

What's Within? Nativism Reconsidered

by Fiona Cowie, Oxford University Press, 1999. £25.00 (334 pages)
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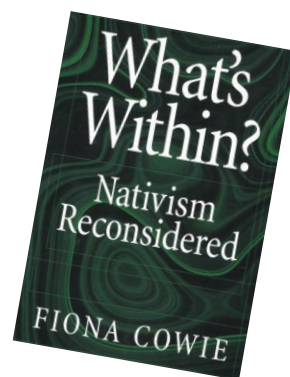
It is far from obvious that we should all share with the author of this essay, Fiona Cowie, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the California Institute of Technology, the impression that 'nativism rules'. And that writing a detailed critique of innatist hypotheses in linguistics, cognitive science and the philosophy of mind should count as a 'powerfully iconoclastic' enterprise (as the first line on the jacket of the book states). Even imagining that her critique were really persuasive, how many sacred icons would it shatter? There would be glass on the floor in about ten offices in linguistics at MIT, and in another, say, fifty or so departmental offices widely dispersed across the continents. Hardly enough in the whole of Europe that the noise might be even noticed. In the departments of philosophy, even in the US and England, it's much harder to think of any glass on the floor at all. What she has to offer, 'enlightened empiricism', is dimly distinguishable from the post-positivistic empiricism that has been for the past several decades, and still is, the dominant analytic philosophy of mind and language. The geography of glass splinters in psychology would only be marginally denser than the one in linguistics, except possibly for cognitive neuroscience. In the former Soviet Union, including her former Eastern European colonies, the faintest allusion to innatism has been fiercely persecuted (sometimes under police monitoring) for over 70 years. Moreover, empiricism, is (quite interestingly) the spontaneous philosophy of mind and language of ordinary folks in the street, on a par with 'naive physics'. It surely is the spontaneous initial philosophy of undergraduates everywhere, more often than not destined to remain unchallenged well into post-doctoral studies (if ever at all).

Demographically speaking, few philosophical arguments could be less 'iconoclastic' than the umpteenth refutation of innatist hypotheses. In terms of head counts across the academic world, nativism may have been just a ripple over the uniform blanket of environmentalism and empiricism that has persistently covered the study of language and mind almost everywhere. Are Cowie's arguments really new and at all challenging to an innatist? Jerry Fodor is presently circulating a long draft of a vitriolic counter-critique of Cowie's book, destined to be published. Given space limitations here, and the superb job undertaken by Fodor, I advise the reader to track down Fodor's forthcoming comment

One aspect of this book is surely commendable: the painstaking accuracy

with which Cowie tracks the opponents' theses. Although empiricists had, so far, mostly vented outrage at Chomsky and Fodor without taking the trouble really to understand what they were saying, and why, Fiona Cowie has plunged deeply into their work, earnestly trying to capture its contents and rationale. In my opinion, she has occasionally failed, but her detailed philological and argumentative reconstructions are, in the main, accurate. She knows what she is against, all the way down to nitty-gritty experiments in psycholinguistics and language acquisition mostly known only to the specialists, and considered (rightly, in my opinion) pillars in favor of linguistic nativism. Her efforts to re-interpret or defuse these data, and sometimes to upturn them in favor of empiricism, are ingenious. Indeed, the very ingenuity that these attempts impose on Cowie will signal to the unprejudiced reader why they had been presented as clearly pointing in the opposite direction. It is, instead, a recurrent rhetoric sin of Cowie's to conclude, after having deployed a piece of strained and hair-splitting analysis, that this or that specific innatist thesis is therefore 'totally unsupported'. She often seems to maintain that evidence for innatism must be either apodictic, or devoid of all value.

Her conclusion is that it's possible that linguistic nativism may, after all, 'turn out to be true' (p.275); that it has not been demonstrated (apodictically?), yet, that it may be true. Quite a shift from the more traditional critiques that held linguistic nativism to be just a crazy idea. Yet, she contends that the nativist has a special burden of proof, from which the empiricist is exempted. Empiricism can be corroborated even by tentative and incomplete evidence, while nativism must always be gauged against the backdrop of the most solid, knock-down data. Why this bizarre asymmetry should hold is one of the central topics of this book. What would it take to convince Cowie? One example will suffice. The creolization of pidgins, including sign-language pidgins, clearly shows that the child spontaneously injects novel and complex morpho-syntactic structures into the meager linguistic data that she receives from the external community of speakers. It's a perfect case in favor of strong linguistic innateness. After weakly attempting to upturn these data on creolization in favor of empiricism, Cowie almost surrenders. She candidly confesses: 'Still... I am not persuaded' (p. 304). The best commentary on such attitude is better left to Francis Bacon: 'The human understand-



ing when it has once adopted an opinion draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusion may remain inviolate.' I bet that Bacon's term 'predetermination' was itself innatist.

One more thing must be added, in this particular case. Cowie pictures herself as having undertaken a job loaded with significant and desirable socio-political consequences. Before running over 300 pages of exquisitely thick scholarly arguments, Cowie stresses the importance of her theses to counter 'the resurgence of nativism in other spheres... with potentially devastating consequences.' (p. viii). What she labels 'New Nativism' threatens to have scary consequences on a number of concrete issues: from 'Head Start programs for poor scholastic performance among minority children', to 'divorce laws', to 'sexual inequality', to 'deriving "ought" from "is"' (pp. viii-ix). Cowie does not commit the mistake of unloading onto Chomsky's and Fodor's shoulders the responsibility for such ignominious states of affairs. Nay, she explicitly exonerates them. Well, then, why evoke these dark shadows at all, in such a quintessentially academic book? The suspicion lingers that the message, at bottom, is something like this: whatever force my arguments may have, be advised that they had better be received with approval anyway, because otherwise many innocents will suffer, and conservative politicians will be given free rein. That's an improper move, to put it mildly, in a rational argumentation game. If I were the judge, I would ask that such lines be expunged from the record, and that such testimony be disregarded by the members of the jury.

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