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Ancient Self-Refutation: The Logic and History of the Self-Refutation Argument from Democritus to Augustine. By LUCA CASTAGNOLI. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. [xx] + 394.

Suppose I claim that everything is false. You object that if everything is false, my claim itself is false. I admit this. But given that the claim is false, you argue, not everything is false. Again, I admit it.

This little argument establishes that by advancing my thesis I commit myself to its contradictory opposite. Thus my thesis is shown to be self-refuting. An argument that aims at showing that a given thesis is self-refuting is called a “self-refutation argument.” Such arguments were in widespread use by philosophers in antiquity. Although the Greek technical term for self-refutation, *περιτροπή* or *περιτρέπειν* (“reversal”), is not attested before Sextus Empiricus, self-refutation arguments were known at least since the fourth century B.C.E. They were typically used to attack unorthodox positions such as the denial of the existence of any truth or falsehood, Protagorean relativism, hard determinism, and general skepticism.

Luca Castagnoli’s book is the first to provide a comprehensive account of the wide variety of these arguments in antiquity. The book is in three parts. The first part deals with self-refuting theses concerning truth and falsehood, such as “Everything is false” and “Everything is true” (pp. 11–141). C. investigates self-refutation arguments put forward against such theses in the *Dissoi logoi*, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Γ, and Sextus’ *Adversus mathematicos*. Moreover, he examines the self-refutation argument given in Plato’s *Theaetetus* against the Protagorean claim that every opinion is true, and an argument in Augustine’s *Soliloquia* against the claim that truth will perish at some time.

The second part of the book is devoted to a heterogeneous group of self-refutation arguments commonly classified under the heading of “pragmatic self-refutation” (pp. 143–247). A claim is pragmatically self-refuting, roughly, if its content conflicts with the way it is presented. For example, suppose I shout the sentence “I am not shouting.” Unlike with “Everything is false,” the content of this claim does not by itself imply its contradictory; if I asserted it in a calm voice, the claim would be true. But given that I shout it, it is pragmatically self-refuting. In his *Letter to Menoecus*, Epicurus levels the charge of pragmatic self-refutation at a determinist who claims that everything is necessitated, and that therefore we are not responsible for our actions and beliefs. Epicurus argues that if the determinist advances his claim in such a way as to reproach the anti-determinist and to hold him responsible for his denial of determinism, then his claim is pragmatically self-refuting. Similarly, a skeptic who claims that there are no proofs is liable to the charge of pragmatic self-refutation if he presents this claim as something that has been established by a proof (Sextus Empiricus *Adversus mathematicos*).

The third part of the book examines the role self-refutation arguments played in the ancient debates between skeptics and dogmatists (pp. 249–352). C. argues that, contrary to what is sometimes thought, the Pyrrhonists did not take their own skeptical position to be self-refuting. Moreover, he argues that the Pyrrhonists recognized a distinctive kind of self-refutation argument characterized by the term *περιγραφή* (“bracketing,” “canceling”). In this kind of argument, unlike in the *περιτροπή* arguments discussed in the first two parts of the book, advancing the self-refuting thesis

does not result in being committed to its contradictory; it merely results in bracketing or withdrawing the thesis and not endorsing it anymore (see pp. 270–71, 355).

C. provides an impressive and valuable overview of the history of ancient self-refutation arguments. At the same time, he examines each of these arguments in detail, explaining their context and discussing different ways of interpreting them. Since the individual arguments differ significantly in their structure and strategy, C. does not attempt to propose a general definition of what an ancient self-refutation argument is (pp. 2–5, 353). Nevertheless, his synoptic treatment contributes to a better understanding both of the individual arguments and of their general nature. C. takes into account an enormous amount of secondary literature, paying special attention to the pioneering work on ancient self-refutation by Myles Burnyeat.¹ The Greek or Latin text of all primary texts is quoted in footnotes. The book is a little longer than it needed to be. While the presentation is generally clear, the style tends to be wordy and rhetorical. There are also some unnecessary digressions that do not contribute directly to an understanding of ancient self-refutation (e.g., pp. 129–38, 295–301).

