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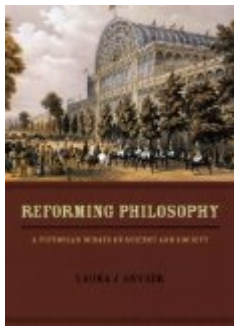

Laura J. Snyder. *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. x + 386 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-76733-8.

Reviewed by Joe Bord

Published on H-Albion (September, 2008)

Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

This admirable and plainly written book is the best study of William Whewell to emerge since Richard Yeo's *Defining Science* (1993) and really the most interesting comparative look at John Stuart Mill since Christopher Turk's *Coleridge and Mill* (1988). Laura J. Snyder takes a well-defined subject (in the first place, the Mill-Whewell debate over intuitionism and inductive method) and uses it to capture something of the political and social "spirit of the age." Snyder calibrates her assessment of the encounter quite convincingly, neither overplaying its centrality in broader Victorian intellectual life nor overlooking the way in which the argument between Mill and Whewell was ineluctably a discussion about reform as much as about epistemology.

On the latter point, Snyder is right to emphasize how the dichotomy between inductivism and hypothetico-deductivism in Victorian theory begins to break down under scrutiny. Her most original chapter is her first ("Whewell and the Reform of Inductive Philosophy," especially the section "Renovating Bacon"). Whewell wanted to extend and refurbish Baconian principles through his "discoverer's induction." Clearly historians have underestimated the tenacity of Baconian ideals in mid-nineteenth-century scientific debates, and Snyder adds to the ongoing revision of Francis Bacon's importance. Meanwhile, Mill's inductivism (for the physical sciences) indicated how conservative empiricism could correlate with advanced politics, whereas Whewell's more nuanced renovation of empirical method accorded with a more moderate political position. Snyder is especially good at explaining Whewell's centrism, not only in his composite scientific methodology but also in his political ambivalence. The one did not absolutely determine the other but they did complement one another. Whewell was a gradualist in both science and politics.

Whewell emerges as a rather more congenial figure than Mill in Snyder's account, and on occasion it is not clear whether Mill willfully misconstrued his opponent. Mill seems to have made

Whewell a substitute for other targets, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Yet, Whewell was an easy man to misunderstand. For example, in an excellent passage, Snyder shows how Whewell's epistemological doctrine differed on important points from Immanuel Kant's, yet the distinction between Kant's categorical forms and Whewell's more specific fundamental ideas of science is subtle enough that one can see how contemporaries assumed that "the doctrines of Kant and Transcendental Philosophy are now promulgated in the university which educated [John] Locke" (p. 44). Mill's knowledge of the history of science was narrower than Whewell's, and Snyder agrees more frequently with Whewell's methodological criticisms of Mill than vice versa. Snyder discovers in Whewell's writings a richness of method not evident in Mill's *System of Logic* (1843), and tends to use Whewell as a yardstick by which to measure Mill.

Still, Snyder revaluates Mill's political theory in a way that rescues him from a "negative liberty" straitjacket. Her most sympathetic treatment of Mill comes with his later *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). Mill stuck with a deductivist, Ricardian approach to political economy (as exhibited in his earlier *System of Logic*), yet Snyder finds that by the time he had published *Principles* Mill had moved on to consider the “art” of moral distribution in addition to the science of production. This shift in focus yielded an approach that was closer in practice to the concerns of Whewell and Richard Jones. Education, moral improvement, and a measure of state assistance were implicated in this, thereby linking political economy with a moralizing view of liberty. So far as ethical theory is concerned a picture emerges of Millian refinement under fire. Mill moved utilitarianism away from Benthamism at least partly due to Whewell's criticism, even though he did not admit that this was what was going on. In the fourth chapter, Snyder provides an enjoyable description of the debate between Mill and Whewell over the pleasures and moral status of animals: Mill rallied the utilitarian troops behind Benthamite verity, denouncing Whewell's rejection of animals as moral subjects as tantamount to an argument for slavery. Mill later worked out his hierarchy of subjective pleasures in a way that in effect tried to meet Whewellian objections.

In Snyder's account, Mill used Whewell as something of a political Aunt Sally. Much of the author's political reassessment of Whewell consists of showing how he and Mill were actually closer on the big issues of the day (such as slavery) than Mill gave Whewell credit for. If in science Whewell emerges as a far more original figure (certainly he was no derivative British Kantian), in politics he appears more progressive. Snyder is careful to acknowledge that Whewell called himself a “constitutional conservative” or an “old Whig,” but stresses his commitment to upward intellectual social mobility (p. 223). On this point, it would have been interesting to know what Whewell wrote about Edmund Burke. Politically, he seems to have been a very liberal Peelite, and Snyder notices that he married into an active Whig family (the Marshalls of Leeds). Certainly, he did not deserve Mill's choicer rhetoric.

Snyder is most interested in rehabilitating Whewellian induction for a modern epistemology of science and in broadening our understanding of Millian liberalism in political theory. Snyder also sees, as she acknowledges in the third chapter, that the Whewell-Mill debate did not occur in an intellectual vacuum, and she has some striking things to say on the impact of the encounter on contemporaries. For example, she shows how Charles Darwin and his critics partially framed their own debate in Whewellian categories. In contrast, the link between Darwin and Mill appears weaker. Thus, the book is probably most relevant to historians and philosophers of science, but theorists of liberalism and historians of nineteenth-century reform could also read it with profit to round out their own contexts.

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Citation: Joe Bord. Review of Snyder, Laura J. *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2008.

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