Book Reviews

The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy, by Stephen Boulter. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xvi + 237. H/b $74.95.

The notion of common sense in philosophy is widely associated with Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century, Henry Sidgwick in the nineteenth century, and G. E. Moore in the twentieth century. The title of Stephen Boulter's *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy* suggests an account of common sense philosophy in the spirit of these historical figures; and indeed, Reid and Moore (along with Aristotle) are cited here as the conceptual wellsprings for the view. The book (five chapters of which have been previously published) is described as 'an extended exposition, defence and illustration of a metaphilosophy of common sense' (p. xiv). Chapters one to four, respectively, purport to: (i) motivate a metaphilosophy of common sense by defending its role within the 'philosophical enterprise'; (ii) defend the view of evolutionary psychology that beliefs are adaptations and that common sense beliefs are the 'default position' that philosophers ought to respect; (iii) explain why philosophers frequently end up denying the beliefs of common sense; and (iv) show that the tendency of philosophers to deny the beliefs of common sense has its source in medieval theology (pp. xiv–xv). The latter half of the book (Chs 5–9) adapts theses from the metaphysics of Aristotle, evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology to defend the common sense beliefs that (i) the external world is independent of our representations of it; (ii) propositions are either true or false (bivalence); (iii) eliminative materialism is false (we do have mental states like belief and desire); (iv) we are responsible for our actions; and (v) moral properties are mind-independent.

Boulter's position is that (1) the enterprise of philosophy is to coordinate material from 'the special sciences, the truth-directed subjects of the humanities, and pre-theoretical beliefs' into a coherent picture (p. 11); (2) a philosophical problem is a tension—an aporia—that emerges when beliefs in different domains clash but are equally well-supported, and that the job of the philosopher is to resolve the tension (pp. 11–12). (3) Philosophers, however, are wont to (and even prefer to) defend positions that are at odds with common sense, taking them for 'exciting discoveries rather than the basis of a *reduction ad absurdam* [sic]' (p. 68); (4) the common sense philosopher, however, will always give the common sense belief the benefit of the doubt in a genuine aporia, and will insist that common sense belief should be the default position, 'despite the fact that no deductive proof can be offered for it' (p. 24).

Unhappily, the book suffers from some significant shortcomings (not assisted by the unappealingly derisive tone in which it is written). A fundamental difficulty stems from the metaphilosophical strategy described above ((1)–(4)), specifically characterized as shifting the 'burden of proof onto the shoulders of those who would reject common sense beliefs' (p. 24). What becomes clear throughout the book is that this strategy (described as 'dialectical') plays a largely descriptive role, not a critical one; and it is further undermined by a tendency on Boulter's part to mistake exposition for argument. It is also, more problematically, largely unmotivated. No convincing justification emerges for the author's view concerning the 'enterprise' of philosophy, nor for his characterization of the nature of philosophical problems—we are notified, rather than logically persuaded, of the position. The central strategy of 'shifting the burden of proof' onto those who would reject common sense, for example, appears grounded early on by nothing more than a series of negative characterizations of 'philosophers' and their tendencies. Further—possibly most irksome of all—Boulter repeatedly relies on quotation from an all-embracing variety of philosophers' work to prop up his claims, rather than offering an analysis, explanation, or genuine defence of those claims. Boulter sees nothing amiss with this, avowing that he has drawn 'where possible on the work of those whose expertise in the relevant fields is sufficiently well regarded to inspire some confidence' (p. 199); unfortunately, Boulter does not face up to the problem that claims of 'expertise' alone might be insufficient to support his views.

Instances of these drawbacks pervade the book; the following are three examples. In the introduction, Boulter asserts that there are 'two tribes'; the philosophers and the 'common run of mankind', which bear an 'uneasy relationship' (p. xii) toward one another. A misattribution to Descartes of Cicero's claim that 'there seems to be nothing so outrageous that some philosopher will not maintain it' sets the tone (p. xiii). Philosophers, we are told, are willing to adopt or defend 'an eye-watering litany of philosophical extravagance' (p. xiii); their positions are 'paradoxical' ('quite literally beyond belief') (p. 71); 'a puzzle' (p. 21); 'truly bizarre' (p. xv); or 'repeatedly end up denying what everybody knows to be true' (p. 25); no defence of these various charges is offered. The list of common sense beliefs presented on page 29 comes furnished with no argument to help persuade us that these are worth defending (as, oddly, Boulter seems to concede (p. 198)); nor does he look to the contemporary literature for assistance. But since neither Reid nor Moore can be said to have proposed self-evident criteria for common sense belief, Boulter does little here to shed light on, let alone explain, the concept.

