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978-0-521-89631-3 - Ancient Self-Refutation: The Logic and History of the Self-Refutation
Argument from Democritus to Augustine

Luca Castagnoli

Excerpt

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Introduction

πολλαχῶς γὰρ ἐπισταμένων τὸ αὐτὸ μᾶλλον μὲν εἶδέναι φαιμέν
τὸν τῷ εἶναι γνωρίζοντα τί τὸ πρᾶγμα ἢ τῷ μὴ εἶναι.

Since we may know the same thing in many ways, we say that he who knows what a certain thing is by what it is knows it better than he who knows it by what it is not.

Aristotle *Metaphysics* B 2, 996b14–16

If a philosophical argument is worth attention, so is its history. Traces it has left in the thought of philosophers who have concerned themselves with it have the historical import they do in part because they reveal aspects, often unexpected ones, of the argument's philosophical interest and significance.¹

With these remarks Myles Burnyeat opened, more than three decades ago, his first masterful study on ancient self-refutation, virtually inaugurating serious inquiry into the subject of this book (in fact, in an important sense, creating it). With our journey through the landscape of ancient self-refutation I would like to offer the reader fresh and compelling corroboration of Burnyeat's thought-provoking *incipit*. Not only does the ancient history of the self-refutation argument deserve our full attention, but careful examination of it can provide important insights into the logic, strengths and limits of the argument itself.

A number of excellent discussions devoted to specific ancient self-refutation arguments have sprung up since (and thanks to) Burnyeat's seminal work. Do we really need another foray into this topic? The fact that this is the first systematic monograph-length analysis of ancient self-refutation aiming at a certain degree of completeness² perhaps suffices to

¹ Burnyeat 1976a: 44.

² Obviously I cannot even dream of having satisfactorily treated (or having just mentioned) all the arguments which might be thought to be relevant. I would be satisfied if the reader did not turn the last page of this book with the feeling that a substantial portion of interesting material had been completely and unjustifiedly ignored.

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justify its existence. I hope that the synoptic historical and logical understanding which this book pursues will make its existence worthwhile for anyone interested in philosophical argumentation, favouring at the same time an improvement in depth of analysis of specific arguments which should appeal to those readers who are more interested in familiar Platonic, Aristotelian or sceptical trees and bushes than in the exotic self-refutation wood.³

There are other, more substantial questions, however, which deserve some preliminary discussion. This book aims to provide a comprehensive survey and analysis of the history and logic of ancient self-refutation; satisfactorily delimiting the scope of such an enterprise is itself no easy task. Determining the suitable chronological boundaries for the notion of *ancient* philosophy proved a minor source of hesitation: although my decision to arrive at, and halt with, Augustine, with very few glimpses beyond, is not immune to criticism, I believe the success of the whole project does not depend essentially on the merits of this decision.⁴ The major preliminary challenge was a different one: what should count as an ancient instance of *self-refutation*? The ancients did not possess any single technical term, or even an identifiable set of terms or phrases, for our 'self-refutation': even after the *περιτροπή* ('reversal') jargon gained large currency in the Hellenistic age, it never became so popular as to be adopted for all the arguments which seem to deserve our attention and, at the same time, it also continued to be attached to arguments of little interest, or no interest at all, for our inquiry. By itself this might be no more than a nuisance for the interpreter, who cannot rely on sharp terminological criteria (and ultra-fast *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* database queries) to identify and catalogue the relevant material.

However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. You resolve to browse the Greek and Roman philosophical literature for early instances, or at least

³ Whitehead once said that the history of western philosophy can be characterised as a series of footnotes to Plato. I would have no qualms if someone appropriated this notorious diagnosis and suggested that the scholarly literature on ancient self-refutation is no more than a series of footnotes to Burnyeat, and that this book is only the latest, albeit most lengthy and, it is hoped, most critically fecund, of these. Although on occasion I will criticise some of Burnyeat's views and arguments, the extent to which my work remains indebted to his cannot but exceed my numerous acknowledgements *ad locum*.

⁴ My inquiry will be limited to ancient Western (e.g. Greek and Roman) philosophers and their self-refutation arguments. For analogous arguments in the Eastern tradition cf. e.g. Visvader 1978, McEvilley 1982, Perrett 1984, Graham 1989: 183–6, Harbsmeier 1998: 344–5.