C. not only describes the history of ancient self-refutation arguments, but also undertakes to clarify their logic. His main thesis in this connection is that ancient self-refutation arguments are dialectical maneuvers of a distinctive kind. As such, he argues, they do not fit the modern standard account of self-refutation, which is based on the work of John Leslie Mackie.² Consider, for example, the little self-refutation argument given above against the claim that everything is false. According to the modern standard account, this argument can be represented as follows:

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|----|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Everything is false | [assumption for conditionalization] |
| 2. | “Everything is false” is false | [from 1, by universal instantiation] |
| 3. | Not everything is false | [from 2, “not p” follows from the falsity of p] |
| 4. | If everything is false, then not everything is false | [conditionalization: 1–3] |
| 5. | Not everything is false | [from 4, by <i>Consequentia mirabilis</i>] |

The first three lines of this reconstruction constitute a subargument establishing that “Everything is false” implies its own contradictory. In line 4, this implication is explicitly stated. The step from line 4 to line 5 is justified by a principle of classical logic according to which any statement that implies its own contradictory is false. This principle is often labeled *Consequentia mirabilis*, and can be written as follows: $(p \rightarrow \neg p) \rightarrow \neg p$.

The statement of “Not everything is false” in line 3 is conditional on the assumption, in line 1, that everything is false. By contrast, line 5 contains an unconditional statement of “Not everything is false,” derived by *Consequentia mirabilis*. Thus line 5 of the reconstruction establishes the unconditional truth of “Not everything is false.” It

1. M. F. Burnyeat, “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 44–69; “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 172–95.

2. J. L. Mackie, “Self-Refutation—A Formal Analysis,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 193–203.

thereby also establishes the unconditional falsity of the original thesis that everything is false.

By contrast, C. argues that ancient self-refutation arguments do not establish the unconditional falsity of the thesis that is shown to be self-refuting. On his view, ancient self-refutation arguments do not involve an application of *Consequentia mirabilis*, and do not contain anything like line 5 above. Instead, they typically consist only of an argument corresponding to lines 1–3. This argument shows that by advancing a given thesis, or by advancing it in a certain way, one commits oneself to its contradictory.³ But according to C., it does not establish, or aim to establish, the falsity of that thesis (pp. 15–16, 28–29, 39, 63, 78, 139–40, 194, 270, 355). The argument merely serves “the different purpose of unmasking certain theses as ‘dialectical losers’ and silencing their supporters: whoever dares to propose and defend one of these unorthodox theses thereby commits himself, unwittingly, to its contradictory” (p. 140, see also pp. 172–73). Thus, C. holds that ancient self-refutation arguments are not adequately captured by non-dialectical reconstructions such as the one given above. He thinks that “the single most distinctive feature of ancient self-refutation [is] its intrinsically dialectical nature” (p. 355), and that “by reducing those ancient arguments to non-dialectical form . . . we misrepresent their logic and conclusions” (p. 32).

Let me illustrate C.’s view by an example from chapter Γ 8 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. In this chapter Aristotle presents two self-refutation arguments against the theses (a) that everything is true and (b) that everything is false (*Metaph.* Γ 8, 1012b13–18):

Indeed all such theses are exposed to the stock objection that they eliminate themselves.

For (a) anyone who says that everything is true also makes the thesis opposite to his own true, so that his own is not true (for the opposite thesis denies that his is true), and (b) anyone who says that everything is false also [belies] himself. (trans. C.)⁴

C. comments on the argument in (a), calling the asserter of the theses under attack “Antiphasis” (pp. 77–78):

Aristotle is not claiming that if everything were true then it would also be true that it is false that everything is true and, therefore, “Everything is true” must be false: the final, crucial inference from $(p \rightarrow \neg p)$ to $\neg p$ is missing, but it is this extra inference that would be required to have a formal refutation of Antiphasis’ thesis by *Consequentia mirabilis*.

