Introduction

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Many of us privileged to study and teach ancient philosophy for a living will at some point have encountered, within or outside the academic environment, an interlocutor who asks, often in incredulous tones, some form of the following question: how do you find anything new to say about material that is so old?

Now there are various replies one could give. One might, for example, mutter words to the effect that the study of ancient philosophy did not really take off as an academic subject until the work of nineteenth-century German philologists, and that the discipline is therefore rather 'younger' than it may seem. But if a response of this sort does not strike our interlocutor, or even us, as particularly compelling – after all, that surely leaves considerably more than a century for scholars to have delivered the goods! – that may be because of a nagging suspicion that the questioner is onto something. Certainly, when it comes to the foremost philosophical figures of the ancient world, Plato and Aristotle, though not only to them, it can sometimes be hard to resist the thought that, just maybe, everything that might usefully be said about their work has already been uttered.

The present volume is intended as an antidote to that pessimistic thought. It seeks to address the idea that when dealing with at least some of the best-known works, authors or schools in the ancient philosophical tradition, we are inevitably faced at times with texts that have previously been mined by scholars with great thoroughness and skill. But it does so by embracing, rather than despairing at, that state of affairs. Its collective response to our sceptical interlocutor is that, when looked at with fresh eyes, the most well-worn texts can yield new insights, and the hoariest received opinions about them can prove to be less of a solid edifice than may appear.

No doubt much of contemporary scholarship on ancient philosophy can be read, at least implicitly, as joining in with such a response. The distinctiveness of this volume is that it aspires to do so in an explicit and

self-conscious way. It identifies two particular categories – the 'old chestnut' and the 'sacred cow' – that may be taken to encapsulate the potential problem of reading texts that have long been the subject of scholarly scrutiny, and encourages contributors to select examples of such categories, reflect on them, and, we hope, demonstrate in practice how fruitful it can be to engage with ancient philosophy under those headings.

To elaborate a little, then, on our two main categories: 'old chestnuts' are pieces of ancient philosophical text that, for the most part, have received a large and sustained amount of scholarly attention, been subject to a number of competing (sometimes fiercely debated) readings, but are now at a stage where debate seems to be flagging, if not exhausted: Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, to take a text covered (from different viewpoints) by two of the papers in this volume, may serve as an example.

'Sacred cows', on the other hand, are not specific texts, but views about what some ancient school or thinker may have held on a question of philosophical importance – views which have come to be sufficiently entrenched as to represent something like an orthodoxy and to be taken to be so obvious as to need no argument: 'Plato's Socrates was a eudaimonist' would be an example, again taken from this volume. What the different categories of old chestnut and sacred cow are in danger of sharing is the supposition that, for significant portions of the ancient philosophical corpus, the wellsprings of interpretation may be close to running dry.

Based (with some additions) on a conference held in July 2014 in Figeac (France) in honour of Professor Mary Margaret McCabe, this volume begs to differ. One of its major inspirations is the work of McCabe, Emeritus Professor of Ancient Philosophy at King's College London, Fellow of the British Academy, 2014–17 Keeling Scholar-in-Residence at UCL, and the 2016–17 Sather Professor at Berkeley (the first female scholar of ancient philosophy to be appointed to that office). Known to all with more than a passing acquaintance with her as 'MM', her influence permeates each of this volume's contributions, exerted not just by means of her powerful and original publications on ancient philosophy,[1] but also through her gifts as teacher and discussant.

Her published work, to be sure, sets the standard for the bold revisiting of familiar texts. To take an example, McCabe's paper 'Escaping One's

[1] For a comprehensive bibliography of her published work to date, see the *Mary Margaret McCabe Bibliography* in this volume.

Own Notice Knowing: Meno's Paradox Again'[2] begins its interpretation of Meno's Paradox (an old chestnut if ever there was one) by asking whether one 'should apologize for coming back yet again . . . to Meno's paradox.'[3] McCabe offers due homage to two of the paradox's most stalwart recent interpreters – Gail Fine and Dominic Scott (a contributor to this volume) – before succinctly indicating what she still finds unsatisfying about their readings, and going on to offer her own distinctive and persuasive interpretation of that much analysed passage.

