

Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy, by John M. Cooper.
Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004. Pp. x + 410. H/b *, P/b *.

The book reprints twelve of John Cooper's essays on topics in ancient philosophy, adding a new essay on Marcus Aurelius and a note on Aristotle on mixture. The essays range widely in topic, and are unified only in method and goal. To all who love the ancient texts, I highly recommend Cooper's interpretations for the attention to details of the text, the nose for problems that arise, and the skill at finding coherent readings. These features of his essays justify their collection into book form, as scholars will consult and refer to these essays in their further research. The student or scholar trying to use these interpretations as guides into the literature will be aided by copious references to editions of primary sources such as the Loeb texts and translations, but will get little guidance to alternative interpretations from the few references in the essays.

Synopsis of interpretations and evaluations. Essay 1 interprets the anonymous On Ancient Medicine as defending a scientific method that is both making explanations "in terms of for the most part unobservable entities" (32) and making "the observations of the physician . . . provide the . . . knowledge of causes in the medical case" (36), evaluating it as "brilliant and revolutionary" in historical context (42). Essay 2 interprets Plato's Theaetetus 184b-186e as an "argument . . . against the proposal that knowledge be defined as [perception]" (43), evaluating it as containing "points of great originality" (63). Essay 3 argues against the interpretation that "the ancient rhetorical tradition . . . had a distinctive, reasonably well developed theory of what constitutes sound [moral and political] argument" (65). Essay 4 interprets ancient skepticism—the school that "keeps

on inquiring into philosophical questions . . . without ever reaching a conclusion” (102)—as fundamentally two schools. Arcesilaus’s skepticism “stems from a deep and abiding commitment to . . . reason itself as our guide” (102), while Sextus Empiricus completely renounces “reason altogether” (103). Essay 5 explains how “Aristotle, unlike other teleologists of nature (Plato, the medievals, Leibniz), finds goal-directedness in natural processes without feeling any need at all to find [a Designer’s] intentions” (128), evaluating Aristotle as “both coherent and philosophically well-motivated” (129). Essay 6 interprets Aristotle’s “effort to reconcile necessity with teleology in the explanation of animate nature” (146-7), evaluating it as “coherent and, given the science of his time, . . . remarkably effective” (147). Essay 7 interprets Aristotle’s account of how the elements in a mixture (such as fire and earth in flesh) actively retain their powers (fire’s power is heat; earth’s is cold), mutually abating each other’s excess to produce flesh’s moderate temperature. It evaluates Aristotle as “brilliantly and accurately insist[ing] that there must be a difference between mixtures—in which the ingredients remain what they were, without having been destroyed, while however having been altered—and those bodies that are produced by generation from previously existing but now destroyed bodies of other types” (160), although Aristotle ultimately fails “to surmount the difficulties that his theory faces” (160). Essay 8 interprets Aristotle’s account of forms in The Generation of Animals to make “no use of and [have] no need at all for those species forms—the form of a human being in general, for example, shared by all the human beings—that are the staple of much contemporary discussion of Aristotle’s metaphysics” (202). Essay 9 interprets the Stoic conception of autonomy and contrasts it with Kantian autonomy, evaluating the Stoic response “to the difficult questions about how Fate [i.e. universal

causality] and personal responsibility can be combined” as “entirely adequate” (240). Essay 10 interprets Plato’s Republic as “interplay . . . between Glaucon’s negative, libertarian views [of justice] and Socrates’ positive, communitarian ones” (269), evaluating Socrates’ views as “more inspiring than they are satisfactorily worked out” (269). Essay 11 interprets Aristotle’s account of “excellent contemplation [as] (all by itself) the highest human good” (308), evaluating it as not undermining Aristotle’s “high appreciation of moral virtue as a fundamental human value” (308). Essay 12 interprets Seneca’s Stoicism as losing “sight of what he officially recognizes as the goal of moral improvement: an improved mind, an improved understanding, on the basis of which then to conduct one’s life,” with the result that his Stoicism is “no longer quite what Zeno and Chrysippus had in mind” (334). Essay 13 interprets the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius in the same way (368).

How well does the book achieve its goal? The goal of the book is “to make ancient philosophical perspectives available in all their freshness, originality, and deep, continuing, philosophical interest to philosophers and philosophy students of the current day” (vii). With such a goal, the study of historical in addition to contemporary texts can widen the horizon of philosophical topics, approaches, and arguments and thus can overcome the limitations of an exclusive focus on contemporary journal literature. Expert interpretation of historical sources is often necessary for an enlightened consideration of the philosophical interest of historical texts. In addition to its interest to those who love ancient texts, therefore, the book’s expert interpretation of ancient philosophical perspectives also makes it a useful tool for philosophers seeking to overcome the limits of the contemporary.

While the book succeeds in making ancient philosophy available for consideration by philosophers, I would like to see it do more “to gain appreciation for its fruits among the philosophical community in general” (vii). As it seems to me, if the book aims for such appreciation, it must do more than interpret; it must challenge some of the topics, approaches, or arguments of contemporary philosophy by establishing positive evaluations of ancient alternatives.

As shown above, some of the book’s essays—3, 4, 8, 12, and 13—are merely interpretive. Other essays evaluate ancient texts only in the context of ancient scientific understanding (1 and 6), or evaluate negatively (10), or evaluate merely as original or consistent (2 and 11). Essays 5, 7, and 9 do make positive evaluations, but with little explicit justification. Essay 5’s evaluation of Aristotle’s account of undesigned goal-directedness as “philosophically well-motivated” ignores discussions of goal-directedness in contemporary philosophy of biology. Essay 7 evaluates Aristotle’s distinction between mixtures and newly generated substances as “accurate,” but gives no account how this distinction maps onto contemporary chemistry’s distinction between homogeneous mixtures (such as air, saltwater, and brass) and chemical compounds (such as in fleshy substances). When Aristotle’s philosophy presupposes obsolete science, his fruitfulness will not be apparent to contemporary philosophy, howsoever excellent his methods. Essay 9’s evaluation of the Stoic harmony of universal causality and personal responsibility as “adequate” ignores contemporary philosophical compatibilism. To be sure, Stoic compatibilism differs from contemporary in assuming for example the divinity of the causal order, but the essay leaves unclear how this assumption is defensible and

how this assumption makes Stoic compatibilism a philosophical alternative to contemporary compatibilism.

Conclusion. The excellence of the interpretation of each of the book's essays is indisputable. I endorse the book's overall goal: the study of ancient philosophy ought to bear fruit for the general philosophical community, on the grounds that a broader range of perspectives produces better quality philosophy. As I see it, both contemporary philosophy unbroadened by historical perspectives and historical philosophy unbroadened by contemporary are at risk. For this reason, I find it a defect that the book does not defend positive evaluations of ancient philosophy nor give due consideration to contemporary philosophy.

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