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traces, of self-refutation arguments; you ask yourself what the desiderata of your research are, i.e. what defining features of our notion of self-refutation those ancient arguments should mirror, at least partially and confusedly (for, as some modern readers would certainly contend, the ancients were, after all, quite ancient, and you should not expect too much logical clarity from them); you discover that in fact you do not really know what 'our' self-refutation is, because nothing like an approved definition, or even shared general account, of this notion is available in the literature. More startlingly, there are not even obvious competitors from which we might make a reasoned choice:⁵ the self-refutation jargon is used (and often abused) with a mind-boggling myriad of different senses and nuances, and those who adopt it rarely make any serious effort to explain its exact import. Even the few studies devoted to the logic of self-refutation⁶ cautiously eschew the task of providing us with definitions encompassing the various forms they identify and disentangle. Surely, although there is no precise definition largely agreed upon, there must be some set of features which recur in all or most current analyses and uses of self-refutation? Even such an expectation proves itself too optimistic.

Let us start from the basics, and call 'self-refutation argument' any argument which aims at showing that (and how) something is 'self-refuting', i.e. refutes itself.⁷ At least thus far there should be no room for controversy, although it is worth mentioning that 'self-refutation' and

⁵ I shall assume, dogmatically, that the few definitions of self-refutation which I could find in the literature are not viable options: e.g. 'A statement is self-refuting IFF *either* its meaning *or* the manner or medium of its utterance is *sufficient* to show that it is false' (Sparkes 1991: 59); 'a self-refuting utterance is one which is shown to be false in the very fact of its being made' (Blackburn 1994: 345); 'an utterance is said to be self-refuting if it is possible, as soon as it has been made, for the hearer to infer that it cannot be true' (Mautner 1996: 391); cf. also White 1989: 84 (quoted on p. 359). My analysis will demonstrate that these definitions are inadequate to account for what we seem entitled to identify as ancient instances of self-refutation (but also, more generally, that they are exceedingly narrow and misleading accounts of self-refutation *tout court*).

⁶ The most significant general discussions are contained in Passmore 1961, Mackie 1964, Johnstone 1964, Bonney 1966, Stroud 1968, Boyle 1972, Boyle, Grisez and Tollefsen 1976, Finnis 1977, Vanderveken 1980, Stack 1983, Champlin 1988, Johnstone 1989, White 1989, Page 1992, Herrnstein Smith 1996, Johansson 2003. Relevant material can also be found in the vast literature devoted to 'Moore's paradox' and to the 'pragmatic paradoxes' and 'Moorean absurdities' stemming from it (cf. e.g. Moore 1942, Moore 1944, O'Connor 1948, Cohen 1950, O'Connor 1951, Ebersole 1953, Grant 1958, Hintikka 1962b, Burnyeat 1967–8, McDowell 1980, Sorensen 1988, Haslanger 1992, Williams 1994, Green and Williams 2007).

⁷ What I shall be concerned with is attested self-refutation *arguments*, or at least self-refutation *charges*. Obviously there are many theses and theories in the ancient philosophical literature which might be attacked as somehow self-refuting (their number depends of course on how broad one's concept of self-refutation is), but for which no such attack is documented by our sources: these will not be the object of my attention.

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'self-refuting' are not themselves labels favoured universally.⁸ But leaving aside for now the predictable disagreement concerning the 'how', namely concerning the logic of the argument itself, let us focus on the other terms of our *prima facie* innocuous definition. What is that 'something' which is charged with refuting itself? A cursory survey of the literature is sufficient to reveal the range of the different (albeit not always strictly incompatible) answers: propositions, utterances, speech acts, statements, assertions, beliefs, arguments, theories, people, to mention only the most popular ones. Can we agree at least on what the 'refutation' amounts to? What incurs self-refutation is often said to be 'falsified',⁹ sometimes even to be proved 'logically impossible' or 'absurd'; other interpreters maintain, more cautiously, that the self-refuting item is 'only' convicted as somehow unbelievable or unassertable, or pointlessly self-defeating in debate. In certain cases these options are treated as mutually exclusive, in others as dependent on the specific instances or the general types of self-refutation involved.