This is not the place to dwell on the details of that interpretation. Instead let us return to McCabe's question about whether apology is needed for returning to a particular old chestnut, and fill in the ellipsis. McCabe speaks of coming back to the paradox as 'to something that has puzzled me for forty years';[4] and in this phrase one hears something of what, for those of us fortunate enough to have had philosophical conversations with MM over an extended period of time, makes her approach to philosophy, and to the ancients' way of doing philosophy, such a rewarding and invigorating one. MM has the Socratic knack not just of feeling the force of a philosophical puzzle herself, but of being able to communicate its force to others, in such a way as to implant the idea that nothing could be more urgent, here and now, than trying to get to the bottom of it.

It is this aspect of MM's relation with philosophy – of being constantly open to philosophical puzzlement, however venerable the puzzles may be, and of helping others to be so too – that gives this volume an indispensable part of its orientation. About any substantial piece of philosophy, there is always something fresh to say, because it is always possible to feel the problems afresh, and by doing so on one's own terms, to seek new ways of understanding them: a lesson that has been put into practice for some years now in the King's College London 'Old Chestnuts' seminar, initiated by MM and Verity Harte in 2000 and still running today as a graduate ancient philosophy summer seminar. We here pay tribute to its participants, past and present, for helping continue to infuse the old chestnuts concept with ever new and unexpected flavours.

MM's gift for communicating philosophical ideas, and for enabling others to think them through for themselves, is related to the view – one that she strongly holds and whose credentials in ancient philosophy hardly need stating – that philosophy at its best is carried out through the medium of dialogue and conversation. This is no mere slogan. As her recently published collection, *Platonic Conversations*,[5] amply attests, seeing ancient

[2] McCabe 2009. [3] McCabe 2009: 233. [4] McCabe 2009: 233. [5] McCabe 2015.

philosophical authors as engaged in dialogue – direct or indirect – with their readers, with themselves and with one another, offers tremendous scope for enhancing our understanding of many difficult passages. Prominent here is the thesis that much light is to be shed on Aristotle if we regard him as being in more or less continuous dialogue with Plato, not just with general aspects of Plato's thought (as all might agree) but closely and sensitively with individual passages of his work, a thesis corroborated by McCabe with reference to some choice Aristotelian chestnuts such as *De Anima* 3.2[6] and *Metaphysics* 7.13–16.[7]

MM's output is not confined, however, to Plato and Aristotle. She has done pioneering work in elucidating the structure of Presocratic thought and has also made significant contributions to the study of Hellenistic philosophy. This volume reflects that breadth of interest. While the majority of papers are on Plato, who represents – via several books and numerous articles – the largest component of MM's scholarly production, philosophers discussed in the following pages range widely, from Heraclitus to the Stoics to Plotinus. What the papers presented here have in common is the aim of stimulating, by example, new thinking about texts and ideas whose very status as old chestnuts or sacred cows is evidence, as we believe this volume's contents will confirm, of their continuing ability to puzzle and provoke.

While philosophers of the archaic period have left us plenty of chestnuts, none is so obviously fruitful in this regard as the provocateur Heraclitus. Shaul Tor (Chapter 1) opens our collection with a focus on Heraclitus B123 ('nature likes to hide'), whose very translation, tellingly, is up for dispute. Arguing against recent rejections of the personifying force of the verb *philein* (as 'to like' or 'to love'), he detects therein the influence of a sacred cow, itself fostered by Heraclitus' ancient readers. Heraclitus' nod to the intentional forces at work in nature, reflected and reinforced for the reader who comes back to B123 from other Heraclitean fragments, sits ill with an influential narrative, originating with passages of Plato and Aristotle, which finds their predecessors engaged in a pre-Weberian 'disenchantment' of the world.

