

1-1-2004

A History of Irish Thought

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NSUWorks Citation

Hibbs, D. (2004). A History of Irish Thought. *Essays in Philosophy*, 5 (1), 172-174. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/shss_facarticles/743

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Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 1, January 2004

Book Review

A History of Irish Thought, by Thomas Duddy. New York: Routledge, 2002. vi+362 pp. Bibliography and Index. ISBN 0415206936 Hardcover \$75.00; Paperback \$19.95

Thomas Duddy, a Lecturer in Philosophy at the National University of Ireland-Galway, has produced one of the latest contributions to the growing number of commentaries on the impact of Irish thought within the western intellectual tradition. Previous authors working in this relatively new field have tended to focus on individual figures or particular time periods. Duddy, however, has written a comprehensive synopsis of the history of Irish thought beginning with Pseudo-Augustine in the 7th century and ending with the contemporary political philosopher Philip Pettit. Along the way, readers are introduced to prominent - and not so prominent - philosophers, scientists, political theorists, moralists, and satirists. The text is divided into nine chapters, each dealing with an individual thinker or group of thinkers bound by common concerns. Duddy's writing is clear, and his analysis perceptive. He has made what is sure to be a lasting contribution to the genre.

Duddy begins with the most obvious question an author on this topic faces: Does the concept 'Irish thought' make any sense? Duddy argues that the question betrays a prejudice. Most scholars would agree that there are English, French, and German intellectual traditions, each formed by the language used, the problems addressed, the style of presentation, and so forth. But, according to Duddy, to use these traditions as the standard by which we judge whether a nation has produced a unique intellectual tradition is wrongheaded. England, France, and Germany experienced the relatively continuous culture enjoyed by imperial powers. However, nations that were the subject of invasion and subjugation might still have a distinctive strain of thought shaped by their particular circumstances. Noting the comparative discontinuity in the history of Ireland, we should expect to find 'Irish thought' in the reaction of Irish thinkers to the lack of a stable, prolonged, nationalistic background. I will return to this topic later.

Many of the characters Duddy discusses will not be familiar to the general reader. Chapter 1 focuses on one such figure, 'the Irish Augustine', the author of a 7th century commentary on *Genesis* which was later believed to be a work of St. Augustine. The 'Irishness' of the author is revealed through the author's intimate knowledge of Irish topography. Chapter 2 covers John Scottus Eriugena (c. 800-877), an Irish scholar living abroad in the Frankish court of Charles the Bald, the grandson of Charlemagne. Eriugena's place in the history of western philosophy was secured by his translations of various theological tracts and his *Periphyseon*, a philosophical dialogue which aims toward a reconciliation between the Greek and Latin theological traditions.

Following Eriugena, Duddy leaps to the more recognizable characters of the 17th and 18th centuries and

the modern turn in ideas. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 outline the contributions of Irish scientists, philosophers, and moralists to the central debates of the era.

Chapter 3 relates how Robert Boyle and William Molyneux spearheaded the movement towards experimental methods in science via their own scientific successes and their advocacy of scientific societies such as the Royal Society of London and the Dublin Philosophical Society.

The subject of Chapter 4, John Toland, was a polymath who epitomized the enlightenment critique of popular religion. Toland is depicted not as an atheist, but as a critic of religious prejudice. In particular, Toland tried to show that reason and religion were coextensive; that there is no truth that is religious which is not at the same time rational.

Chapter 5 recounts the eccentric metaphysical ruminations of George Berkeley. Berkeley engaged John Locke and the materialists on the issue of skepticism by advancing his now (in)famous doctrine of immaterialism – that the only things in existence are immaterial minds and their contents, ideas. According to Berkeley, the common view of philosophers - that materialism is true - leads to both skepticism and atheism. Thus, to restore God and knowledge, sound philosophy requires that we obviate the mischievous (and vacuous) notion of matter. Duddy argues that Jonathan Swift was similar to Berkeley in that he sought his own victory against what he believed to be the muddled thought of contemporary philosophers. Swift, however, instead of erecting a new metaphysical system, chose to satirize the intellectual products of the ‘free thinkers, atheists, and rationalists’ who were agitating against traditional religious views.

