

CONTENT AND CONSCIOUSNESS, by D. C. Dennett. *Routledge & Kegan Paul*, London, 1969. 198 pp. £2 net.

*Content and Consciousness* is an impressive work. It attempts to tackle problems in the philosophy of mind while drawing on the insights of contemporary logic, epistemology and psychology, the psychological material being drawn mainly from the work of the neurologist. It is difficult to give an adequate account of the book for it deals with a very wide range of issues, and it is this broad perspective that gives the book its interest. D. C. Dennett conceives his task as being that of drawing together recent debates in psychology and philosophy to produce by this merging a 'genuine analysis of mind'. He attempts this merger by mapping our talk in philosophy of mind, our talk of thinking, believing, awareness, intention, etc., on to a picture of the mind as conceived by the neurologist. By this mapping D. C. Dennett hopes to present a unified picture of the mind. In setting himself this task he takes on a method that he himself says, runs counter to two prevailing trends in contemporary philosophy. He must disobey the two 'rules' of 'Avoid mechanism' and 'Tamper not with ordinary words'. He claims that these are both good rules, but that their sound application is not universal. For the purpose of his analysis. D. C. Dennett advocates certain revisions in the way we use our ordinary words of 'conscious' and 'aware', but he does so in a way that is in the context justifiable, and he argues well to justify this move. The move enables the subsequent analysis to be presented with a greater clarity than would otherwise have been possible. The other rule also is disobeyed by D. C. Dennett, for he proceeds to construct a mechanism by which we may understand mental phenomena.

The starting point of D. C. Dennett's analysis is the intentionalist thesis of irreducibility, that 'those features of the world in virtue of which certain mental language statements are true or false are outside the domain of the physical sciences, and not describable or subject to explanation within the scientific framework'. D. C. Dennett's task is to describe and explain mental phenomena within the scientific framework. The first step he takes in this direction is to differentiate himself from the crude behaviourist—the behaviourist who attempts to explain and describe mental phenomena solely in terms of an organism's *overt* behaviour. Dennett distinguishes between 'centralist' and 'peripheralist' theories of stimulus-response behaviourism. The 'peri-

pheralist' theory, as used by the crude behaviourists, attempts to explain and give an account of mental phenomena in terms of the *overt* behaviour of the subject, while the 'centralist' theory allows that data from neural analyses may also serve as *covert* 'behaviour' in terms of which to account for mental phenomena. This point is illustrated by Dennett's consideration of the analogy between the learned ability that a child may have to do something, and the instinctive ability that an animal may have to do the same thing. There must be a similarity between the two, and this similarity is found in the nature of the neural pathways involved in the activity. That the child has had to *learn* the activity in question testifies to a certain plasticity in the neural apparatus of the child, and learning consists in the adaptation of this apparatus to the needs of its life. The mechanism of learning is understood in analogy with the adaptation of a species to its environment as explained by the theory of natural selection. But still the problem faces us as to how we are to map the *conscious* awareness of the child, his reasonings and thoughts, on to the whole host of neural connexions. D. C. Dennett does this by means of a concept of 'threshold' of awareness. We are conscious of something if it passes over this threshold, and the threshold may have different values at different moments of our life. Sometimes we may be conscious of all that is around us, and at other times be totally oblivious of everything. Mental language is about what appears above the threshold. Most of D. C. Dennett's analysis is concerned with giving an account of neural activity in terms of feed-back and inhibitory mechanisms such that a structure akin to that of an 'intentional system' can be constructed. If we can do this, then we see that what appears above the threshold—the system of our consciousness—can be mapped on to the neural system thus described. Much 'unconscious' activity is necessary in order that that of which we are aware should be as it is, and it is the use of this *covert* mechanism to describe the data of consciousness, and exhibit the possibility of listing the truth conditions of statements regarding intentional objects, that is at the heart of D. C. Dennett's thesis. The account Dennett gives of a system of neural activity, built up with the aid of such devices as feedback loops, on to which it is possible to map the activity of a person considered as an

'intentional system', is not unlike the attempt made by Professor Von Wright in his recent *Turner Lectures* delivered before the University of Cambridge, to offer an account of explanation in history by means of the concept of negative feedback.

It is difficult to assess D. C. Dennett's work. The connexion he establishes between the activities of the philosopher and the psychologist places him in a tradition of British empiricism dating from the eighteenth century, and yet the emphasis on 'centralism' and the 'unconscious' which yet affects and infiltrates our conscious is reminiscent of the epistemology of Leibniz. But it is of little importance to place a work in any tradition; rather we must look to the new questions that the work raises for philosophy and psychology. D. C. Dennett's work does raise many interesting problems, too many even to be listed in a short review. It

opens an interesting debate both on the role of mechanism, and the adequacy of the proposed mechanism to account for mental phenomena. Epistemology and the philosophy of mind lie uneasily between logic and psychology. It is time we looked seriously, not only towards logic but also to the neurologist for insight.

D. C. Dennett admits himself that he has had to rely on popular accounts of psychology in order to arrive at his thesis. This is inevitable when someone wishes to embark on a new type of approach to problems. He takes pains to explain the various elements that he uses in his construction, and the book can be used by those with no previous knowledge of neurology. It is virtually free from misprint; the only one I noticed was on page 186, line 32, where I think 'I =  $\log_2^2$  bits' should read 'I =  $\log_2^5$  bits'.

BRIAN A. SMITH

**AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE FUTURE**, edited by Michael Novak. *Charles Scribner's Sons*, New York, 1968. \$7.95.

**A THEOLOGY FOR RADICAL POLITICS**, by Michael Novak. *Herder and Herder*, New York, 1969. \$1.75 (PB).

The bond which unites these two books is Michael Novak's fascination with and pursuit of the question: What does it mean to be human? One is a collection of essays by contemporary American philosophers and theologians focussing on the thought of some central American thinkers on the problem suggested, the other is an introduction to a topic which Novak plans to develop at greater length in the future; but both are attempts to come to grips with three questions, two of them proposed by Kant: 'Who are we? What should we hope for? What ought we to do?'. Both books are clearly intended as explorations of American dilemmas, which, even allowing for cultural differences, are after all human ones.

In a recent issue of *The Review of Metaphysics*, David Burrell (the contributor of the essay 'On Knowing as a Passionate and Personal Quest: C. S. Pierce' in Novak's collection) has made reference to 'the epistemological crisis of the profoundest sort' in which 'philosophy now finds itself. D. Burrell's answer, in that context, is a tentative suggestion about the ways in which religion may throw some light on the nature of human understanding something of oneself as responsive. M. Novak's collection of essays contains only one piece of the dominant

Anglo-American philosophical genre in James McClendon's 'How Is Religious Talk Justifiable', but it is not so much the *type* of philosophical exploration that seems significant as it is the kind of concerns represented that promises a way out of both the human and philosophic problem. Speaking of philosophy in his introduction, Michael Novak notes: 'Philosophers guard the image of man. They nourish the seeds of the future. . . . A philosopher is a human being first, a philosopher second. . . . Philosophy as it is presently exercised appears to be a tool of the *status quo*. The language it analyses is the language already employed.'

The criticism is not new—Herbert Marcuse has made a good deal of mileage out of the point—but it is worth observing that such a comment prefaces a volume in which many contributions stem from American pragmatism, often accused of being a highly conservative philosophy. Not all of the essays show a sufficient appreciation of this problem.

Paul Van Buren's essay is a good illustration of this difficulty. His treatment of William James as a sort of precursor of linguistic analysis may or may not be fair to James, but what is at issue here is whether he really presents a cogent case for a title like 'William James and Metaphysical Risk'. 'An idea is true