Booknotes

'If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may be defined as *the general theory of education*.' Thus John Dewey in 1916. If nearly a century later, it sounds quaintly old-fashioned, consider this: 'The crucial questions for philosophers today have very little to do with consciousness and qualia, with the analysis of epistemic justification, with internalism or externalism about reasons, or any of a multitude of other subjects that fill the pages of professional journals that attract a tiny, but oddly devoted, readership. Rather, our most important tasks are to articulate further the Deweyan connection between democracy and education, to probe more accurately the economic preconditions of democratic education, to expose as precisely as possible the sources of conflict between capitalism, as we now have it, and Dewey's ambitious project, and, on that basis, to conceive of ways of modifying the economic constraints.' Thus Philip Kitcher in 2012, in *Preludes to Pragmatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012). And while lonely philosophers of education will be heartened to read both Dewey and Kitcher, others might be reassured by the modesty of Kitcher's subtitle, *'Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy*'. So far, only towards it then.

In going back to Dewey and the notion that philosophy must be concerned with progressivist democratic development rather than with the interests of a socially disconnected elite (i.e. professional philosophers), Kitcher may expect and deserve support, even from some professional philosophers. He certainly does a good job of expounding and defending a contemporary form of pragmatic naturalism. This is the view that, broadly speaking, our structures of knowledge and value are not grounded in timeless reality, physical or ethical, but reflect specific needs and interests thrown up by human interactions with the world. So Kitcher is critical of any notion of natural kinds, or what we think of as natural kinds, as representing rigid structures in nature, to which all other enquiries must be fitted. Nor are our values, ethical and political, based in anything absolute or a-historical. In general, his naturalism will be resistant to what he calls 'Platonic Forms, Aristotelian essences, processes of Pure Reason, claims that

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favourite premises are *a priori* truths, intuitions of the Good, and a host of less prominent denizens of the philosophical zoo.' Alongside this hostility to philosophical system building goes a demand that we look at our activities, including our scientific and philosophical activities, in terms of their significance for our lives together and for the promotion of the common good.

In the promotion of democracy and the common good, Kitcher's conception is as maximalist as Dewey's. Group living is key to human flourishing, but in modern society this cannot be secured by voluntary association alone. Collective action (and taxation) are needed to realise harmony and the joint projects which become desirable in what he sees as vital struggles against the tyranny of wealth and power, the tyranny of ignorance and the tyranny of the majority. And while he wants all interests to have a voice, and none to be excluded, 'genuine democracy cannot be content with the expression of the raw wishes of all individuals'. Nor, it seems, with their raw opinions, when, as in the USA, the majority tend to doubts about evolution and climate change and are committed to religious belief, all of which Kitcher considers in the book.

Kitcher is here in the bind that so many progressive thinkers, ostensibly committed to democracy and inclusion of all views, find themselves when it turns out that a majority of their fellow-countrymen do not share their progressive views. Maybe the majority are subject to tyrannies of various sorts (aren't we all?) and maybe, in current circumstances, free markets in the dissemination of opinion contribute to the problem. Maybe we should strive to find ways of filtering expert opinion ('responsible and accurate') into the common discourse, giving it more weight than ignorant popular prejudice and its manipulation by malign forces. But Kitcher does himself no favours in the way he deals with evolution and climate change, failing to see or admit that not all doubts and questions in these areas are as crude as blind faith in six day creationism. Indeed had he not been so quick to dismiss consciousness and qualia as proper subjects for philosophical enquiry (even in a Deweyan environment), he would have had to consider the possibility that Darwinian naturalism, if not 'almost certainly false', as Thomas Nagel has it, is by no means almost certainly true.

Kitcher spends some time considering what a naturalistic response to religion should be. At root he is no more friendly to core religious beliefs than those he dubs modern militant atheists. He says that secularists, such as himself 'doubt the existence of the deities, divinities, spirits, ghosts, ancestors, the *sacredness* of specific places and the supernatural forces to which the world's various religions, past

and present, make their varied appeals', and he makes a lot, from a sceptical point of view, of the diversity of religious myth and belief. But he thinks secularism has not taken seriously enough the ways in which religions provide a sense of community for their adherents, and have often advanced social causes in a progressive direction. He even admits that until 'enlightened' secularism develops more inclusive and more egalitarian practices, atheists should be less militant and aggressive towards believers who find social solace in their practices, particularly to ones who are less dogmatic in their beliefs, and always subject to the proviso that 'public reason must be thoroughly secular'.