Obviously not all the competing analyses and uses in currency possess the same degree of plausibility; some additional work might perhaps allow us to distil from them a consistent picture of self-refutation sufficiently broad to meet some consensus and at the same time sufficiently well defined to be adopted as a springboard for our inquiry into ancient self-refutation. I have opted, however, for a rather different approach. I shall not begin by attempting to articulate a decent account of self-refutation on the basis of the modern uses; instead, I will let our quest for ancient self-refutation arguments be guided by a more fluid plurality of concurring provisional criteria, none of which will be assumed to be, by itself, a sufficient or necessary condition for the identification of those arguments. I mention here only the most important of these criteria:

- the occurrence of certain key terms or phrases, such as the Greek or Latin counterparts of 'refutes itself', 'eliminates itself', 'overturns itself', 'throw itself down', 'cancels itself', 'incurs (self-)reversal', will play a primary role in attracting our attention;
- the apparent identity or similarity between some ancient arguments and some examples which recur in modern discussions on self-refutation will be taken into due account;

⁸ Among the alternative labels for self-refutation or some of its forms I signal: 'self-defeat', 'self-referential incoherence/inconsistency', 'pragmatic paradox', 'self-contradiction', 'performative contradiction', 'self-stultification', 'self-destruction', 'recoil', 'turning the tables', 'retortion'.

⁹ Cf. n. 5 above for some examples.

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- the existing scholarly literature on the topic will contribute to directing our attention to what has already been identified and discussed, mostly with good reason, as relevant ancient material.

The characteristic features of ancient self-refutation will emerge progressively from our scrutiny of the ancient texts provisionally selected on the basis of the interaction of these informal criteria.

While abstaining from predetermining what self-refutation is, however, I shall attempt here to partially delimit its scope, by explaining what it *is not*, or at least by clarifying what I have decided not to treat as relevant for our purposes.¹⁰

To begin with, I suggest that self-refutation is best kept distinct from *self-contradiction*. The way I intend the latter notion is itself hard to specify in satisfactory formal terms: I take self-contradiction to include all those cases in which a single proposition,¹¹ atomic or compound, either entails or consists of a pair of contradictory propositions. This broad category would thus include instances both of formal self-contradictions, either explicit

$p \wedge \neg p$ It is raining and it is not raining

or implicit

$(p \rightarrow q) \wedge p \wedge \neg q$ If I am using an umbrella, it is raining, and I
am using an umbrella, and it is not raining,

and of analytic self-contradictions, like

The triangle ABC has four sides

(which entails that the figure referred to both has three sides, *qua* triangle, and has not three sides, since it has four).¹² Self-contradictions are also, intuitively, necessary falsehoods (and ‘self-falsifying in the sense that they are their own falsitymakers’,¹³ as typically shown through *reductio ad*

¹⁰ I am aware that in doing so I am already prejudging some of the open issues concerning the subject, nature and outcome of self-refutation which I have individuated above.

¹¹ Derivatively, we can also speak of self-contradicting sentences, statements, beliefs, etc. (i.e. of all those items having a self-contradicting propositional content).

¹² The difficulty of defining these notions rigorously emerges immediately with formal self-contradiction: in classical logic any logically impossible proposition entails anything whatsoever (*ex impossibili quodlibet*), and thus also any pair of contradictory propositions. ‘Self-contradiction’ is in fact a typical label in logic textbooks for those formulae which are false for any possible interpretation of their variables (often in opposition to ‘tautology’). A more robust notion of *entailment* is presupposed by my distinction (incidentally, some such more robust notion seems to have been favoured by ancient logicians; cf. section 1 of chapter 6). The question of what counts as a single proposition is also far from trivial (on Aristotle’s diffidence towards conjunction as a means to form compound propositions cf. e.g. Geach 1963).

¹³ Johansson 2003: 662.

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impossibile), and are rejected as such in most logical systems.¹⁴ One might argue that self-refutation must be a subspecies of self-contradiction: on some analyses, a proposition refutes itself when it entails its own contradictory, and since anything seems to entail itself as well, any self-refuting p would always entail the contradiction $p \wedge \neg p$. I shall not assess this view at this stage:¹⁵ it is sufficient here to have identified a large class of self-contradictions which will not be part of our study.