He goes on to comment on the argument in (b) as follows (p. 78):

The nature of the argument as a purely dialectical “silencer” of Antiphasis is confirmed by the case of “Everything is false” in (b): he who says that everything is false . . . unwittingly concedes, by self-application, that what he is saying must be false too (again, the further and different conclusion ‘therefore, it is false that everything is false’ is missing). That proposal is thus self-defeating and suicidal: this is all that Aristotle seems to be interested in establishing through the self-refutation ‘stock objection’. This is not to suggest that Aristotle did not believe that—to use our terms—the propositions ‘Everything is true’ and ‘Everything is false’ are false, or that he excluded that he could prove . . . their falsehood; I am only emphasising that this is not what 1012b13–18 purports to establish.

3. As mentioned above, this is only true for the *περιτροπή* arguments discussed in the first two parts of C.’s book, but not for the *περιγραφή* arguments discussed in the third part.

4. συμβαίνει δὴ καὶ τὸ θρυλούμενον πᾶσι τοῖς τοιοῦτοις λόγοις, αὐτοὺς ἑαυτοὺς ἀναίρειν. ὁ μὲν γὰρ πάντα ἀληθῆ λέγων καὶ τὸν ἐναντιὸν αὐτοῦ λόγον ἀληθῆ ποιεῖ, ὥστε τὸν ἑαυτοῦ οὐκ ἀληθῆ (ὁ γὰρ ἐναντίος οὐ φησιν αὐτὸν ἀληθῆ), ὁ δὲ πάντα ψευδῆ καὶ αὐτὸς αὐτόν.

C. emphasizes that Aristotle's argument does not contain an explicit application of *Consequentia mirabilis*. Moreover, he shows that none of the ancient self-refutation arguments before Augustine contain an explicit application of it.⁵ This observation is a good and important one, but I have doubts about the consequences C. draws from it. He takes the absence of explicit applications of *Consequentia mirabilis* to be a sign of the purely dialectical nature of ancient self-refutation arguments. This is questionable. As C. himself points out, the formulation of ancient self-refutation arguments is often compressed and elliptical (pp. 30, 47, 80–81, 114–16, 119, 284, 359). C. usually assumes that pieces of a dialectical context have been omitted in them and should be supplied by the reader (e.g., pp. 80–81, 112–14). But in many cases it is equally possible to supply other, non-dialectical pieces of reasoning. In Aristotle's arguments from Γ 8, for instance, we may supply an inference to the effect that the thesis which has been shown to be self-refuting is not true. For if Aristotle took the arguments to establish that the thesis has its own contradictory as a consequence, it must have been obvious to him that the thesis is not true (since every consequence of a true thesis is true, and contradictory theses cannot be simultaneously true).⁶ On the further assumption that the principle of bivalence is applicable, Aristotle might even infer that the thesis is false.⁷ It is, in my view, perfectly plausible to attribute such inferences to Aristotle and to supply them in his arguments from Γ 8. On this account, there is no reason to think that these arguments are of an intrinsically dialectical nature and cannot be adequately represented as non-dialectical proofs of the non-truth, or even falsity, of the thesis in question.

Moreover, it is difficult to see signs of a dialectical exchange between two parties in Γ 8, 1012b13–18. The only direct evidence adduced by C. is Aristotle's reference to the person who asserts (δ λέγων) the theses in question. C. holds that "Aristotle's reference to the asserter of the thesis that everything is true would be irrelevant if his aim were to prove something about its propositional content independently of that assertion" (p. 78). However, it is not clear that this reference is essential to Aristotle's argument. One might even doubt whether Aristotle actually refers to the asserter of the thesis: for the implicit subject of δ λέγων at 1012b15 might be λόγος instead of the asserter. At least it seems clear that λόγος is the subject of δ λέγων a few lines later, at 1012b21–22.⁸ The whole passage could then be taken to be concerned with

5. Some arguments in Augustine's writings contain an application of *Consequentia mirabilis* (see pp. 121–24, 139, 197–201, 361).

