

BOOK REVIEWS

for instance, one which dogmatically presumes that the only possible entities are individual objects—can certainly hinder the process of scientific theory-construction and arguably has actually done so in the case of modern quantum theory" (83).

In addition to an able defense of the subject, *The Possibility of Metaphysics* includes a detailed and wide-ranging metaphysical system. Chapters cover objects, identity, time and persistence, substance, matter and form, abstract entities, facts, and "the puzzle of existence": why is there something rather than nothing? Lowe's discussion is admirably clear, but this is not a book for beginners. Lowe presumes a background in philosophy of at least that of an advanced undergraduate. Seasoned philosophers will find the book stimulating, fiercely original, and, where they disagree, abundantly thought-provoking. Lowe is unique among philosophers writing on metaphysics today: an elegant writer who manages to combine equal portions of inventiveness, analytical rigor, empirical savvy, and plain good sense.

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WHAT'S WITHIN? NATIVISM RECONSIDERED. By FIONA COWIE. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. xviii, 334.

Fiona Cowie's *What's Within* consists of three parts. In the first, she examines the early modern rationalist-empiricist debate over nativism, isolating what she considers the two substantive "strands" (67) that truly separated them: whether there exist domain-specific learning mechanisms, and whether concept acquisition is amenable to naturalistic explanation. She then turns, in the book's succeeding parts, to where things stand today with these issues. The second part argues that Jerry Fodor's view of concepts is continuous with traditional nativism in that it precludes a naturalistic story of concept acquisition. Cowie objects, however, to Fodor's path to this conclusion and thus sees no reason to endorse it. The third part assesses Chomskyan nativism as a contemporary instance of positing domain-specific learning mechanisms. Though she is highly critical of how "poverty of the stimulus" arguments and the like have been used to lend credence to stronger conclusions, she holds that such arguments do indeed support the nativist's domain-specificity claim. Cowie's reconsideration of nativism thus limits itself to concepts and language (a few exceptions aside: there are two brief forays into face recognition and a mention of pathogen response). The terrain she does cover, however, is vast; and Cowie's illuminating discussions will stimulate anyone interested in the area. As I focus on a few large-scale qualms in what follows, let me mention in

particular that much of what is of interest in Cowie's book is to be found in her detailed consideration of specific arguments.

Just above, I followed Cowie in speaking of two "strands" in the nativist debate. Nativists affirm domain specificity (at least when arguing on their opponents' terms) and non-naturalizability; non-nativists deny these claims. But parties to the dispute do not always properly separate these claims, she notes, and so their talk of what's innate is often ambiguous. Put thus weakly—in terms of "strands"—the claim is quite plausible; indeed, it is illuminating to see that these were among the issues at play (in some manner) between rationalists and empiricists, at least part of the "import" (64) of early modern nativism. Cowie, however, more often states her thesis in stronger terms: the claims of domain specificity and non-naturalizability constitute what early modern nativism *is* (27), what early modern nativists *assert qua* nativists. So understood, her interpretation is less convincing. Cowie's instructive survey of alternative construals attests that it is very difficult to unpack what was meant by nativism while respecting the interpretative constraint that the reading not render the debate insubstantial.¹ But it seems at least as likely that the relevant concepts had not yet become fully clarified (after all, it's not clear that they are *today*—see below) than that these sharp thinkers meant something (or rather two, often undifferentiated things) so apparently different in content from what it seems they meant. (Cowie asks, on behalf of an objector: if non-naturalizability is (in part) what mattered to them, if this is what they meant, why didn't they say so? And answers: because they needed to play down such a gloomy claim. But why would Descartes or Leibniz have thought the proper response to God's role in our lives (as they saw it) to be gloom?) Cowie, of course, takes up a variety of other considerations in defending her proposal. One line of support she claims is the light her reading throws on such contemporary nativists as Fodor and Chomsky. So let's turn to the second and third parts of her book.

It would of course be absurd to claim that what Fodor *means* by nativism is that there is no naturalistic account of concept acquisition. Cowie suggests, however, that Fodor's nativism is *continuous* with the non-naturalizability strand of traditional nativism in that it leads to this conclusion. It is clear that Fodor holds that one can't provide a successful *purely psychological* explanation (paradigmatically, in terms of hypothesis testing) of concept acquisition. In a nutshell, any such explanation would require subjects to deploy concepts that could not themselves have been thus acquired. But Cowie suggests further that there are at least "indications" (111) that Fodor denies the possibility of *scientifically* explaining concept acquisition. Her primary evidence is Fodor's answer to the question: why is it that we typically acquire the concept DOOR-

¹Cowie cautions against reading her as attempting to provide an analysis of what the term 'nativism' (and its cognates) means (68). Note that I speak only of what the *parties to the debate* meant in using these terms.

