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John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection

By David Cheetham

Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003; 189 pp.; hb. £ 40.00; ISBN: 0-7546-1599-5.

[1] David Cheetham's text, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* is an extensive introduction to the equally extensive work of philosopher of religion, John Hick. Cheetham traces the development of Hick's thinking from Hick's early adoption of phenomenological approaches ('experiencing-as') to his articulation of a religious pluralism that attempts to read together the world's major religious traditions. Cheetham engages with Hick's defenders and critics, painstakingly analysing the themes which have occupied the minds of philosophers of religion during the twentieth century. Hence we are introduced to the work of Augustine, Irenaeus, Anthony Flew, Terence Penelhum, Richard Swinburne, amongst others.

[2] The themes around which these philosophers have focussed their work, many of which are 'mainstream' philosophical issues, and which Hick highlights in his own work: realism and anti-realism, metaphysical dualism, belief and knowledge, soul-making and life after death, are some of the most difficult questions on the philosophical agenda.

[3] I particularly enjoyed Cheetham's chapter on death and eternal life. The science fictional nature of metaphysical possibility which permeates discussion of Hick's 'replica', the existential post-mortem consequence of human life as we know it, is well rounded albeit highly speculative. Cheetham is careful to point out that Hick's ruminations on life after death are deeply situated in his preference for Irenaean theology (which rejects the notion of the Fall) over Augustine's account of human sinfulness and fall from God's immanent, overt grace. Indeed Cheetham regards Hick's predilection for Irenaeus as the foundation for Hick's later religious pluralism in which human development and progression towards an ultimate end (the eschaton?) is revealed.

[4] There are five chapters in the book, 'Faith and Knowledge', 'Evil and Soul-Making', 'Death and Eternal Life', 'The Universe of Faiths' and 'Religious Pluralism'. The flow of the chapters represents the flow in Hick's thinking. Although each chapter has a central problem (for example the existence of evil simultaneously with the existence of an all loving all powerful God in 'Evil and Soul-Making'), Cheetham cleverly links each chapter, either in an anticipatory or a retrospective fashion. This has the effect of presenting Hick's complex work as a difficult albeit harmonious whole.

[5] At least that is what Cheetham wants to do. This brings me to the questions of style and of editing which became an issue for me as I read. Cheetham at times has an obsequiousness of style that is extremely irritating. His text is littered with qualifiers like ‘would seem’ and ‘somewhat’ [‘this criticism would seem to have weight’ (p.85) ‘thus the somewhat macabre question of particle ownership arises’ (p.89)]. These are two examples only, but their persistence through the text from the very beginning, undermines Cheetham’s clear textual authority on Hick’s work, as if Cheetham is afraid of the getting it wrong. Cheetham is apparently committed to the view that Hick is right no matter what. No-one is right no matter what. All theory will have its highlights and its lowlights and that contributes to the interest of the theory. A theory that was completely ‘right’ (whatever that might mean) would leave no room for discussion.

[6] On the question of editing, there are some quite glaring spelling mistakes (as an example, ‘Hick notes that for us the *significance* of the physical world is that it is something objective who’s “laws. . .”’), the quotes around ‘replica’ are inconsistently used and their correct use is crucial to our understanding of the argument and more generally, Cheetham slips into what should be sentences but which are marked only by commas ‘Hick thinks that it is, rather than seek to dissipate the issues through over qualification, he thinks that. . .’ The judicious use of commas and full stops surely has not gone out of fashion in this age of pluralism and post-modernism? But judiciousness should be tempered by knowledge; and perhaps that is the problem—communication is assumed rather than constructed patiently.

[7] My overall impression of this book is that it is well argued, if defensively, but badly edited. It is a good introduction to the thought of John Hick, but a bad example of good editing, thus not a good model of writing for an undergraduate towards whom it might be aimed.