Aristotle and, above all, Plato are, of course, the principal purveyors in the ancient philosophy chestnut business, also thereby providing interpretive fuel for many sacred cows. Thus, it is no surprise that the remaining

[6] '"Perceiving that We See and Hear": Aristotle on Plato on Judgement and Reflection', Chapter 14 of McCabe 2015.
[7] 'Some Conversations with Plato: Aristotle *Metaphysics* Z.13–16', Chapter 15 of McCabe 2015.

papers in our volume are focused on the writings and thought of these two, in particular Plato; and that this is so even when our authors take up responses to them in the work of later authors. Six contributors take on a Platonic old chestnut directly, adopting different strategies for striking at it. Charles Brittain (Chapter 2) focuses on exposing the precise structure of Socrates' parodic interpretation of Simonides' *Ode to Scopas* in the *Protagoras*, arguing that Plato has Socrates play a skilful game exploiting late fifth-century interpretative gambits collected in *Poetics* 25, while offering, through his Socrates' misadventures, the makings of a positive Platonic theory of interpretation. An upshot of this reading is defence of the heretical view that Plato's Socrates is not always averse to the deliberate use of fallacy in constructing his arguments.

Raphael Woolf and Angela Hobbs (Chapters 4 and 5, respectively) each take a swing at the speech of Diotima in the *Symposium*. Woolf picks up the famous objection by Gregory Vlastos that the speech does not properly value the role of the individual in interpersonal love. Holding, against recent detractors, that Vlastos's charge was not misplaced he argues that it has nevertheless been misdiagnosed and that, with its proper basis in mind, we should not simply dismiss Diotima's position. Where Woolf opts for a strike on an already notorious feature of Diotima's famous speech, Hobbs argues that, even in a hoary old nut of this kind, there are new veins to be mined, often obscured by contemporary prejudices. Such, she argues, is the claim that *Erōs* is a *daimōn*, some kind of magical figure (in the non-debunking sense), with the corollary implications for Socrates, insofar as Diotima's description of *Erōs* is widely recognized as featuring traits resonant of Socrates. The idea of a magical aspect to Socrates, and to the philosophy he represents, should not, she insists, be dismissed or downplayed because of the negative associations that magic also has elsewhere in Plato. Instead, an understanding of magic as radically transformative can explain both its Platonic use and its connotations therein for bad and good.

Verity Harte and Dominic Scott (Chapters 7 and 8) both come at chestnuts, in the fertile branches of the *Republic*, that involve the distinction between knowledge and (true) belief. Each takes aim by arguing that the nut is best attacked with the aid of passages from elsewhere in the work. Harte argues that material on powers hidden in the conversation between Socrates and Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1 sheds light on the individuation conditions for powers subsequently exploited in the famous argument to distinguish philosophers from 'philodoxers' at the end of *Republic* 5. Scott argues that when, in *Republic* 10's discussion of mimetic poetry, Socrates descends from the apparently heady metaphysics of his opening discussion

to a more workaday view of knowledge drawn from 'experience' (*empeiria*) and thence to an opaque contrast between the knowledge of users and the true belief of makers, not only is this not inconsistent with the rest of the work, but its consistency, both in its local context and in the work as a whole, comes into focus through careful attention to the work's recurring double focus on the situation of legislators both actual and ideal.

Typically, a Platonic old chestnut will be a specific passage of a work. Sometimes, however, a work as a whole is so puzzling in its overall construction that it constitutes a chestnut in itself. Such is the situation of the *Cratylus*, Malcolm Schofield's target (Chapter 9). The *Cratylus* is famous for the worry that a perfect image of Cratylus would be another Cratylus. Schofield argues that the dialogue presents us with a puzzle in its own two portraits of Cratylus: an enigmatic figure at its opening, whose views are its stimulant, but who is silent for the bulk of the dialogue, only to emerge a regular discussant at its close. The solution, Schofield argues, and an insight into the project of the dialogue as a whole, is to see that Cratylus, reportedly a teacher of Plato, is used as a figure to enable the working through of some of the deepest paradoxes that Plato sees as arising from contemporary naturalist theories of naming.

