Book reviews:


In 1940 Arthur E. Murphy put aside a large work on "Contemporary Philosophy." He died in 1962 and the work is now published, in an edition edited by Marcus G. Singer, under the current title. A biographical sketch precedes the work. In it we learn that Murphy received his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1923 from the University of California and did his dissertation on "The Metaphysics of Space-Time." We also learn that he gave a seminar on Peirce, Royce, and Collingwood, while at Cornell (1945-1953), and that he found the atmosphere there in the years after Wittgenstein's arrival tense, and a bit solemn. Singer's introduction provides a survey of Murphy's earlier ideas and of his "contextual analysis" viz., the view that philosophers must not rush to describe a Theory of Everything before they have worked on explanations of the varied particularities of experience and attempted limited explanations based upon testable hypotheses. Singer's introduction also includes a brief survey of the use of 'speculative philosophy' in American thought, distinguishing it from non-speculative (analytical) metaphysics.

In this work, Murphy is on a mission to review the philosophy of the last fifty years (1890-1940) and to warn of the tendency for philosopher's to overreach, whether from the standpoint of the system-building of F. H. Bradley or Whitehead, or the excessive sense-data reductionism of Russell. He does not offer another philosophy but a meta-philosophy in the form of a "hypothesis" that philosophy as a reflective study arises after an examination of our preconceptions reveals conflicts among them, and that reflective philosophy progresses and gains respect when it strives to adjudicate the debates over these conflicts. Murphy's reflective philosopher, however, is not without preconceptions: philosophers must always strive for ultimate, inclusive, discriminating, and harmonious explanations; in the end a philosopher may rest only after it is shown that "life at its human and attainable best, is reason in operation." (p. 22). Thus, Murphy appears to favor at least the spirit of idealism for striving to create comprehensive systems.

In Chapter Two Murphy examines the idealism of Bradley,
Bosanquet, Royce, and others in the context of the important and genuine problems idealism has attempted to resolve: the exposure of science as a highly theoretical activity, the need to ground values in a reality in continual need of clarification, the project of unifying experience as a whole within a perspective that does not do violence to values traditionally associated with it. These are the worthwhile tasks and contributions of the idealists that philosophy must nurture. Dubious contributions include a tendency for excessive dialectical abstractions, unsupportable and "dreary" claims about the nature of the Absolute, and the support idealism lends to certain political ideologies.

Subsequent chapters are devoted to the pragmatism of Peirce (Ch. 3), in which Murphy shows a good understanding for his day of the broader philosophical context of Peirce's pragmatism; to the realism of Alexander, Russell, and Moore (Ch 4), which Murphy applauds for attention to the details of logic and perception, but sanctions for dogmatic and premature demarcations of the subject matter of philosophy; and to an extended critique of Whitehead (Ch 5 & 6). Murphy critiques Whitehead's notion of feeling as "so generally interpreted as to be consistent with anything that science . . . can discover," (p. 171) and doubts that his process philosophy can account for actual entities. In the remainder of Chapter 6 Murphy critiques the realism of Alexander, Russell's neutral monism, the physical realism of Roy Wood Sellars, McTaggert's personal idealism, and Peirce's synechism ("a bad hypothesis" p 226). Peirce erred, he argues, by using generality as an explanation rather than something to be explained. In the final two chapters Murphy comes close to embracing Santayana and Etienne Gilson as examples of healthy philosophic trends: Santayana because he wanted to root philosophy in common sense and in "faith mediated by symbols" (p. 241); Gilson, because he believed that man was a metaphysical animal and so philosophy would always bury its undertakers.

In the end Murphy called this work negative and preliminary. It is valuable and timely to the extent that it recognizes the importance of 'speculative philosophy' in the American tradition, and reminds us that philosophy is always being engaged and its discourse shaped, except when there is an internal loss of nerve, by the scientific and normative concerns that urgently preoccupy non-philosophers.

Tucson, Arizona
Joseph L. Esposito