# Book Review:
# W. J. Mander's (2020) *The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics.* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

*The Unknowable* offers the first sustained study of a nineteenth century movement in British philosophy: metaphysical agnosticism. The book is appropriately titled - this Victorian theory about the unknowableness of reality is almost unknown today, its philosophers darkly obscure. It covers metaphysical agnosticism, alongside two movements opposed to it: empiricism, and British idealism. As these three trends comprise the major metaphysical lines of Victorian thought, *The Unknowable* effectively provides a study of nineteenth century British metaphysics more generally.

*The Unknowable* is an exceptionally fine history of philosophy: it takes an extremely neglected period of metaphysics and explores it clearly, methodically, insightfully. Mander is known for tackling uncommon subjects: he has previously authored monographs on John Norris and idealist ethics. Yet this must be the most uncommon. No book has previously been dedicated to Victorian metaphysical agnosticism. Although monographs exist on individual Victorian philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill or James Frederick Ferrier, broad studies of philosophy during this period are rare. There is a 2014 collection edited by Mander himself, *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century.* Aside from that, scholars must look to vintage histories of philosophy by Rogers (1922), Copleston (1966), and Passmore (1966). These are hardly ideal. Rogers is almost a century old, whilst Copleston and Passmore are both disproportionately absorbed by the Mills (father and son). More recent guides to nineteenth century Western philosophy include collections edited by Moyar (2010) and Stone (2011) but, as you would expect, these do not aim to particularly address British thought, or metaphysics. Mander's study goes into immeasurably more depth and detail than all these existing works. His research into the schools of Victorian agnosticism and empiricism is especially important. Although the last decade has seen increasing research into British idealism, including Mander's own work, these territories remain stubbornly disregarded.

*The Unknowable* has a tripartite structure, each part discussing one philosophical movement. Within each school, Mander considers a selection of figures, most chapters covering one or two philosophers. Part I on agnosticism starts with William Hamilton, and continues through Henry

Longueville Mansel, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Henry Huxley. Part II on empiricism starts with John Stuart Mill, and continues through Alexander Bain, George Croom Robertson, Shadworth Hollway Hodgson, William Kingdon Clifford, G. H. Lewes, and Karl Pearson. Part III on idealism starts with Ferrier, and covers a variety of figures including John Grote, James Hutchison Stirling, John Caird, and F. H. Bradley. Given this structure, the book should be of interest to philosophers researching Victorian philosophical movements, and individual figures. I'll say a little about Mander's contribution to both areas of scholarship.

The schools of thought that Mander identifies - agnosticism, empiricism and British idealism - have been variously touched on by earlier writers. For example, Passmore (1966, 38-9) briefly draws connections between the agnosticism of Hamilton, Mansel, Huxley, and Spencer. But, as far as I am aware, Mander is the first to conceive these three movements as distinct trends, actively reacting to one another. The introduction to the third part of *The Unknowable* states, 'It is the thesis of this book that Idealism should be thus seen as the third major metaphysical orientation of the nineteenth century and, so conceived, we see Idealists battling on a twofold front, against agnosticism and against empiricism' (p.208). Despite the book's title, this does seem to be its central concern: distinguishing and understanding the conflicts between these three movements.

Mander provides ample evidence that these movements are in conflict. *The Unknowable* argues persuasively that empiricism deliberately sets itself apart from agnosticism, in holding that reality *is* knowable - through sense experience or science. British idealism agrees with empiricism that reality is knowable but distinguishes itself by arguing we can know it another way - through thought or reason. As Mander puts it, empiricists *contracted* the realm of the real to possible sensory experience, whilst idealists *expanded* the realm of the knowable, using reason to reach beyond mere sensation (p.4). This helps us understand the appeal of empiricism, even when it lurches into scientism: the whole world can be known in seemingly straightforward ways. It also helps us understand the sudden, widespread popularity of idealism: using reason, we can move beyond our senses, such that every part of the world lies open to our minds. Mander finds evidence that idealism was battling earlier schools in Absolute idealist T. H. Green, who advised students to set aside empiricism *and* agnosticism: "Close your Mill and your Spencer, and turn to Kant and Hegel" (p.208). Yet, as Mander observes later, idealist borrowings of Kant and Hegel appear to be 'more like tools of convenience taken up in a pre-existing debate', rather than the origins of a new way of thinking (p.228).

Turning to individual figures, one advantage of considering particular philosophers is that you can get into the mechanics of their theories, and their motivations. Mander prefaces each

discussion with a short, largely intellectual biography, which I found useful for situating philosophers amongst their peers. Unusually for a history of philosophy, the book even includes portraits of these thinkers. Mander's research into these philosophers is impressively thorough, and his readings always enlightening. I'll give a few examples.

