

English and American Philosophy Since 1800; A Critical Survey



English and American Philosophy Since 1800

PREFACEIn making an attempt to estimate the philosophical ideas of the last century and a quarter, I have endeavored as a historian to be accurate, and as impartial as nature will permit a philosopher to be when dealing with opinions more or less out of harmony with his own. But it may prevent misleading anticipations if I confess at the start that the tracing of historical affiliations and historical causes has had only a secondary interest for me, and that the book as a whole is frankly propaganda, and designed to recommend one particular attitude as against competing attitudes; apart from this critical interest, it is not very likely that the work would have been carried through. If it were urged that fewer pages of criticism, and more attention to historical and descriptive data, would have resulted in a more generally useful volume, I do not know that I should be prepared to combat the claim; though I think it might be argued that one way, and at times the only way, to give an intelligible account of a philosophical doctrine, especially of the more esoteric sort, is by pointing out its limitations and obscurities. My real excuse however for writing a book in which criticism plays so large a part is that I wanted to do so. The particular philosophical standpoint which the following pages presuppose as a background, is one which, I am regretfully aware, many philosophers, perhaps most of them, will regard as lamentably crude and unadventurous. Typically two conceptions have been predominant in the history of thought: the psychological, and the logical. For the one, reality is to be interpreted as experience, beyond which the philosopher should not attempt to pry, experience standing for the actual stuff of human living, to the exclusion of any more ultimate or metaphysical source in the nature of things. For the other, the traditional demands of the dialectician are supreme, with the result that reality itself

tends to turn into a system of logical relations such as will satisfy these demands. As against both these ideals of method, I have assumed constantly that the business of philosophy is to clarify and to bring into harmony, but also in the end to justify substantially, the fundamental beliefs that are implicated in our normal human interests; and that this reference to the needs of living, in a wide and generous interpretation, furnishes the touchstone by which alone the sanity of philosophical reasonings and conclusions can be tested. And put to such a test, both empiricism and rationalism, in their more technical sense, seem to me to stand condemned. While philosophy aims of course at logical consistency, thought, or logic, is an instrument, and not the constitutive stuff out of which the world is made; and even as an instrument its conclusions, in the hands of human thinkers, are too flimsy and precarious to be safely substituted for the convictions by which human life and human values are sustained. Empiricism, on the other hand, in spite of its laudable insistence on translating metaphysical reality into homely concrete matter of fact, is clearly guilty of a paradox when it denies the right of anything to set up as a fact unless it be a part of some human experience-process. In assuming that belief, rather than experience, is the starting-point of our cognitive contact with the world, or, if one prefers, that experience includes a reference to the natural setting within which life goes on, as well as to the immediate facts of experiencing, I conceive that I am really more empirical than the empiricists. Of course I know that the assumption will not approve itself to all philosophers. But if, as seems unavoidable, any fundamental criticism in philosophy must start with the acceptance of an attitude, or notion of what is reasonable and convincing, which is itself debatable, I do consider it an advantage when this attitude comes naturally to the human mind, and does not have to be induced by a special

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