Believers with any backbone might find outright attack preferable to condescension of this sort. But Kitcher's stance here is bound up with his view that 'the substantive doctrines of the various religions are extensive myths, made up to answer to psychological and social purposes' (purposes which secularism will have to supply, if it is to succeed in supplanting religion). This is what we learn from evolutionary psychology, apparently. But where, one wonders, is the evidence? How does Kitcher or any evolutionary psychologist know that this is why religious myths were 'made up'? Were they there at the time? Do they understand enough of the mentality of the ur-religionists to be able to say anything so categorical, or to know what their purposes actually were or might have been? And even if religious myths, made up or not, answer to social and psychological purposes (which perhaps in a very general sense they do, just as any belief, including scientific belief, does), might not *one* of those purposes be to satisfy what seems to be a very widespread human sense of transcendence. That, by definition, could not be satisfied by any version of secularism; nor does saying that this is a basic human aspiration rule out the possibility that there might actually be something to which the yearning answers.

Moreover for a believer of any sophistication from religious traditions, West or East, that answer would not be in terms of 'the deities, divinities, spirits, ghosts', etc., dismissed by Kitcher. To take just Thomas Aquinas as representative, for him God is not *a* deity, *a* divinity, let alone a spirit or a ghost. God, for Thomas, is not a being among beings, even a very powerful one, but being itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*, the source and sustaining cause of all particular beings, on a completely different plane of existence from them, yet intimately present to each. This conception is not unproblematic, but what it attempting to show is that speaking of God and asking questions about God is precisely not like asking about causes or agents within the world, which is partly why it would be misplaced to look for evidence for God within the world, even at

the moment of the Big Bang. Until secularists like Kitcher show some understanding of this point, they and the religious people they are trying to engage will simply talk past each other, to mutual frustration.

In contrast to Dewey's evolutionary view of philosophy, in *The Common Mind: Politics, Society and Christian Humanism from Thomas More to Russell Kirk* (Angelico Press,Tacoma, WA, 2013), Andre Gushurst-Moore attempts to uncover perennial themes in the thinkers he studies. Like Kitcher, Gushurst-Moore would have little truck with any philosophy which remained cocooned in its own recondite cul-de-sacs, cut off from more general human concerns. Unlike Kitcher, however, for Gushurst-Moore, reference to a transcendent dimension is key. A society without divine sanction, and without a distinction between timeless natural law and changeable human decision will falter and fail. The culmination of naturalism in science and philosophy is not the elevation of man, but his ultimate reduction to mere matter. And a feature of a society moving in that direction is that crucial decisions will be put increasingly in the hands of specialists, out of touch and out of sympathy with the common people (a point actually acknowledged, albeit obliquely by Kitcher, as we have just seen).

What we have between Kitcher and Dewey, on the one hand, and Gushurst-Moore and his protagonists (who include Swift, Dr Johnson, Burke, Coleridge, Chesterton, T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis) on the other, is two opposing and irreconcilable views of human nature. Dewey and Kitcher are aware, to some extent, of the cost of the move to naturalism, and have interesting things to say about how this might be remedied. But, even more than what might be called the metaphysical differences between the parties is a striking difference in their respective attitudes to what might be called the common people. Here are three representative quotations from Gushurst-Moore's book (which is indeed replete with such nuggets):

> '[Common sense is that] power of mind which perceives truth, or commands belief, not by progressive argumentation, but by an instantaneous, instinctive, and irrestistible impulse; derived neither from education nor from habit, but from nature; acting independently of our will, whenever its object is presented, according to an established law, and therefore properly called Sense; and acting in a similar manner upon all, or at least, upon a great majority of mankind, and therefore properly called Common Sense.'

> 'A true development, then, may be described as one which is conservative of the course of antecedent developments being really those antecedents and something besides them: it is an addition which illustrates, not obscures, corroborates, not corrects, the body of thought from which it proceeds; and this is its characteristic as contrasted with a corruption.'

> 'His second (disqualification as a philosopher) was the incompleteness of his own mind as a representative of universal human nature. In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.'

The first quotation, which would doubtless have horrified advocates of the transformative power of education such as Dewey, is from James Beattie, the Scottish philosopher of Common Sense; the second, also strikingly counter to Dewey, this time opposed to his evolutionism, is from Newman's *Development of Doctrine*. The third, which actually refers to Bentham (though it might equally be applied to a number of other philosophers), is from J.S. Mill. Surprising as this might be to some, it suggests that with the exercise of imagination there may be greater possibility of rapprochement between naturalists and anti-naturalists than the writings of each sometimes suggest.

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