

Edgeways Miscellany no. 7
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A really good book!

It can be debated whether the empiricist tradition in philosophy is a cause, an effect, or just a part of, the modern enlightened world, but that our world and empiricism belong together inseparably is beyond dispute. Empiricism is *par excellence* the epistemology of the age when scientific thinking is predominant. The founders of the British empiricist tradition were either members of or closely connected with the Royal Society; and empiricists, and their offspring positivists and materialists, have seen themselves ever since as the close allies of science, and science as putting into practice the true thinking that empiricist philosophy defines.

To the non-specialist the name *empiricism* sounds attractive: it is comforting to be assured that “the evidence of one’s senses” is philosophically respectable, surely an improvement, anyway, on radical sceptics who refuse to accept the evidence of their senses. Empiricism, one would suppose, begins by recognising the reality of things.

In actual history, the central endeavour of the empiricists, to see all knowledge as a sort of organisation of sense data, is another matter. As H. O. Mounce says, “If you deny any element of the *a priori* to human experience you reduce it to mere sensation” (p. 30) not, that is, to knowledge. Mounce recurs to this great objection to pure empiricism, that knowledge cannot simply be equated with or refined from sense-data, and his arguments need to be read not reported.

Further, Mounce explains with beautiful clarity an incoherence in Locke that led to most preposterous conclusions in philosophers as varied as Locke himself, Berkeley and Bertrand Russell. If knowledge depends on perception, the understanding of knowledge must include and understanding of perception itself, and say something about the perceiver. What we perceive, thinks Locke, is not objects, but our sense impressions of objects. Since there is no way of getting at objects without our sense impressions, Kant reached the well-known conclusion that the world itself cannot be known. Further, the knower, connected to the world only by sense impressions, is subjectivised. Empiricism itself can end up, as early as Hume, in a radical scepticism about what can be known. Mounce is so thoroughly the master of his subject that he is able to make the objection that an intelligent child could make, but a trained philosopher would not often dare: “I cannot without having certain sensory experiences perceive a tree, but it is the tree I perceive not my own sensory experiences.” (pp. 45–6) Perhaps the empiricists would have made things easier for themselves if they had seen this. The train of thoughts by which empiricists have in fact tried to reconcile the apparent impossibility of perceiving the external world and the absolute pre-eminence of natural science, depending as it does at every step on experimental observation, is one you will have to read Mounce to understand. His discussion of how Wittgenstein sometimes is and sometimes is not an empiricist is of particular interest. The whole book is written with beautiful lucidity and a restrained style (envied by this reviewer) that makes the adverse criticisms very telling.

There is no doubt, anyway, that central marks of the empirical tradition are reliance on scientific method (understood as a unitary mode of thought) as the best way of thinking, and in consequence both a thorough hostility to metaphysics, and a confidence that all pre-Empirical philosophy is just a muddle.

This is to make a philosophy that aspires to be the end of philosophy. If there is only

one proper way of thinking, the one found pre-eminently in the natural sciences, the role of philosophy is just to make sure it is followed. As Locke famously put it: “. . . in an age that produces such masters as . . . the incomparable Mr Newton . . . it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge.” (quoted p. 29) When philosophy has done its work of liberating us from metaphysics, it can presumably wither away like the state at the end of Marxist history.

H. O. Mounce has no sympathy with this self-confidence of the empiricists, their conviction that philosophy starts with them and ends when they have done their work. Oddly enough, then, the importance of his own book is in clearing the ground: he shows us the way out of a fly-bottle—not to put an end to philosophy, but to release us into a much older and more reasonable conception of it according to which philosophy is much more than the underlabourer of science. This is at the same time to reclaim philosophy as a not wholly specialist pursuit. Gilbert Ryle pointed out that in the Victorian age philosophers published their essays in the ordinary reviews addressed to the common reader but that in the twentieth century philosophers “became accustomed to publish in journals purchased very largely by their own professional colleagues.” Unlike Ryle, Mounce is not sure that this was a good thing: “It does not occur to [Ryle] that what he describes might be the trivialization of his subject.” (p. 140)

If a small puff may be forgiven: Mounce’s thesis that successive generations of empiricists fall into the same fallacies is well argued, but some of the objections to empiricism go back a long way, as well. The three pamphlets by which Thomas Burnet immediately answered Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* overlap here and there with Mounce. For the only modern edition go to our shop.

I. R.

H. O. Mounce, *Metaphysics and the End of Philosophy*, Continuum
978 0 8264 9951 6, £65.00

Mindful of Leavis’s warnings about flank-rubbings we don’t usually review our friends’ productions, but made an exception in this case to draw the attention of readers to a book they might otherwise not have noticed, or only as a specialist work the price of which indicates that it must not be read outside university philosophy departments. (Mounce’s university no longer has one: see correspondence in *Words in Edgeways* no. 8.)

H. O. Mounce edits *Philosophical Investigations*, a Blackwell journal details of which can be found at <www.blackwell-synergy.com>.

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