Reviews

LEGITIMATION OF BELIEF, by Ernest Gellner, *Cambridge University Press*, London, 1974. 210 pp. £4.25.

What kind of world do we live in? This apparently ontological question, inviting a descriptive reply, is Ernest Gellner's way of asking the central epistemological question of modern philosophy—how can knowledge of an external world be validated?—to which purely prescriptive solutions were offered by philosophers claiming to hold the key to valid knowledge, and purely descriptive solutions by sociologists claiming that such philosophies were illusions: observation of the real cognitive world, rather than contemplation of a putative cognitive mechanism, would show that only God —if he exists—has any defensible claim to objectivity.

This latest book by Gellner is an irritating, condensed, brilliantly original and, at times, witty attempt to explore and criticise the epistemologies of the past three centuries, and to establish criteria of validity which respect the empirical and philosophical data without collapsing into total relativism, on the one hand, or usurping God's prerogative on the other. In other words, only a middle path between philosophy and sociology can lead us out of the intellectual jungle that has enveloped philosophy for so long and now threatens sociology. This is why Gellner poses the question as he does, and why he prefers the term 'legitimacy' to 'validity'.

Those familiar with Gellner's writings will know that they must be prepared to tolerate here, as elsewhere, the author's insatiable appetite for stage-management: his taste for paradox and bewildering metaphor—at the crucial conclusive stage of his book he leaves us 'shipwrecked on four planks' and closes the book without stating precisely what he intends to convey by this metaphor. Irony abounds, teased out with impish humour, turning Ryle into a 'neo-mentalist', Skinner into a 'crypto-humanist' and Koestler an 'inside-out behaviourist'. But this is a serious book, for all Gellner's frequent nudges in the ribs and distracting antics, all the more remarkable for its multi-disciplinary erudition and relevance. While I believe it will rank among the major works of philosophy and sociology for many years to come, it is unlikely to cause any great upheaval in the established schools of either discipline, partly because of its eclecticism and cultivated uncertainty, but mainly for reasons intrinsic to those schools, as Gellner argues in his criticism of them. For those who resist the seductions of relativism and epistemological realism alike, who know that knowledge is possible but search in vain for some formal support for their conviction, this book is essential reading.

'We choose a style of knowing and a kind of society jointly'. The whole argument is contained in that statement and the structure of the book reflects the close interrelation between cognition, politics and economics. Seven chapters are taken up with a review of the major philosophical attempts at a formal solution to the problem of knowledge; in the final two chapters, the author turns to anthropology and sociology and tries to find there a description of the world we live in that would account for our knowledge of it in a non-circular manner.

He starts from the assumption that knowledge, if it is possible at all, must be of a reductionist kind. Of its nature, understanding involves explanation and explanation requires that the thing to be explained must be subsumed under a more general phenomenon which, for the problem at hand, is not itself in need of explanation. For this 'critical monism', we must thank the mechanist or materialist school of philosophy whose monism was not always as critical as Gellner would wish, nor as purely strategic—they sometimes believed that the world was really structured in a mechanical way, not

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that this was an inescapable constraint on the mind—but whose model of explanation provided an essential tool for understanding and a bulwark against the chaos of empiricism.

The mechanist ideal alone, however, is a defective vehicle of knowledge, since it provides no means of avoiding circularity, no guarantee that the data and the explanation are not in collusion, promoting self-authenticating visions of the world which cannot be judged by any external court of appeal. For monism to be critical, it must be allied to empiricism, the doctrine that instals experience as the sole and ultimate judge of the independence of facts from theory. However 'corrupted' by theory, the evidence can at least be prevented from being reliably and systematically so corrupted, and it is only personal experience that can perform this function.

The price of scientific knowledge is disenchantment, alienation, dehumanisation — Weber, Marx and Kant shared the same bleak vision of the future of Western civilisation, though Kant generalised it to the human condition as such. Truth in the scientific sense is radically distinct and separate from the social and moral order, making life meaningless, subjecting man to the same rational scrutiny as the rest of nature. But Weber overestimated the bleakness, according to Gellner. The increased leisure, reduction of authoritarianism and general permissiveness of modern society combine to provide substitute visions for the cosy primitive worlds of our historic past. The 'luxuriant slush of Californian-style religion-and-protest' may indeed be a foretaste of our real future. But this phenomenon does not represent an abandonment of science and a return to the all-embracing womb of ideologies where knowledge and the social order are systematically linked. The trend today is towards 'ironic cultures', styles of life that do not wholly commit the individuals involved but allow them to retreat from fantasy to science when serious business is at stake.

The acceptance of forms of living which are discontinuous with real knowledge and real conviction provides a limited role for relativism in scientific explanation. Our daily lives are, in part, discontinuous with the type of rule-bound, bureaucratised society we have become. The explanation of human behaviour, made impossible by epistemological relativism, must, nevertheless, take account of the fact that some beliefs and ideas are not held seriously, but ironically.

