Taylor.[47] The second was one of the most extraordinary pieces of scholarship Burnyeat ever published. In John Stuart Mill's mention of reading at the age of seven the first six dialogues of Plato in 'the common arrangement', that expression much intrigued him. His article reports the outcome of his comprehensive bibliographical investigation into its likely reference. He explored with the help of many colleagues and librarians the history of publication of editions of Plato from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century (catalogues are given in two appendices), as well as the evidence for Plato editions in the Mill household. His conclusion was that the arrangement was the Stephanus ordering, which John Stuart very probably read in the Bipont edition of 1781–7, and that he must in that case have written 'six' by mistake for 'seven' (if indeed he read all dialogues up to and including the *Theaetetus*). The paper was published simultaneously in three differently appropriate journals.[48]

Burnyeat continued to reflect on the *Republic*. In his Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society in 2005, he spoke on 'The truth of tripartition', defending Plato's theory of soul (not Plato's arguments).[49] A seminar conducted back in 2001 with Michael Frede, whose presence in Oxford he found one of its greatest attractions, yielded a joint publication after Frede's death: *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*. In his section of the book, Burnyeat construed the letter, with striking imaginative power, as a sort of prose drama, designed to show the damage done to the soul by our emotional responses to social pressures of various kinds, as the *Republic* had suggested: 'a major aid for all readers of this difficult text', said Charles Kahn.[50] He also published essays on other dialogues. A study of what he argued should be understood as 'the rational myth' of the *Timaeus* was at once recognised as another classic, which helped fuel increasing interest in the dialogue. Plato, he suggested (noting the concern

[46] Burnyeat (2001a).
[47] Burnyeat (2001b).
[48] Burnyeat (2001c).
[49] Burnyeat (2005b), dedicated to Bernard Williams' memory.
[50] Burnyeat & Frede (2015), reviewed in Kahn (2015). Kahn like some others, however, was unconvinced by Burnyeat's argument for inauthenticity.

with political as well as cosmic order), was thinking of the reasonableness of the practical reasoning in which a supremely good designer would probably engage.[51]

Aristotle, too, consumed much energy in Burnyeat's years at All Souls. He became particularly preoccupied with what he regarded as the neglected problem of how to read a chapter of an Aristotelian treatise, and particularly with the function of cross-references to other parts of the treatise, and to other treatises. He argued that cross-references indicate appropriate order of argument and exposition, and so of reading order. The issue was a prime focus especially of his persuasive interpretation (presented at the Symposium Aristotelicum in 1999) of the function of Book 1 of *On Generation and Corruption* within the corpus – as designed to provide three kinds of foundation for understanding the physical world: physical, conceptual, and teleological.[52] But the problem was no less a concern of three major publications he worked on. First came a return to the *Metaphysics*, after many discussions and seminars devoted to it since Owen's London group. The focus on how to read the work is immediately clear from the title of a short monograph: *A Map of Metaphysics Zeta*, a map (it transpired) not only of its internal structure but of its place within the whole.[53] Recent scholarship had tended to concentrate on the theory of form and substance that Book Zeta was developing, in requisite intensive detail. Burnyeat was suggesting a need to prioritise a wider (in some ways more traditional) perspective. There was disagreement over whether he got right either map or what he was mapping. But many readers found his approach refreshing and illuminating.

Specific Aristotelian chapters were the subject of two long subsequent essays. In the first, devoted to *De Anima* II.5, Burnyeat returned to Aristotle's treatment of sense perception, developing the account first broached in 'Is an Aristotelian philosophy of mind still credible?'[54] He built an authoritative exposition, alert to cross-references, of actuality as a physical alteration – but conceived differently, in order to account for the cognitive accuracy of perception, from the notion as introduced in the *Physics*: what Aquinas (the subject of a further study) conceived as a 'spiritual' but still physical form of change.[55] The other paper, originating in 1995, exhibited formidable command of philological as well as philosophical resources. Here Burnyeat argued that a passage *distinguishing* actuality from change in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*, often treated as canonical by analytic philosophers, must be misplaced. He judged it, though probably by Aristotle, a 'freak performance'.[56]

[51] Burnyeat (2005c).
[52] Burnyeat (2004b).
[53] Burnyeat (2001d), dedicated to the memory of G.E.L. Owen.
[54] Burnyeat (2002b).
[55] Burnyeat (2001e).
[56] Burnyeat (2008; quoted phrase: 276).