6. In the *Prior Analytics* Aristotle states that no thesis can necessarily imply its own contradictory (2.4, 57b13–14). C. appeals to this statement in order to argue for his claim that ancient self-refutation arguments should not be analyzed as involving implicit applications of *Consequentia mirabilis* (pp. 105–11, 178–79, 190). Thus, C. should deny that Aristotle's self-refutation arguments establish a necessary implication between the self-refuting thesis and its contradictory. However, C. does not explain what other kind of consequence relation he takes the arguments to establish between them (although he suggests that it is "a sort of dialectical necessity," p. 38).

7. C. concedes that Aristotle's argument in (b) suffices to establish that "Everything is false" is either false or Liar-paradoxical (pp. 78, 81). (If a thesis is Liar-paradoxical, then the assumption of its falsity leads to contradiction as well as the assumption of its truth.) But "Everything is false" is only Liar-paradoxical in the unlikely (for Aristotle perhaps impossible) event that everything distinct from this thesis is false. So, given the additional premise that there is at least one true item distinct from the thesis "Everything is false," Aristotle can, even in C.'s view, safely infer that the thesis is false.

8. δ γὰρ λέγων τὸν ἀληθῆ λόγον ἀληθῆ ἀληθῆς ("for the statement which states that the true statement is true is true"). C. gives a different translation of this sentence: "for he who says that the true thesis is true says something true" (p. 76). However, it is quite unnatural, in this context, to take ἀληθῆς to apply to a person and

λόγοι (statements or theses), but not with their asserters. Such an interpretation of the passage is given by Alexander of Aphrodisias (*in Metaph.* 340.26–29):⁹

The statement that says that everything is false [ὁ δὲ πάντα ψευδοῦ εἶναι λέγων λόγος] negates itself, because if everything is false, then this very statement, which says that everything is false, would be false, so that the statement which negates it, saying that not everything is false, would be true.

Does Alexander misrepresent Aristotle's argument by omitting reference to the asserter of the thesis? If the answer is negative, then even if the occurrence of ὁ λέγων at 1012b15 actually refers to the asserter, this is a merely accidental feature of Aristotle's argument and cannot be regarded as an indication of its dialectical nature.

None of this is to deny that *some* ancient self-refutation arguments are of an intrinsically dialectical nature: it is only to deny that all of them are. This is in line with Burnyeat's view that dialectical self-refutation is a subspecies of ancient self-refutation, but does not exhaust it.¹⁰ C.'s dialectical approach provides a useful interpretive framework for many ancient self-refutation arguments, especially for those discussed in the second and third part of the book. For example, C. gives an attractive dialectical reinterpretation of statements like "If proof does not exist, then proof exists" that occur in certain anti-skeptical self-refutation arguments reported by Sextus Empiricus. C. argues that these statements should not be understood literally, but should be regarded as elliptical reminders of complex dialectical arguments which can be described as follows: "If you claim that proof does not exist, then you must present a proof of what you assert, in order to be credible, but thus you yourself admit that proof exists" (pp. 170–86, 280–83). He makes a similar point for Aristotle's famous argument in the *Protrepticus* that one must philosophize. A number of ancient sources state that this argument relies on the implication "If one must not philosophize, then one must philosophize." C. argues, to my mind persuasively, that this implication should not be understood literally, but as an elliptical reminder of a dialectical argument such as the following: "If your position is that one must not philosophize, then you must reflect on this choice and argue in its support, but by doing so you are already choosing to do philosophy, thereby admitting that one must philosophize" (pp. 187–96).

Thus, although C.'s thesis that all ancient self-refutation arguments are of an intrinsically dialectical nature is questionable, his book is rewarding. It gives an impressive overview of ancient self-refutation arguments, and in many cases provides illuminating commentary on particular examples of these arguments.

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to take it to mean "says something true" instead of "is true." For further passages in which λόγος is the subject of (ὁ) λέγων, see *Metaph.* Γ 7, 1012a24–25; Δ 6, 1016a33; *Int.* 14, 23a28–29; *De motu an.* 10, 703a4; *Eth. Nic.* 2.6, 1107a6–7.

9. See also 340.19–26, and Arthur Madigan, trans. and comm., *Alexander of Aphrodisias: On Aristotle's "Metaphysics" 4* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 139 and 181 n. 983.

10. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy" (n. 1 above), 59.