

Reviews

SCEPTICISM AND REASONABLE DOUBT, The British Naturalist Tradition in Wilkins, Hume, Reid, and Newman by M. Jamie Ferreira. O.U.P. 1988, 255 pp. No price given.

Professor Ferreira is reconstructing a British philosophical tradition. The grand scheme of the seminary course, 'Berkeley, Locke, and Hume', is given an effective jolt. Berkeley gets into her book only by way of an approving remark from Reid and a passing mention by Newman. In his episcopal place, Professor Ferreira puts John Wilkins, but he does not receive any lengthy attention. She needs only to dredge his writings for a few usages. By 'moral certainty' the bishop of Chester meant that some conclusions from the evidence of 'the Nature of Things', 'Testimony', and 'Experience', do not admit any reasonable doubt. 'Moral certainty' shares, therefore, some characteristics with 'conditional infallible certitude' that some things, in mathematical logic, for example, must be as we apprehend them, and other characteristics with 'mere probability' on the occasions when doubt is reasonable. Wilkins is included in Professor Ferreira's thesis as a representative of a tradition of decent, reasonable, philosophers. Locke, who refused to bestow the title of 'certainty' on 'the highest levels of probability', and who was committed to the 'qualitative distinction between certainty and probability', was an abandoner of 'the tradition'. Professor Ferreira suggests that taking Wilkins to exemplify the usual British way of doing things makes it easier to appreciate the criticisms of Locke made by Reid and Newman who knew themselves to be members of the tradition of 'Reasonable Doubt Naturalism'.

If the line goes from Wilkins to Reid, with Locke as a sport, what are we to think of Hume? Professor Ferreira argues that Hume, in assessing the status of particular matters of fact, located by Locke in the category of 'the highest degree of probability', felt warranted to claim 'total certainty', no less than in cases of demonstration. She makes Hume a much more interesting and complex arguer than he often appears in professional epistemological conversation. She identifies elements in his thought which 'can plausibly be read' as supporting a category of 'proof', and counter-elements which undermine it. Hume is placed in ambiguous relation with those who respond to scepticism by an appeal to 'human nature' and the 'unreasonableness' of doubt even when doubt is 'more-than-logically' possible.

Reid is introduced as the clear claimant that 'in cases where conclusions are reasoned to, there are two separate sources of certainty': 'probable' evidence and 'demonstrative' evidence. Reid makes the point very clearly: 'That there is such a city as Rome, I am as certain as of any proposition in Euclid'. We, most of us, know of the existence of Rome from postcards on the hall mat, *La Dolce Vita* at the cinema, and television shots of a Pope putting hats on the heads of cardinals. 'Such evidence' works, in Reid's image, as 'a rope made up of many slender filaments twisted together'. Professor Ferreira approves the cable simile as 'anti-elitist'. She also identifies it as the model of Newman's idea of such evidence: 'The best illustration of what I hold is that of a cable which is made up of separate threads, each feeble, yet taken together as sufficient as an iron rod', and 'A man who said "I cannot trust a cable, I must have an iron bar" would in certain given cases be irrational and unreasonable'. I share Professor Ferreira's belief that the transference of image is the best possible evidence of an unacknowledged debt. Her case for Newman's dependance on Reid in an important element of his talk about 'certainty', and thus in an important element of his whole philosophical and theological enterprise, is well made. What Dr Coulson has done for S.T. Coleridge and F.D. Maurice, Professor Ferreira is now doing for Hume and Reid: giving them their places in Newmanic discussions. Hers is no

mean achievement, for Newman seems often at pains to cover his tracks and prevent critical notice of 'influences'. It is all the stranger, therefore, that Professor Ferreira should be insisting that a line of influence which he did acknowledge is of no great importance for the shaping of Newman's treatment of 'probability'.

'What is distinctive about Newman's position', she says, 'cannot derive from Butler's influence'. But both the 1864 and 1865 versions of the relevant section of *Apologia* announce, what might otherwise be confidently read out of the *University Sermons*, the *Essay on Development* and the *Grammar of Assent*, that Newman felt himself to belong in a line with those for whom 'probability is the guide of life'. His understanding of 'probability' develops from Keble's supplement to Butler. Newman acknowledges 'I made use of it myself', but since it 'did not even profess to be logical', he tried 'to complete it with considerations of my own'. Newman seems to be indicating Butler and keeping quiet about Reid.

Perhaps Professor Ferreira is anxious to be rid of Butler lest Locke come along with him. After all, Fairbairn thought Butler 'borrowed his doctrine of probability from Locke', and even Gladstone, denying the borrowing from Locke, allowed that Butler 'takes up the question at the point where Locke had laid it down'. That would suggest the possibility of reconstructing a tradition of Locke, Butler, Keble, and Newman. However, what Professor Ferreira will do for Hume, she will not do for Newman. She will now allow him this complexity. But then, as 'cable' betrays Newman's reading of Reid, Professor Ferreira's language betrays her appreciation of Newman's place in a Butlerian line.

Appraising Reid's rope, she gives italicizing emphasis to two elements: 'such reasoning is understood, therefore, as *convergent* and *reinforcing*'. A rope's slender filaments twisted together may very well express the reinforcing character of helical contributions to an argument. But converging? When Newman writes of 'absolute certitude' resulting from an *assemblage* (his italics this time) of concurring and converging probabilities, his language does not suggest a remembrance of Reid's rope. And my sense of 'converging' as a Butlerian element in his thought is, paradoxically, reinforced by a sentence of Professor Ferreira even as she denies any such thing: 'as Newman saw it, nothing in Butler's notion of convergence of probabilities implied more than "practical" certainty'. It should, surely, be possible to entertain a view of Newman and his idea of certitude which attends to more than one tradition in British philosophy.

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PHILOSOPHY IN RUSSIA by Frederic C. Copleston. *Search Press. University of Notre Dame. 1986. Pp.445 + x. No price given.*

The well-known Russian religious thinker N.A. Berdyaev said of himself once with disarming honesty that he had little, if any, capacity for 'analytical discursive reasoning' (Cf. his *Dream and Reality*, quoted in Copleston p. 355). A very large proportion of Russian philosophers that Copleston is writing about seem to fall in this category. They are, very often, brilliant writers, versatile expositors, accomplished pamphletists, visionaries, eulogisers or masters of invective. In a word, they are long on rhetoric and short on argument. But, then, in Russia the word 'philosophy' tends to mean something different to what it means in English philosophy departments. Patient probing of the structure of arguments or analysis of linguistic meaning are hardly seen as philosopher's main preoccupation. Russian philosophy has always been closely associated, on the one hand, with religion, and, on the other hand, with political theory, and the central issues in both these fields have been disputed about with a large measure of commitment and passion.

This preoccupation with religion and politics, and a distrust of abstract theorizing, which characterizes the mainstream Russian philosophical thought, is well brought out by Copleston's book. With an incredible industry Copleston has worked his way through what