Three further contributors, Amber Carpenter (Chapter 3), Tad Brennan (Chapter 6) and Joachim Aufderheide (Chapter 10), tackle passages with old chestnut status, two Platonic, one Aristotelian: Socrates' argument in the *Gorgias* that the tyrant who does what he wants is not thereby powerful or happy; the proposals regarding women as guardians in *Republic* 5, the first of the three waves that Socrates is there faced with; and Aristotle's definition of virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6. Each, however, aims thereby to bring down a sacred cow. Carpenter argues that the orthodox view that Socrates is a eudaimonist misses the way in which, both in this argument and elsewhere, he carefully distinguishes the (human) good from happiness and uses constraints on the former to undermine conventions regarding the latter: Socrates should thus be more correctly regarded as an 'agathist' than a eudaimonist. Brennan argues that not only are Socrates' (and Plato's) attitudes to women consistent, they can be used to critique the conventional wisdom that, in the central books of the *Republic*, Plato sets to one side the work's governing city-soul analogy. The endorsement of the selection of *some* women against the backdrop of a general anti-feminist stance towards women is a figure for the rational selection of some pleasures against the backdrop of rational suppression of the majority of appetites. Aufderheide argues that a careful scrutiny of Aristotle's definition of virtue, in conjunction with his account of the good person as a

measure (*EN* 3.4), shows that Aristotle does not accord virtue priority in definition over right action. Accordingly, despite the obvious centrality of virtue to his ethical theory, Aristotle was no virtue ethicist: proponents of twentieth- and twenty-first-century virtue ethics, taken as defenders of a distinct normative theory, are wrong to revere Aristotle as its founder.

Three final contributors remind us that ancient readers of Plato and Aristotle (and others) had their chestnuts too: some still in fruit, others that have receded from view. Ricardo Salles (Chapter 11) argues that the harmony theory of soul in Plato's *Phaedo*, a recurring old chestnut, had a decisive influence on the Stoic theory of soul as *pneuma* tensed in a particular way. In turn, tracing the contours of the Stoic reading of the passage and their parallel theory brings out what is distinctive of the *Phaedo* theory as compared with apparently similar accounts of material powers in the *Timaeus*. In the background of Richard Sorabji's contribution (Chapter 12) are two Aristotelian chestnuts, the famous Sea Battle argument of *De Interpretatione* 9 and his theory of causes succinctly presented in *Physics* 2.3, in particular the way they figure, in later ancient authors, as a backdrop of perennial arguments about the requirements for actions being 'up to us' and thus morally accountable. Sorabji argues that the great second-century (AD) Aristotelian, Alexander of Aphrodisias, can be rescued from a current consensus as to the nature (and weakness) of his response to the Stoics, by recognition that his argumentative focus is on denying necessitation, right up to the moment of action, not causation and that he does not suppose that the cause must be divorced from the agent's beliefs, desires or in general their character.

Peter Adamson (Chapter 13) concludes our collection with an account of how Plotinus aims to crack one aspect of a truly old, old chestnut, much chewed over by late ancient Platonists, the Myth of Er: specifically the role it accords to a *daimōn* in connection with each human life. Showing the careful way in which Plotinus makes sense of the relations between three apparently inconsistent passages on a human's *daimōn*, from the *Republic*'s myth, the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, Adamson offers a case study of Plotinus 'reading Plato from Plato' in *Enneads* 3.4 [15]. Plotinus emerges not only more cautiously optimistic about the prospects for human development than other, Gnostically inclined late ancient Platonists, but also as a non-dogmatic and subtle interpreter of Plato whose reading of his own and our old chestnuts still deserves serious attention: a fitting paradigm, we hope, with which to end the volume.