

REVIEWS

YOLTON, John W., *Thinking Matter : Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1984.

This is an absolutely fascinating, almost bewitching book. Though about a controversy that raged in Britain during the eighteenth-century, it could as well be treating our own late twentieth-century discussions in philosophy of mind. Make some appropriate changes in names and language, flesh out some arguments here and there, you could almost generate the debates that rage in the columns of, say, a *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* about the computational metaphor in cognitive psychology. This reason alone should suffice to welcome this work into the shelves of libraries, both public and private, of those interested in history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy of psychology.

Apart, however, from the topicality and the intrinsic historical interest of the material itself, the book is a veritable goldmine of information about many less well-known writers and thinkers of that period. Tracts and pamphlets of a Baxter, Browne and Cockburn rub shoulders with the treatises of a Locke, Hume and Priestly. And what emerges from all this is the spirit of a period, the nature of its concerns and the implications of an issue captured in its complexity, confusion and characteristic details by the able pen of John Yolton.

The issue itself was this : Could matter think ? Or was an immaterial soul the only way of securing immortality ? Those concerned with the threat to religious orthodoxy saw, in the attempts of those who tried to provide a positive answer to the first question, a materialism which undercut and undermined religious beliefs. One of the crucial questions in this regard was the nature of human action. Was it possible to explain human actions in terms of the mechanism of the body ? Or does one require to introduce some kind of spiritual and mental causality in the workings of nature ?

The book addresses itself to depicting the way this issue and related questions were debated in the 18th century Britain. The 'introduction' sets the scene by delineating the issues that Cudworth was the first to raise in 1678 and which anticipated "many of the books and pamphlets, including the Boyle lectures, in his own and the next century." (p. 5).

The first chapter presents Locke's suggestion, one of the main themes of the book, and some of the reactions to it. His suggestion was that "it would be possible for God — that omnipotent, eternal, cognitive being — to add to a system of matter the power of thought" (p. 17). This, together with Locke's proposal that immateriality was not necessary for immortality, raised a storm of protest.

The second chapter investigates one of the reasons which lead some of the writers of that period to try and refute Locke's suggestion : the fear of the image of man as an automaton. "The force at work in those who reacted against ... (Locke's) suggestion was the fear of the automatical man. This image of the man-machine had widespread implications." (p. 45) Some of the arguments of those opposed to Locke's suggestion as well as of those who

supported it has a surprisingly modern ring.

The third chapter is a summary of the way Hume saw this discussion. The fourth and fifth chapter dig deeper into the controversy by looking at the different positions held by the participants in this debate about two issues: space and extension and the nature of matter. The sixth chapter focusses upon Priestly's materialism and the attacks upon it.

The seventh chapter is about the concept of action, an important issue for those "who believed that man can and does act freely, to articulate a supporting concept of action; (and) even those who defended some version of necessitarianism felt the need to characterize human action" (p. 127). The last chapter takes up the various explanations proposed during this period in order to explain the nature of thinking and acting. The conclusion highlights the significance of the themes discussed during this debate to the extensive interests the 18th century thinkers had in moral philosophy.

This debate about materialism or thinking matter is, of course, inextricably tied to the discussions about the nature of mental activity, the kind of cognitive access we have to the world etc. Yolton promises to take up these themes in a companion volume, since then published, titled *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid*. I wonder whether it was such a wise idea to split the themes so interconnected into two separate volumes. It might have been better to publish them under one cover: an additional 250 or so pages would not have made the book unwieldy. It might well have preserved the force and coherence of the theme much better.

As I indicated at the beginning of this review, this is a beautiful book. Yolton's superlative scholarship is evident on every page of this book. I believe that *Thinking Matter* is a very substantial contribution to the history of philosophy. The scope of the work is far greater than the modest subtitle 'Materialism in eighteenth-century Britain' indicates. It deserves to be read widely, especially by those of us active in the domain of philosophy of psychology.