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978-0-521-10422-7 - Australian Realism: The Systematic Philosophy of
John Anderson

A. J. Baker

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This book outlines the realist and pluralist philosophy of John Anderson, Australia's most original thinker, whose articles and teaching at Sydney University have deeply influenced Australian intellectual life. Several main themes run through his work, but Anderson never gave an overall account of his views. This is remedied here: in exhibiting the range of Anderson's thought, from logic, epistemology and theory of mind, to language and social theory, Baker's work sketches realism as a systematic philosophical position, and shows something of the history of ideas in Australia.

This book will be of particular interest to historians of modern philosophy, and those studying realism.

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This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures kindling, and measures going out.

If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is hard to be sought out and difficult. *Heraclitus*

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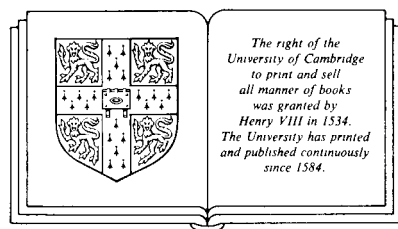
Australian Realism

The Systematic Philosophy of John Anderson

A. J. BAKER

With an introduction by

ANTHONY QUINTON



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Introduction

Australian philosophy has benefited enormously from the fact that it was dominated by John Anderson for the greater part of his active career and it is entirely just that the only one of the twelve chapters of S. A. Grave's *History of Australian Philosophy* that is devoted to a single philosopher is devoted to him. According to Grave, Australia's first philosopher was installed in 1850, but the interval between that date and 1927, when Anderson arrived from Scotland, is passed over in a couple of chapters. It is really due to Anderson that there is enough in Australian philosophy to write about at book length. The impulse of his powerful mind and resolute personality has been effectively kept up by his many distinguished pupils, notably J. A. Passmore and J. L. Mackie, and by their pupils in turn. It really is the same impulse, too, even if the philosophers who can be seen as following him by no means take over his doctrines wholesale. What they have more conspicuously got from him is an Andersonian spirit which combines business-like force and economy in tackling problems with ambitious boldness in taking on large topics and in seeing them as hanging together as parts of a single intellectual enterprise. Anderson's prose is a fit vehicle for thought of his sinewy, enterprising kind and it is something his followers have admirably kept up.

A convenient way of bringing out Anderson's large place in, and service to, Australian philosophy is to compare Australian philosophy with the philosophy of more populous and equally prosperous Canada. There have been some worthy Canadian philosophers – John Watson, expositor of Kant, and G. S. Brett, historian of psychology, for example – but none in Anderson's time who came anywhere near him in originality and importance. Nor, since his time, has there been any distinctively national excellence in Canadian philosophy. (The Canadian

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mind, it should be added, has plenty of extraphilosophical achievements to its credit: for instance, the economic history of H. A. Innis and the criticism of Northrop Frye.)

Anderson's belief in the systematic nature of philosophy or, more broadly, of the general interconnectedness of all branches of intellectual activity was a service to Australia as a whole and not just to Australian philosophy. His influence as a teacher, as an example of how the life of the mind should be carried on, has been felt and acknowledged by many Australians working outside the domain of philosophy proper: historians, psychologists, social theorists, literary critics. In the depressed and fairly repressive 1930s he was a valuable public nuisance of the Socratic variety, keeping independence of thought alive at a time when there was much to frighten people out of it.

On the other hand, Anderson owed a lot to Australia and, in a way, to Australian philosophy, or, at any rate, to a philosopher of Australian birth. A powerful influence was exerted on him by the Gifford lectures delivered in Glasgow towards the end of the first world war by Samuel Alexander, later published as *Space, Time and Deity*. Alexander, born in Sydney, had graduated in Melbourne and gone to England to become the first Jewish tutor in an Oxford college and, later on, professor of philosophy at Manchester. Anderson was strongly attracted by Alexander's conception of philosophy as descriptive or factual, as a kind of general science, and by his realism, by his unwillingness to countenance any sort of existence but natural existence in space and time. On a more pedestrian level, it seems that Alexander played some part in getting Anderson his first job at Sydney.

What Anderson got from Australia in general was opportunity. It was philosophically more or less virgin soil, highly inviting to someone who lived up to his own high valuation of creative adventurousness. His particular force of intellect and will meant that for a long time he had no serious competition to face. He was able to dominate the abler young philosophers and could cope easily with the local criticism excited by his innovations and impieties, which provided him with just the right

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amount of roughage to keep his critical digestion in good working order.