In the same way, serious thought cannot dispense with the sociological awareness that scientific criteria of validity are not the requisites of some innate structure of the mind but historically specific requirements of a particular social and economic development that distinguishes modern from primitive society. It follows, if I understand Gellner correctly, that science can never lay claim to truth absolutely; the god's-eye perspective is simply not available to science or intuition or any other cognitive strategy. Science itself is a choice, an historical contingency of bureaucratised society, and in that sense it is relative to a particular type of society. There can be no proof that the knowledge it offers is more 'true' than magic. But if beliefs are to be validated or falsified; if the knowledge required must be communicable, cumulative, capable of public testing, independent of personal status—if this type of knowledge is required, then, in the very nature of the case, only science can provide it. It follows, furthermore, that the scientific judgment that a belief is invalid—e.g. divine creation or conservation of the universe—does not mean that the belief in question is not 'true', but merely that it is not communicable, cumulative, etc. The belief is linked to the moral order in such a way that the inquirer must be converted before he can be convinced.

This last point leads me to the first of three criticisms. Gellner repeatedly refers to scientific knowledge as 'powerful', in contrast to the belief-systems of ideologies — the 'cosy visions' of an enchanted world. But ideological knowledge is also very powerful, though in a different way. Indeed, if Weber is correct, it is ideological knowledge that stimulated the growth of science in the first place and brought about the social and economic transformation that is characteristically rational, scientific, modern. Gellner, moreover, holds cosy-visionists in unambiguous contempt, departing again, somewhat, from Weber. This suggests that he secretly believes in the absolute superiority of science, though his reasoning makes it clear that no such status can be claimed. The contempt is more comprehensible in the context of science as the dominant legitimator of knowledge: ideologues are perfectly entitled to their choice of knowledge but they

are not entitled to claim scientific status for it.

On one point of his criticism of Kuhn, Gellner is, I think, mistaken. Against Popper, Kuhn showed that intellectual consensus, not untrammelled criticism, was a necessary condition for scientific advancement. But consensus alone does not distinguish the scientific world from the non-scientific, as Kuhn claimed. The reason is not, as Gellner claims, that science and non-science are distinguished by *different kinds* of paradigm. This is to distort the notion of 'paradigm' by equating it with any consensus about problem-solving, whatever the problems. It is not freedom, as Popper says, nor consensus, as Kuhn says, but consensus within a mechanist-empiricist framework of explanation that distinguishes science from non-science. It seems to me that Gellner's confusing use of 'paradigm' leads him to ignore Kuhn and consensus in the role he offers finally to a limited relativism. Compared with the relation between communities of scientists and scientific explanation, ironic cultures make few, if any, epistemological demands.

Finally, Gellner's assessment that Weber overestimated disenchantment underestimates Weber. The fact that cultural fantasies are increasingly available does not disprove Weber's thesis but, on the contrary, supports it. He was well aware of ironic cultures in his own day and it is only increasing disenchantment that can account for them. In a sense, it is Gellner rather than Weber who exaggerates disenchantment. Since the only contrast he offers to bureaucratised man in modern society is ironic man, and since irony is made a property of styles of food and personal relations alike, it is difficult not to draw the implication that all contemporary ideologies are ironic and all moral choices are on the same fantasy level as Californian slush. But this is absurd. Is all conviction pseudo? What evidence could possibly establish it? Certainly not the evidence that *some* conviction is ironic, still less that the explanation of human action *ipso facto* eliminates moral choice *from the action.* Gellner seems to be resolving the dilemma of Kant and Weber by simply dissolving morality and values into knowledge and facts and ignoring the empirical fact that people do suffer for their convictions in a way that they are not prepared to suffer for their cooking or hippy life-style. We may not all be fervent Marxists or Jehovah's Witnesses, but we are not all hippies either. What distinguishes Marxists from hippies—the belief-system of the former is linked to their social structure and in that sense taken seriously —is at least as important as the characteristic they hold in common, namely that they both turn to science for the solution of technological problems.

There is no formal solution to the problem of knowledge. Our temptation is either to ignore this impasse or to accept it as a solution. There are many who will be grateful to Gellner for this superb and provocative analysis of the problem in terms that make sense of learning.

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THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, by John McHugh. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 1975. 510 pp. £10.

Months later than I should have done, I came to read *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* in December, as Advent reached its climax in the days of the O Antiphons, when the Liturgy fixes our attention on the Incarnation, 'on the coming of Christ, born of the Virgin'. John McHugh's book proved an invaluable companion volume, illuminating the liturgical texts, providing, as it were, scholarly prolegomena to Christmastide *lectio divina.* Such personal details I mention not to excuse my inefficiency as a reviewer (the book would have been just as illuminating in the middle of July) but to illustrate one of the many virtues of this remarkable study: it can be *prayed.* Fr McHugh, in a quiet and unpretentious way, has realised the traditional ideal of the unity of theology and prayer, in this case the integration of modern methods of Biblical study with Catholic faith and practice. He has set out to demonstrate that historico-literary criticism of NT texts does not lead necessarily to the barren reductionism of so much contemporary theology but can and does contribute to the rearticulation of the truths of Catholic Orthodoxy. In that

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