Chapter 6 limns the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson and the aesthetics of Edmund Burke. According to Duddy, Hutcheson argued against the egoism of Hobbes by locating an internal, disinterested, moral sense which approves of what is praiseworthy and disapproves of what is blameworthy. Thus, not all action is motivated by self-love. Duddy tells us that Burke rejected the relativist claims of skeptics concerning taste and argued for an underlying universality regarding the reports of sense organs. Although some degree of relativity is consistent with this universality, if someone were to assert that tobacco is as sweet as sugar, we should regard them as being equipped with faulty sensory organs rather than accept relativism.

With Chapter 7 Duddy moves into the 19th century and the Irish contribution to prominent movements such as utilitarianism and feminism. William Thompson is characterized as a follower of Jeremy Bentham who, like Bentham, employed the principle of utility in theories designed to promote social reform. Anna Doyle Wheeler authored what Duddy describes as the most important work on women’s rights published between 1792 (Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*) and 1869 (J.S. Mill’s *Subjection of Women*). Mill had claimed that both the interests of children and the interests of women were subsumed under the general interests of men; therefore, males could represent all interests in governmental policy making. Wheeler argued that women’s interests, like that of children, are unique, and cannot be included in a general category of interests under the stewardship of males. Thus, governmental representation should be extended to women.

In Chapter 8 Duddy continues his account of the 19th century with the controversy between traditional religion and modern science. John Tyndall, a vociferous proponent of the notion of scientific autonomy, openly declared that religion was hostile to the free inquiry of scientists. Although Tyndall noted the

natural inclinations of humankind to be religious, his gesture toward a type of vague religious impulse failed to persuade. The more traditional theologians proceeded to attack his brand of materialism as intellectually inadequate since it failed to make sense of consciousness, personal identity, and so on. Duddy also takes note of an interesting critique of Darwinian theory in the work of Frances Power Cobbe. Cobbe, who was a friend of Darwin, argued that Darwin could never make sense of morality while examining the behavior of non-human animals. The moral sense of human beings cannot be the product of blind development from lesser forms of consciousness as Darwin would have us believe.

The concluding chapter mentions (briefly) the work of various luminaries of the 20th (and 21th) century, including W.B. Yeats, Iris Murdoch, and Philip Pettit. Yeats is described as an anti-rationalist mystic, while one of Murdoch's central concerns is the impenetrable core of the human mind. Pettit is concerned with eliminating threats to the autonomy of mind – from both materialists who seek a reduction of mind to microphysical systems, and from theories which suggest human minds are mere products of cultural conditioning. His own preference is for a multi-layered approach where each level of explanation, from the microphysical to the macrosocial, is autonomous.

Duddy's book is successful in achieving its ultimate goal – providing the reader with a sense of what Irish intellectuals have been up to from the time of their earliest appearance in the historical record to their latest efforts. Although some specialists may quibble with the list of minor figures in this study, Duddy hits all the high points. Duddy's summaries are not designed to engage scholars on interpretive issues, so the text is free of unnecessary jargon and minutiae. The result is an accessible history that is impressive for both its precision and scope.

If there is a weakness in the book it is in Duddy's attempt to specify 'Irish thought'. He is correct when he notes that there *can* be identifiable intellectual traditions within groups that have little or no historical continuity in terms of political or social stability. However, this does not tell us what conditions are necessary for a discrete intellectual tradition to exist. Locating these conditions has been, and still is, a matter of serious debate. Duddy could have lingered on this issue *ad nauseam*, but the result would have been a different, and perhaps lesser, book. Even if the notion of 'Irish thought' is dubious, Duddy's history is still an impressive achievement.

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