Review of Christopher Peacocke The Realm of Reason

Some of what we know we know by experience and some by reason. It's experience not reason that

teaches that Arsenal ended last season with 90 points and Chelsea with 79. It's reason not experience that

teaches 90 is greater than 79. And it's, arguably, those two together that teaches Arsenal ended with more

points than Chelsea. One useful classification of philosophers is by the relative importance they assign to

experience and reason in grounding what we know. Empiricists (on one reading of that term) play down

reason, sometimes going so far as to declare that anything known by a means other than experience must

be a mere matter of definition. Rationalists play reason up.

Christopher Peacocke is firmly in the rationalist camp, and this short book is an attempt to lay out what he

takes rationalism to be, what his preferred version of rationalism is, and some arguments in favour of that

version. It's much too much to attempt in a short book and it isn't entirely persuasive on any of the key

details. But it is a grand vision for what a global rationalism might look like, and that vision might prove

attractive even if the details need work.

Given the length, a surprising amount of time is spent on relatively abstruse details. So Peacocke provides

a particularly careful account of what distinguishes rationalists from empiricists. And he does a lot of

work to classify, and adjudicate between, rationalisms of various strengths. These are the best parts of the

book, but also the least accessible. Peacocke's preferred version of rationalism has two distinctive

components. First, he focuses not on beliefs (as I did in the introduction) but on transitions between

representational states. Representational states are often beliefs, but include things like perceptions that

have representational content without necessarily being believed. The rationalist claim is that for any

justified transition, there's an a priori explanation of why it is justified. Second, he insists that this

explanation rely crucially on the contents of the states involved in the transition.

So we get a quite strong foundationalist epistemology. Experience provides the foundations for empirical

knowledge, but how we get from there to what we know is entirely in the domain of reason. Famously it

is difficult to justify many steps by reason alone. The most pressing is the very first step. How do we justify the transition from appearances to reality, such as the transition from *That looks crooked* to *That is crooked*? Some philosophers have thought that we either need to link appearance and reality so closely that the link is infallible. Peacocke doesn't take that line, so he has to justify the transition some other way.

Descartes faced a similar problem when trying to get over his radical doubt, and solved it by appeal to God. We can tell a priori, he thought, that a benevolent God exists, and a benevolent God would not let us be deceived, at least when we are careful enough to rely on clear and distinct impressions. Now Descartes had to be careful here to only use a priori reasons. He couldn't, for instance, argue from the apparent design of the universe to the existence of a designer, because we can't tell at this stage whether the apparent design is merely an artefact of our defective perceptual faculties. Indeed, we can't rely on any apparent fact about the external world until we've determined that appearances are a good guide to reality. So we need to argue for the existence of God without appeal to perception, and then use God's existence to justify future reliance on perception.

In keeping with the spirit of the age, Peacocke updates Descartes's strategy by replacing God with Darwin. Very roughly, Peacocke argues that the best explanation of our having representative capacities at all is that we are the products of a long process of natural selection. And if we are the products of a long process of selection, then we probably have accurate representations. If those two claims can be justified a priori we have an a priori argument to the (prima facie, probable) accuracy of our representations.

Less roughly, Peacocke argues for a Complexity Reduction Principle. We are entitled, on a priori grounds, to believe that complex phenomena have explanations, and we are entitled to regard simpler explanations as more probably true than more complex ones. That we have representations at all is a complex matter. How might it be explained? One explanation is via Divine creation. Another is that we are brains-in-vats in an experiment by some quirky scientist. But neither of these explanations really

reduces the complexity, since in each case we need to appeal to a thing with representational capacities. A simpler explanation, allegedly, is that we are the product of natural selection and having accurate representations is selected for. This is certainly a novel argument for Darwinism. It isn't why they teach natural selection to biology students. And of course it has flaws. Peacocke does little to show that there aren't *any* better explanations of our having representations out there. Nor does he address how complicated hereditary mechanisms must be if they are to support natural selection. Arguably they are much more complicated than is needed for representation, so Darwin doesn't help reduce complexity here.

So it's not clear Peacocke's rationalism can get past step one, but let's see what would happen next. To go beyond particular perceptions we need induction. Peacocke takes the basic form of enumerative induction to be the (defeasible) inference from *All the (many and varied) observed Fs have been Gs* to *All Fs are Gs*. The observation of only Gs amongst these many and varied Fs is a complex fact, and its best (i.e. simplest) explanation is sometimes that all the Fs are Gs. Peacocke argues that in these cases this explanation is the a priori justification of the transition, and in only these cases is the transition justified, so induction is acceptable by rationalist lights.

The chapter on induction is only 15 pages long, and it really needs to be much longer. Peacocke sets out the position just outlined, and compares it in some detail to a similar position advocated by Gilbert Harman, and that's it. There is no discussion of what we do when most, rather than all, the observed Fs have been Gs, even though that's surely the more important practical case. There's no discussion of the case that's frequently central to modern discussions on induction, when a certain (stable) ratio of the Fs are Gs. Peacocke only talks about the special case when *all* Fs are Gs, and it isn't obvious the discussion generalises. There is no discussion of rationalist alternatives, such as Keynes's justification of enumerative induction in terms of analogical inference, or D. C. Williams's probabilistic defence of induction. And there's no discussion of empiricist attempts to justify induction a posteriori, or to do without it. Even if Peacocke's suggested justification works, and it is at least a serious contender, a

persuasive treatment of induction should have dealt with at least *some* of the points raised in this paragraph.

The final two chapters discuss moral beliefs. Again, Peacocke thinks that all the inferences we make to get from our perceptual beliefs to our moral beliefs can be justified a priori. His view is that we can come to know a priori some moral principles. And we can know contingent moral facts, such as that someone's giving £1000 to Oxfam is morally praiseworthy, by doing the following inference. The person helped other people in need. (We learn this by experience.) Helping those in need is morally praiseworthy. (We learn this moral principle by deploying our reason.) Hence what the person did is morally praiseworthy. But there's a problem here, and Peacocke never fully addresses it. It's only *prima facie* true that helping those in need is morally praiseworthy. There are always exceptions to the principle. If the person's children starved to death because that donation was the last money they had to buy the children's food, the donation wasn't morally praiseworthy. Moreover, it is just about impossible to state the exceptions without using moral language. So it is far from clear how we are meant to come to know this is not one of the exceptions, because knowing this requires both empirical knowledge and moral sensitivity. From a 'principleist' position like Peacocke's, knowing this is not one of the exceptions seems just as hard as the original problem of coming to know that the action was praiseworthy. So it seems the rationalist still has work to do here.

One can easily get the feeling from this book that rationalism runs into problems as soon as we try to apply it to real-world cases. But it isn't obvious these are deep problems with rationalism, and in particular it isn't clear that the problems can't be fixed with relatively minor adjustments. Even if there are difficulties in application throughout the book, there is a lot of important philosophical work going on beneath the surface. Peacocke's best work is done in classifying the various types of rationalist position that are available, and motivating the kind of view he wants to defend. This material remains valuable, invaluable I think to anyone wanting to draw a plausible rationalist picture, even if his real-world applications are not yet perfect.