It is an advantage for an original thinker to get on with working his ideas out in an uncluttered environment, with some praise and interest to keep his enthusiasm alive, some manageable criticism to keep him on his toes, but with not too many clever people breathing discouragingly down his neck. A well formed and thickly populated intellectual scene can have a disabling effect on a philosopher taking his first steps. Indeed once Anderson himself was established as unquestionable philosophical leader, his own pupils were deterred from all but more or less parenthetical or marginal publication, either footnoting his doctrines or moving off into regions like the scholarly history of philosophy to which he laid no imperial claim.

Anderson's rapid ascent to being king of the hitherto modest castle of Australian philosophy certainly encouraged him to work out his new and powerful ideas in a wide-ranging and enterprising fashion. But the measure of isolation from the English-speaking philosophical community at large that enabled him to make such an impressive start set up a habit of intellectual self-sufficiency that was bad for him, since it exempted his ideas from the serious criticism which, once safely brought to maturity, they could have profited from. It was also a misfortune for English-speaking philosophy generally that his ideas, which were never published in book form until 1962, the year of his death, were almost wholly confined in print to Australian periodicals, above all to the *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, which soon became almost the house organ of the Andersonian school. The only exceptions are a couple of discussion notes in *Mind* in 1926, in which he criticises F. C. S. Schiller's rejection of F. H. Bradley's theory of truth on the ground that both of them fail to acknowledge the objective truth of ordinary propositions, and an important paper, in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* for 1926/7, 'The Knower and the Known', setting out his refutation of the Cartesian conceptions, deeply rooted in nearly all subsequent western philosophy, of the mind as simply a consciousness and of its objects as

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no more than its own sense-impressions. Unsupported by other available writings these first utterances failed to secure any attention in the place of their first publication. The first serious notice I know of that his thoughts received by a philosopher outside Australia was the characteristically breezy compound of endorsement and correction contained in Gilbert Ryle's 'Logic and Professor Anderson' in the *Australasian Journal* for 1950.

Since 1962 general awareness of Anderson's thought has greatly increased. Passmore and Mackie, his most able and productive pupils, have written authoritatively about him at article length and have spread the word further by more or less definite references to their indebtedness to him. D. Z. Phillips, in *Education and Inquiry*, has edited a selection of Anderson's educational writings. A. J. Baker, in *Anderson's Social Philosophy*, has surveyed Anderson's social and political thought and practice. In the present book he has gone on to give a rounded and comprehensive account of the whole range of Anderson's philosophy. It has the special authority that comes from its being the work of a pupil and close associate. The task of an introduction in these circumstances is to look at the connection of Anderson's somewhat enclosed and self-sufficient body of ideas with the general movement of philosophy in his epoch outside the area where for long it lay largely concealed from general view.

The central elements of Anderson's philosophy are his more or less cosmological doctrine of empirical realism, his more or less logical doctrine, which might be called factualism, (qualified as more or less cosmological and logical respectively because Anderson would have admitted no such contrast, for him logic, or its basic part, *is* cosmology) and his doctrine, argumentatively crucial, that relations presuppose qualities, that nothing can be related to anything else unless both have in addition non-relational qualities.

Anderson's empirical realism is ordinarily expressed in the formula that there is only one way of being, the way in question being spatio-temporal. Everything that there is exists in space and time; there are no abstract or eternal objects; minds are part of nature and in space; values are natural qualities of human ac-

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tivities, or of the social movements in which human activities are carried on. A host of arguments is invoked to support this position, most notably the impossibility of putting together the realms of being that misguided philosophers have been led to put asunder – Passmore calls it the two-worlds argument in the chapter of his *Philosophical Reasoning* devoted to it. Symptomatic of this impossibility are the irreducible problems of explaining how particulars can conceivably participate in universals and of how mind and body, Cartesianly dualised, can interact as they evidently do in perception and in acts of will.

In this work of ontological deflation, to borrow Ryle's term, Anderson is at one with a number of twentieth century philosophers. One of them, indeed, is Ryle himself, whose writings on philosophical logic and the philosophy of mind have been single-mindedly devoted to the elimination, respectively, of reified abstractions and of private inner states, of logical and mental entities with a 'special status' outside the observable natural world in space and time. Anderson's position has much in common, too, with the reism of Kotarbinski which affirms that only objects, conceived in a straightforward, observable, spatio-temporal way, exist and that properties and the like, on the one hand, and experiences and the like, on the other, are not objects. D. C. Williams, in the essays that make up his *Principles of Empirical Realism*, argues for a similar view, even if, in the end, he interprets concrete objects as complexes of 'tropes' or abstract particulars.