A key feature of the notion of self-contradiction as I have just outlined it is that it is a single propositional item that is properly called self-contradicting. However, 'self-contradiction' is also adopted, loosely, with reference to more complex items, and it is especially in this sense that we find it often used interchangeably with 'self-refutation'. Think of typical allegations such as 'You are contradicting yourself!', or 'That theory is self-contradictory': they do not necessarily suggest that the interlocutor has accepted a self-contradicting proposition in the sense outlined above, or that a theory includes any self-contradicting thesis. More often than not, such allegations express the charge that your interlocutor made (two or more) distinct inconsistent claims, or that a theory includes (two or more) distinct inconsistent theses. This *inconsistency* can assume a variety of forms. In the most trivial one, for example, Tom says that p ('Plato was a better philosopher than Aristotle') on Monday and that not- p ('Plato was not a better philosopher than Aristotle') on Tuesday; or, more subtly, Tom says that p ('Plato was a better philosopher than Aristotle') on Monday, says that q ('Aristotle was a better philosopher than Parmenides') on Tuesday and says that r ('Parmenides was a better philosopher than Plato') on Wednesday, where q and r jointly entail not- p . I shall call this '*diachronic inconsistency*' between Tom's various claims. Suppose that, on the contrary, Tom believes that p , q and r at the same time, without realising that q and r jointly entail not- p : in such a situation (which, incidentally, occurs to all of us often enough) Tom is holding *synchronically* inconsistent beliefs. If we broaden our perspective to Tom's system of beliefs (or set of utterances) as a whole, of course we are entitled to speak of self-contradiction, or to protest that Tom is contradicting himself (the conjunction of the propositional contents of his beliefs would be a self-contradiction in the strictest sense explained above); however, none of the propositions Tom takes to be true can thereby be singled out as self-contradicting (or self-refuting).

¹⁴ Some non-classical systems of logic admit contradictions (cf. e.g. Priest's (1987) 'dialetheism').

¹⁵ One of the main contentions of this book will be precisely that self-refutation is not a case of a proposition entailing its own contradictory and thereby being demonstrably false.

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The inconsistent ‘items’ need not belong to the same category. One interesting species of inconsistency, which we can label ‘*pragmatic inconsistency*’, typically involves a clash between what one *says*, on the one hand, and what one *does*, on the other. Pragmatic inconsistency itself has a variety of distinct nuances and manifestations. Let us consider only a couple of them which will be particularly relevant for our purposes:

- (1) what one says can take the form of some sort of general advice or norm (‘People should not smoke’) and what one does can be an open violation of it (smoking cigarettes), stimulating the evergreen censure ‘You don’t practise what you preach’;
- (2) what one says can be some factual claim (‘I cannot read ancient Greek’) and what one does something which either directly falsifies it (reading Plato in the original), or appears to involve presuppositions and implications which, if true, would falsify it (selecting Burnet’s Oxford Classical Texts edition of Plato’s *Theaetetus* as my bedtime reading for this week).

I suggest that the various forms of self-contradiction and inconsistency which I have sketchily outlined should be carefully kept distinct from self-refutation, while recognising that the edges between all these notions are not always as sharp as we might desire.¹⁶ Independently of its theoretical merits, I hope that my rough *via negativa* to self-refutation will serve its contingent purpose of conveying some preliminary idea (and warning) of what the reader should not expect to find in the pages of this book. Standard *reductio ad impossibile* arguments, which on my account are located in the sphere of self-contradiction, will not be on our menu (although some of my contentions concerning the logic of ancient self-refutation might have consequences for some forms of ancient *reductio* as well). The elenchus (Socratic, Aristotelian or otherwise) will also lie beyond the scope of my analysis, since its gist seems to remain, through all its varieties, intended aims and interpretations, that of unmasking hidden inconsistencies between sets of beliefs, concessions, theses;¹⁷ for the same

¹⁶ For some further reflections on this distinction cf. the conclusion.