KNOB as a result of experiencing typical doorknobs (as opposed to grandmothers, balloons, or what have you)?² A psychological story could advert to intentionally characterized evidential relations; a non-intentional, causal account, however, can seem at a loss to explain this coordination. Fodor's answer (at least for a certain range of concepts) is *metaphysical* doorknobhood is an appearance-dependent property, specifically the property of being such that minds like ours come to have a concept expressing it as a result of experiencing typical doorknobs (where 'typical doorknobs' must get cashed out in other terms). Of course, adverting to a metaphysical claim in answering a why-question doesn't of itself constitute non-naturalism. But Cowie claims that Fodor holds further that no non-metaphysical explanation of the doorknob/DOORKNOB effect is required and perhaps, more strongly, that none could be given. Fodor, I believe, *does* hold that no further non-metaphysical explanation is required *for the purpose of deflecting attempts to use the doorknob/DOORKNOB effect to argue for hypothesis-testing models of concept acquisition*.³ It is much less clear that no such explanation is required for *other* purposes, or that Fodor believes that his metaphysical account *precludes* any other explanation, in particular an account based on the causal powers of typical doorknobs. It is thus not clear that Fodor can be fairly charged with non-naturalism. What's more, as a result of this focus on Fodor as a *non-naturalist* sort of nativist, the question of what Fodor *himself* means by nativism, what he takes to be at issue, is not fully explored. Indeed, in laying out her own account of concept acquisition in opposition to Fodor's, Cowie talks of devices, templates, and prototypes that are "innately specified" (121, 134, and 135, respectively) without clarifying what *she* means in so speaking. Her characterization of Chomskyan nativism, we'll see, gives rise to a related worry.

What's Within's third (and by far longest) part asks whether poverty of the stimulus arguments and the like establish full-blown Chomskyan nativism or only some weaker position, in particular Enlightened Empiricism. Chomskyan nativism and Enlightened Empiricism both espouse representationalist, biologically bounded, domain-specific models of language acquisition. Even before we turn to where they part, that they thus agree might already raise an eyebrow. Cowie claims that Chomsky's position is a contemporary version of the *domain specificity* type of nativism. But now we see that in *this* sense Enlightened Empiricism counts as a form of nativism too. (It's likewise surprising, or at least confusing, that she claims that, since poverty of the stimulus arguments support at most Enlightened Empiricism, they are "completely unable to support *any* form of nativism about language-learning" (177, emphasis in original).) Why the positions are so labeled becomes clear when one notes what separates

²See Jerry Fodor, *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 6.

³I believe that this is the dialectical role of the remarks she quotes on 127-138. Admittedly, Fodor's text is not clear.

them—but the clarification only raises further questions. Chomskyean nativism further holds that the domain-specific principles constraining language acquisition are those of Universal Grammar and that these constraints are innate; Enlightened Empiricism is agnostic about the former, but denies the latter. But what is it that Chomskyan nativists affirm and Enlightened Empiricists deny? Here's Cowie's characterization of the claim she labels 'Innateness': "The constraints on learners' thoughts during language learning are in some manner innately encoded" (155). (Sometimes she supplies 'inherently' as a gloss on 'innately'—see, for example, 155.) Having witnessed Cowie in part I scuttle a variety of construals of nativism and settle on the aforementioned strands, one finds it somewhat disconcerting to find the term being used again later in the book in a different, but unexplicated, sense. It might be suggested that one rendering of nativism dismissed in part I as unhelpful in understanding the traditional debate might help Cowie here: the view that what's innate is, roughly, what's necessarily yielded by a genotype's interactions with a proper range of environments. (She labels this 'nativism*' (44) to distinguish it from *her* concerns, admitting that the issues it raises are probably more interesting and important, but insisting that this just isn't what the "nativist-empiricist" debate is about (45).) Cowie raises some important questions about how one might cash out this idea. (One point she doesn't discuss is that the use of induction to acquire certain concepts might itself count as innate by these lights, unless some sort of restriction is placed on admissible interactions with the environment.) But if she would not be willing to avail herself of this or some other strategy (no doubt there are many alternatives worth considering), then she owes us an explanation of why one isn't needed here.

This worry notwithstanding, *What's Within's* third part contains a searching critical examination of the arguments offered for Chomskyean nativism and is sure to generate much healthy discussion. Because of the non-demonstrative nature of the multifarious considerations for and against and thus the way they gain or lose plausibility in relation to the whole, it's perhaps unwise to enter piecemeal into this debate. So let me close by simply commending to the reader this gracefully written book and the responses that will no doubt follow.

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