There were further essays on Plato and Aristotle, two pieces of detective work on ancient Greek optics, and a sequence of memorable book reviews. He also brought to posthumous publication both Williams' collected papers on history of philosophy[57] and those of his third wife, the Croatian philosopher Heda Segvic.[58] In 2008 he was initiator of a discussion evening at the British Academy on the striking group portrait by Stuart Pearson Wright of its recent Presidents, seated round a table with a plucked chicken (uncooked) sprawled centrally. He himself drew attention to Diogenes the Cynic's similar presentation of just such a fowl to Plato – who had defined humans as featherless bipeds.

VI

Burnyeat had become Emeritus Fellow at All Souls in 2006. In 2007 he was appointed CBE, 'for services to scholarship'. The same year he was presented with a Festschrift, aptly entitled *Maieusis*.[59] In 2012 St Andrews conferred upon him an Honorary Doctorate, a distinction he appreciated the more for its renewal of his earlier link with East Fife; earlier that year two volumes of his collected papers, from his UCL period and the subsequent years in Cambridge, appeared (two more, from his time at All Souls, are following posthumously).[60] Robinson had made him an Honorary Fellow in 2006, giving him a much-valued academic base again in Cambridge. From then on, he was frequently in evidence in College and at the ancient philosophy reading group, while mostly living in Oxford with his devoted partner, the musicologist Margaret Bent.

But there was Alzheimer's in his family. It had afflicted his mother and her mother and aunt before that. Not long after retirement from his All Souls Fellowship, scientific confirmation came of evidence that he too was developing the condition. Decline was gradual. For several years, he was able to continue delivering papers already written, and preparing substantial drafts for new ones. Latterly he became attracted by ancient evidence that the *Republic* contained six books, not ten, with Book 1 probably then ending after Glaucon and Adeimantus had restated the anti-Socratic position. It formed the topic of his short Yamamoto Memorial Lecture at the Symposium Platonicum in Tokyo in 2010, marking his long years of support for Plato scholars from Japan (his first visit was in 1980; this time Gwen came too). He could write

[57] Williams (2006).
[58] Segvic (2009).
[59] Scott (ed.) (2007).
[60] Burnyeat (2012a; and forthcoming).

characteristically generous and insightful notes to friends, and penned a lively sketch of key elements in his own formation in 2012. He even passed a further driving test in 2014. A move to an Oxford care home finally became inevitable, however. He seemed to be content there, with family and friends still finding something of the old Myles in him. He died on 20 September 2019.

In the field of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy the range and fertility of his achievement, his public intellectual profile, and his world-wide impact had been exceptional.[61] The generous help he gave to countless students and other scholars, not least in Japan and Russia, whether starting or established, needs no further comment, nor his enterprise in bringing their unpublished or untranslated or uncollected work to publication. He had provoked thinking on the less familiar and fresh thinking on the familiar, perhaps especially on Aristotle, often combating current views or presuppositions. He opened larger vistas on virtually everything he wrote about. In particular, his publications on knowledge and scepticism, from Heraclitus to Augustine, and on resonances of ancient views about them in modern philosophy, from Descartes and Berkeley to Moore and Wittgenstein, had continually cast new light upon the fundamental problems they tackled, as well as into their own distinctive perspectives. And he was one of the great Plato scholars of our era: in his command of the Greek text, in penetrating insight into its many literary and philosophical dimensions, and in deploying informed attention to the long history of its interpretation over millennia.

One substantial unpublished essay from the 1970s which Myles Burnyeat did decide to include in his collected papers he entitled 'the passion of reason'.[62] His own passionate attempt to understand in historical perspective the philosophising of the greatest minds of the past relied on learning, acuteness, rigour, and patience, but also sympathy, imagination, and openness. The passion was surely what drove him upon that 'continuous adventure into the unknown which was simultaneously a continuous re-education in the known', thinking deeper thoughts and glimpsing bigger pictures than one could oneself.

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[61] The American Leiter Reports posted in a blog (8 February 2016) the result of a write-in poll making him 'the best post-WWII Anglophone scholar' of the subject.

[62] Burnyeat (2012b).

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Note on the author: Malcolm Schofield is Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, and Emeritus Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University of Cambridge; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1997.