



Robert G. Meyers. *Understanding Empiricism*

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Robert G. Meyers. *Understanding Empiricism*. Chesham: Acumen, 2006. Pp. 183. ISBN 1-84465-059-6, Paperback, £13.99.

Understanding Empiricism is an ambitious book. It is often a little breathtaking in its scope. Of course it is difficult to tackle a topic such as this in a short space of time. Introductions to this and that are notoriously difficult to get right. This book gets it right some of the time.

One way to deal with the scope of material—understanding empiricism and its history—is to present material without reference, without backing quotation, and with a large number of assertions. This is how Meyers chooses to deal with his material (a lot of the time).

Perhaps the hardest chapter for the novice is Meyers's first chapter, the one in which he explains what empiricism is. For a book with the title that this one has, one might have expected the material of chapter one to constitute the entire book (expanded and defended, of course). Meyers distinguishes between what he calls "justification empiricism" and "concept empiricism" and employs the term "empiricism" without adjective to refer to the former. It may be hard for the student to understand why Meyers's discussion of empiricism is so restricted (some have claimed that it is not so easy to keep these two aspects of empiricism firmly disentangled). This is not to say that Meyers does not have his reasons, but he is wrong to think that the beginner doesn't need to know what these reasons are. After all, it is precisely dissatisfaction with starting points that draws many students into philosophy in the first place. And while one is at it, when introducing empiricism one would do well to warn the student against over rigid adherence to labels. Michael Ayers, for example, has argued that, while Locke is a concept-empiricist, he is a weak rationalist in so far as he held a rationalist ontology. It is true that there is room in Meyers's account of empiricism for just such manoeuvrings. After all, Meyers allows that empiricists may hold doctrines traditionally associated with the rationalists, just so long as s/he denies the possibility of a priori knowledge of real existence (3). This—the denial of a priori knowledge of real existence—is the defining feature of Empiricism for Meyers. He refers to it in one place as the "principle of empiricism" (29). Presumably, adherence to this principle is what defines justification empiricism (although Meyers is not clear about this). Using this as one's benchmark, it turns out that the early Bertrand Russell is not an empiricist, as he allows that one can have a priori knowledge of things that subsist. The early logical positivists are both empiricists *and* verificationists. Meyers is clear that he does not want to mix empiricism with verificationism. Indeed, those who attack the positivist's verificationism sometimes take themselves to be attacking

empiricism—but this would not be the case the way Meyers sets things up. As Meyers puts it, “To build the rejection of metaphysics into empiricism thus clouds the issue” (6). So we have empiricism delineated by Meyers.

Next Meyers turns to a survey of the history of empiricism. For reasons he does not explain, he begins with Locke and he largely concentrates his discussions in the first part of the book on the work of the great British Empiricists—Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. It arguably would aid the beginning student’s understanding to be told that empiricism has a longer history, and to mention the work of Aristotle as well as to explain about the development of science (ancient and medieval, as well as modern). (I can imagine Meyers’s reason for starting with Locke, but it would have been nice if he had been explicit about it.) My greatest reservation about this book comes from the handling of this part of the history. Leaving aside the abruptness of his starting point, Meyers takes us through the work of these early modern empiricists at a clip. It is hard to judge what a student needs who is only beginning to get acquainted with philosophy, but my guess is that these early chapters are too quick to be of much help. The chapter on Berkeley is particularly unhelpful, while the chapter on Locke is the best of the three. Interestingly, half of the chapter on Locke is concerned with concept empiricism. And we learn in this chapter that while Locke also holds to “the principle of empiricism,” he does not hold to it as a necessary truth (Meyers never tells us whether or not the other empiricists hold to the principle as a necessary truth.) That Locke takes the principle to hold only contingently is evidenced, according to Meyers, by the fact that he allows that there could be creatures who have microscopic eyes and thereby could know the real essence of things. It is not immediately clear why the possibility of microscopic eyes tells against the necessity of the principle. Meyers explains that microscopic eyes would give us ideas of the ultimate particles from which we could frame abstract ideas. We would then examine these abstract ideas and come to know the axioms from which we would deduce the macro qualities. The result, claims Meyers, would be a priori knowledge of laws of nature. This is one of the many places that references to the text would help. Book 2, chapter 13, 11–12 introduces the idea of microscopic eyes, but there is nothing there about how men with such eyes would proceed—other than to remark that they would proceed very differently from ourselves as such eyes, says Locke, “would not serve to conduct [a man] to the Market and Exchange.” Indeed, Locke remarks that such men could not “discourse concerning the Objects of Sight,” which indicates that such men might never reach the ideas we have. In any case, it is not entirely clear why this shows that Locke does not hold to the principle of empiricism as a necessary truth. What precisely would it be to hold it as a necessary truth? Does, for example, Berkeley hold it as a necessary truth? I don’t see that any empiricist need have a commitment to *what* is experienced; just to the thesis that all knowledge of real existence comes from experience.