The book starts with Hamilton, whose philosophy of the unknowable so energised British metaphysics, first set out in his 1829 "Philosophy of the Unconditioned". As Mander explains, Hamilton argues that reality is inconceivable and incognizable: 'we have no power whatsoever to escape our own cognitive limitations, condemning us to utter ignorance and incomprehension about ultimate reality' (p.13). This is because we can only understand objects as they stand in relation to us, not as they are on their own (p.15). Yet, as an agnostic realist, Hamilton does not doubt there *is* a reality out there (p.20). He asserts the existence of mind, matter, space, time and God; he just denies they are comprehensible (p.35). Hamilton's position appealed to his peers for several reasons. One is that it became possible to portray scientific progress as less threatening because science deals 'merely with the empirical surface of things', whilst simultaneously freeing science to move forward without getting bogged in 'difficult metaphysical swamps' (p.2).

Despite Mander's implicit sympathy for the characters he studies, he does not hesitate to flag up their philosophical inconsistencies. *The Unknowable* is particularly blunt in its assessment of the agnostic Spencer. Mander argues that Spencer is never 'quite able to settle' on how best to reconcile science and religion: he slides between the view that science and religion grasp at the *same* thing, and at *different* things (p.71-72). Mander also points out that, despite Spencer's professed position on the scientific unknowableness of the world, Spencer makes 'all kinds of claims about it' (p. 72). At one point, Mander describes Spencer as 'blind' to the depth of the questions he deals with: 'his undergraduate-level arguments are as self-confident as they are superficial' (p.67).

Mander also helps us understand Bradley's complex reaction to agnosticism. In his discussion of Bradley, and elsewhere, Mander aims to bring out similarities, as well as disputes, between the three schools. Like other British idealists, Bradley denies that *experienced things* may be understood as in any way different from *the experiencing of them* (p.295). Reality is identical with experience. However, he diverges from some of his fellows in allowing that reality passes beyond thought, writing 'the notion that existence could be the same as understanding strikes as cold and ghost-like as the dreariest materialism' (p.293). Bradleyian experience includes feeling, as well as thought (p.296). And this, Mander argues, could be read as a resurgence of Hamilton's unknowable: 'It brings back into the picture the reality beyond thought… the mysterious

incomprehensibility of the Absolute' (p.298). Surprisingly, despite his idealism, Bradley's Absolute is not wholly knowable.

Although *The Unknowable* does admirable work with the material it covers, I wish it covered slightly more. No book can cover everything, but I would have found a few extra elements valuable. One concerns the figures that Mander leaves out. As he explains (p.6) the study's focus on debates about the unknowable precluded discussion of some talented nineteenth century philosophers, such as James Martineau and William Whewell. I particularly felt the loss of Whewell, whose 1840 *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* has so much to say about the metaphysics of space, time, matter, and causality. I would also have welcomed more on Henry Sidgwick and James McCosh, who receive passing mentions; and Mary Shepherd, Constance Naden, and Thomas Case, who are not mentioned. It would have been rewarding to hear Mander's views, even briefly, on how these philosophers fit into his Victorian framework. For example, should Whewell be associated with the empiricists, given his dislike of Kant's 'dim and unknown' external reality? Was Naden really that closely aligned with Spencer's agnosticism?

The other element I would have appreciated is a kind of 'afterward', a flying take from Mander on what happened to these nineteenth century movements *after* the nineteenth century. Although Mander makes a few remarks on the unknowable in twenty-first century philosophy (p.6), he doesn't trace the immediate legacy of this theory or its fellows into the early twentieth century. This left me wondering. Did metaphysical agnosticism persist into any 1900s or 1910s philosophers? How does Mander perceive the relationship between, say, empiricism and the 'new realism' offered by Oxford realist John Cook Wilson, or early analytics Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore? Mander's much-celebrated (2011) *British Idealism: A History* provides a rewarding legacy chapter, "The After-Life of Idealism", and I think something like that would have worked well in *The Unknowable* too. I wonder if Mander didn't offer such a legacy chapter here because he is not, ultimately, especially interested in theories of unknowability. His interests are perhaps much wider: the whole breadth of nineteenth century metaphysical thought. But ostensibly focusing the book on agnosticism provides, as Mander himself points out (p.1), an 'appropriate path' through the 'massive dusty labyrinth' that is Victorian metaphysics.

Quibbles aside, *The Unknowable* is a superb history of philosophy. It admirably tackles poorly known figures and theories, rendering their views well motivated - and sometimes even sensible. This book will become a landmark in the study of nineteenth century British metaphysics.

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