In chapter one, Boulter describes philosophical problems as 'coordination problems', but gives little critical defence of this claim ('largely consistent with metaphilosophical insights of the discipline's greatest practitioners' (p. 7) is one mystifying contention). In chapter two, Boulter leans heavily on the view that beliefs are adaptations, in order to claim that common sense belief is

'nothing other than a belief required to ensure ecological and social fitness' (p. 44). The view that beliefs are adaptations is meant to offer support for the claim that the beliefs of the 'laity' are the ones that should be the default position in the task of resolving aporia. It must be said, however, that what Boulter calls the 'evolutionary argument' is contentious, and he offers little if any critical argument for it, relying instead on citations to 'current work in evolutionary biology and psychology' (p. xiv) for what is, at best, illustration. Again, however, Boulter defends this approach (pp. 198–9)—after undermining confidence in evolutionary psychology by pointing out the shortcomings of its evidentiary criteria—by saying that he relies on the work of experts in order to avoid 'unwarranted armchair speculation'.

In chapter four, in discussing a common sense tendency to rely on inductive arguments, Boulter turns his attention to Hume's problem of induction, and contends arrestingly that:

> The problem of induction owes less to Hume's empiricism than it does to the theologically motivated Condemnations of 1277. The enlightenment's greatest atheist bequeathed to philosophy a problem that makes sense only in a theological context. The problem of induction is quite simply a theological hangover. (p. 93)

That is: the problem of induction makes sense only in a context that attributes the property of omnipotence to God, which assures us that in so far as we can conceive of events being contingent, God can make it so (p. 84). Thus the 'inevitable result is the belief that only logically water tight guarantees are rationally acceptable ... concerning matters of fact' (p. 93). So, according to Boulter, the emphasis in post-Cartesian philosophy on both scepticism and the induction problem is the result of the failure of the classical modern philosophers to realize that the dictates of theology (epistemological certainty, for instance) clash with those of common sense, creating an aporia (p. 88). Boulter wants to claim that giving common sense (which is not deductively watertight) the default position would resolve these classic epistemological issues, but (in so far as the view is intelligible at all) he does not consider some obvious objections; for instance, the possibility that Hume's rejection of necessary connection is epistemological, not metaphysical (on which there is an extensive literature); or formulations of the problem of scepticism in ways that do not depend on eliminating *all* doubt (formulations that make use of a closure principle, for instance). Moreover, Boulter's defence of the theological assumptions he takes to be at work in induction and the problem of scepticism seems to rest mainly on a set of selections from the work of Bosley and Tweedale, and from a few medieval sources (pp. 88–93). Genuinely bizarre, further, is that while claiming that 'the denial of physical, natural, or causal necessity has been an entrenched dogma of empiricism since Hume', Boulter maintains that 'Wittgenstein was simply voicing widespread assumptions when he confidently claimed that, indeed, until Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* and Marcus' ground-breaking work in

modal logic, the passage of time had seen only the strengthening of this dogma' (p. 80). I am not sure what to make of a claim that Wittgenstein ever commented on Kripke (from the grave?), except to say that I am quite certain it is false.

I will conclude by commenting briefly on Boulter's application of the metaphilosophy of common sense to eliminative materialism in chapter seven. Boulter gives a clear enough expository summary of Paul Churchland's arguments against Folk Psychology (FP), correctly stating that Churchland gives more than one formulation of eliminative materialism (EM). But Boulter does not address the ambiguity in Churchland's work between the *eliminative* hypothesis and the *reductive* hypothesis. EM either (i) denies that we have beliefs and desires or (ii) denies that a fully formulated neuroscience will contain predicates like 'is a belief' or 'is a desire.' Boulter runs through some of the more unrefined objections to (i) (routinely dismissed in the literature as absurdly overstated, in any case); but would have done better to address (ii) more directly. A materialist could argue that (ii) is completely consistent with common sense—the more we learn about the brain, the less we will need the taxonomy of folk psychology (the taxonomies of the special sciences simply reveal the current state of our ignorance). Boulter's anaemic conclusion, that reference to the taxonomy of folk psychology is important and worth saving, does not clearly help to defuse the materialist threat implicit in (ii); and, more problematically, seems to conflict with his defence of the adaptationist view in chapter two. If beliefs are adaptations, that is, we could argue that they are in principle reducible to some form of complex truth-tracking mechanisms in the brain. This suggests that some form of reductionism is true after all, and that the role of psychology as a special science is in fact at risk; a position at some odds with Boulter's claims in defence of Folk Psychology here.

This book has some considerable defects, but I would emphasize that many will be sympathetic to the philosophical claims to which Boulter seeks to apply his common sense metaphilosophy (I count myself as a sympathizer). Most of them can be classified as versions of realism (epistemological, metaphysical, or moral). The problem is to make a case for the virtues of a common sense philosophy that might better substitute for what Railton has called a 'stark raving' realism in any of these categories. That such a case might be made is not even clear; but what is clear is that, in this book, Boulter has not made it.

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