It is my impression that Meyers is on firmer territory when he leaves behind the details of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume and gets on to the later chapters on empiricism and foundationalism, empiricism and the *a priori*, and empiricism and skepticism. This is where the book feels most comfortably in gear. In my opinion the strongest chapter in the book is chapter 4, "Foundations and Empiricism." I would direct any student to this chapter as a starting point for understanding this particular aspect of empiricism. However, Meyers might have been clearer about the relationship of foundationalism to empiricism. After all, Descartes was, in his own fashion, a foundationalist.

It really does become a question what work the label of empiricism is doing at this point in the book. Is Meyers working on the assumption that everyone in the twentieth century is effectively an empiricist? Perhaps it would have been better to introduce the student to empiricism in different areas—religious knowledge, maths and logic, the physical world—making it clear that one can adopt empiricism with respect to one area and not another. In any case, in chapter 4 Meyers introduces us to sense data and how they were thought to provide a foundation for empirical knowledge. He then moves on to outline a radical critique of sense datum theories and their ilk due to Wilfrid Sellars. (It is curious Sellars's own work is not cited in the further reading suggested for chapter 4.) Sellars accuses foundationalism as being committed to what he famously called "the myth of the given." Meyers's discussion of this myth and the alternatives of reliabilism and coherentism that Sellars proposes are models of clarity. Many will not have known (or may have forgotten) that Sellars introduced philosophers to the idea of a perceiver as a reliable source of evidence about the world, as well as to the idea of a reliable perceiver as analogous to a reliable thermometer. It is interesting to note that Sellars not only discusses this view, but rejects it. As Meyers writes, according to Sellars, "To have beliefs and evidence, one must be more than a meter of the environment; one must also be able to make inferences, have concepts and decide between competing beliefs" (89). According to Sellars, the way to move from meter to believer is to learn a language—to make both word-world and word-word connections. My only complaint about this chapter is that the student may be forgiven if s/he loses the thread of empiricism.

Meyers could have been clearer that the issue of foundationalism vs. coherentism that he wants to discuss is one that arises within empiricism. The student might also be forgiven for wondering whether the idea of empiricism isn't becoming a little blurry, for example, when Meyers presents Sellars as rejecting the following argument which is said to be accepted by the theory of the given:

- 1) We have an innate capacity to be aware of sorts, for example that things are red or triangular;
- 2) This capacity is triggered by experience, but not shaped by it, thus;

- 3) This awareness does not depend on subconscious processing and so it is presuppositionless.

Talk about innate capacities can sound like the kind of thing a rationalist might say, and the fact that the capacity is triggered but not shaped by experience is equally difficult for the student to square with empiricism. The problem need not have arisen had Meyers discussed what might be called “concept empiricism” earlier on. Furthermore, does Sellars’s own commitment to the idea that all cognition rests on judgement avoid this problem because of the crucial role played by language—a language acquired in experience? Of course one must not allow oneself to get boxed in by labels, but the student attempting to understand empiricism needs these issues to be addressed, and Meyers omits to address them.

Perhaps the biggest trouble with the book is its title. I cannot help feeling that I did not come away understanding empiricism any better, nor did I think it would help a student to understand it. What this book does best is introduce the student to a number of issues that arise within empiricism. Perhaps the series was not particularly suited to the material Meyers wanted to present. This is a shame, as introductory series of this kind can be enormously helpful to both the professional educator and the student.

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