¹⁷ *Contra* Robinson (1953: 1–32), according to whom the Socratic *elenchus* is usually ‘indirect’: the thesis subjected to elenchus entails (typically alone, but sometimes in conjunction with others) something false or impossible (in most cases, a self-contradiction), so the Socratic elenchus would be more similar to a *reductio ad absurdum* than to a proof of inconsistency. I believe Robinson’s interpretation of the elenchus does not square well with Plato’s texts, but it is worth mentioning here that Vlastos badly misrepresents it when he describes it in terms which would make of the ‘indirect elenchus’ a form of self-refutation argument: ‘when the answerer asserts *p*, Socrates would derive *not-p* either directly from *p* or else by deriving from *p* some further premisses which entail *not-p* – in either case deducing *not-p* from *p* “without the aid of any extra-premiss” (1983: 29). For an incorrect interpretation of the Socratic elenchus analogous to the one which Vlastos wrongly

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reason, Plutarch, with the material sedulously collected in his *De Stoicorum Repugnantiiis* (*On the Contradictions of the Stoics*), will not be a hero of our story. The charge of pragmatic inconsistency was a favourite weapon in ancient philosophical controversy: while its history would certainly deserve a comprehensive investigation analogous to the one I am undertaking here for self-refutation, my tentative map of various types of refutation has banned it from the ground covered in this book. Also the notorious Liar Paradox, for reasons to be explained in chapter 1, will make only a cursory appearance on the stage, to be quickly dismissed.

As I have explained, I shall not presuppose or adopt any specific modern account of self-refutation to guide and shape our study of ancient self-refutation arguments. I shall often refer, however, to John Mackie's (1964) formal taxonomy of different types of self-refutation. This preference has a double rationale: not only does Mackie's analysis remain one of the most rigorous and finely nuanced on the market, but it has also become, through Burnyeat's partial adoption of it, the unchallenged benchmark in most subsequent literature on ancient self-refutation. Although Mackie's analysis will receive large and well-deserved attention, I shall not assume it to be a privileged route to the correct identification, interpretation and assessment of ancient self-refutation arguments; actually I shall express various reservations about the extent to which it can be borrowed for our purpose and, more fundamentally, to which it succeeds in clarifying some fundamental aspects of the logic of self-refutation itself. I shall also refrain, as far as possible, from casting my analysis within any other specific modern theoretical framework: although I have no doubt that the conceptual apparatus offered, among others, by pragmatics, speech act theories, and dialectical, doxastic and epistemic logics could sometimes prove helpful, I believe that our research will be best conducted and presented in a setting which remains neutral between such theories and their technical (and often controversial) distinctions and jargon.

The same kind of plurality of approaches is reflected in the structure of this book: in part I the ancient self-refutation arguments will be collected, analysed, assessed and compared on the basis of the similarity of the positions under attack; in part II the structural analogy in the logical patterns of the self-refutation arguments themselves will be the main organising

attributes to Robinson (and along the lines of the so-called *Consequentia Mirabilis*: cf. chapter 6, section 1 below) cf. Hall 1967: 386: 'This is a logically valid procedure, for it corresponds to the logical law "if p implies not- p , then not- p is true"'. On the Socratic elenchus cf. also Benson 1995, Scott 2002; on the Aristotelian elenchus cf. Bolton 1993, Cavini 1993b, Gobbo 1997; on the Stoic conception of elenchus cf. Repici 1993.

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principle; part III will be devoted, finally, to the investigation of the crucial role the self-refutation charge played in the ancient debates between sceptics and dogmatists and of the way in which that charge contributed to shaping those debates and ancient scepticism itself. I hope that the asymmetry resulting from these different perspectives will enhance, rather than weaken, the quality and structure of the exposition and our sense of the importance of the self-refutation argument in ancient philosophy.

But it is time now to make the acquaintance of our mysterious beast.

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PART I

Truth, falsehood and self-refutation

Insignem continent Veritatis astum hae demonstrationes, quo illa hostium suorum armis in eorum perniciem pro se abutitur; sed imprimis Dilemmate velut incantamento cogitur Veritatis hostis de industria, pro Veritate tamquam pro aris et focus dimicare.

These demonstrations contain a remarkable stratagem of Truth, by which she uses the weapons of her enemies for their own undoing and to her own advantage; but especially the enemy of Truth is deliberately forced by the Dilemma, like by a spell, to fight for Truth as if he were fighting for his own hearth and home.

Arnold Geulincx, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*
8 (= 1891–3: vol. II, 473)