Anderson associates his reistic principle that there is only one way of being, that of common objects in space and time, with the principle that there is only one way of knowing or, one might also say, only one way of speaking (if, at any rate, one is actually going to say anything). To know anything is to know some matter of actual fact and to say anything is to describe, or misdescribe, such a matter of fact. This second, epistemic or logical, principle does not obviously follow from the first, cosmological principle. That all factual knowledge is of natural facts and that all descriptive discourse is about observable things in space and time does not obviously imply that all knowledge is factual or that all adequate discourse is descriptive.

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Two obtrusively apparent counter-examples are *a priori* knowledge (in logic, mathematics and perhaps philosophy itself) and judgements of value. Platonism takes *a priori* knowledge as having universals for its objects and their eternal relationships as its content, matters, that is to say, of abstract, non-natural fact. Ethical intuitionism takes an analogous line about values. But the existence of *a priori* knowledge and of significant value-judgements can be admitted by those who believe in Anderson's single way of being if they understand the former as conceptual and the latter either as describing complex, but still natural characteristics of mental life, or as not descriptive at all but as appropriated to another significant employment such as commanding or commending.

Anderson's claim that the truths of logic and mathematics describe matters of natural fact starts from the relatively plausible, and frequently seductive, idea that geometry is the science of space. His claim becomes less plausible when he goes on to say that the logical relation of implication is a 'sensible relation'. Generally sensible relations have objects as their terms. Implication, however, relates propositions (or, Anderson might prefer to say, facts). In claiming that the truths of logic are simply very general pieces of natural description he fastens on their role as propositions at the expense of what many would see as their more fundamental role as rules of inference (or, more precisely, as the propositional correlates of such rules). There is little temptation to construe what are primarily rules as descriptions. He would reject the view that they are analytic on the ground that propositions true by definition are not really propositions at all, but rather degenerate, proposition-like forms of words. But proof in logic and mathematics is either by inference from premises which it is evidently contradictory to deny or is accomplished by *reductio ad absurdum*, by inferring a contradiction from the denial of the proposition to be proved. In either case the inferences which compose the argument correspond to logical truths it would be evidently contradictory to deny. Why should what is got from sub-propositions by sub-propositional means be supposed to be substantially, descriptively prop-

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ositional? There is, no doubt, an affinity between Anderson's rejection of the *a priori* and Quine's of the analytic. But it is a remote one. For Quine the truths of logic and mathematics are at the outer, minimally factual end of a continuum; for Anderson every proposition is as straightforwardly, literally and uncompromisingly factual as every other.

Anderson's unconcern with inference comes out again in what he has to say about science, which is something he tends to regard from the corner of his eye, since he has no explicit philosophy of science. He denies that scientific hypotheses are inferred inductively from singular reports of observation on the traditionally logical ground that singular propositions are a species of universal propositions: 'Socrates is mortal' being as much a universal affirmative as 'all men are mortal'. He holds that causal generalities are simple descriptions of what we observe, as much as reports of the shape or colour of things, even if more risky. There are, as he sees it, no essentially inferred propositions and also, it would seem, no essentially inferred objects. He does not appear to acknowledge any problem about theoretical entities. This is an aspect of his general repudiation of ultimates. Axiomatic first principles and basic empirical propositions are rejected along with absolute simples and totalities. Just as everything is complex and has parts, on the one hand, and is a part of something more complex than itself, on the other, so every proposition may be inferred from others or be the basis of an inference to others.

Anderson's account of judgements of value or, as he might prefer to put it, of value facts and the knowledge we have of them, is not entirely idiosyncratic. He takes the goodness of the things that are good, namely certain human activities, to be a straightforwardly describable property of those things. So far he is at one with G. E. Moore. But he disagrees with Moore in taking the property of goodness to be a natural one. Like Moore he goes on to reveal what it is that he finds as a matter of fact to be good. His catalogue turns out to have a more vigorous flavour than Moore's: activities are good to the extent that they are free, creative, productive, enterprising, risky.

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Another difference from Moore embodies Anderson's most profound ethical idiosyncrasy: his complete detachment of the good from the right. Moore had linked them by definition: the right act was the one that had better results than any available alternative. For Anderson, while the good is a matter of discoverable natural fact, talk of what is right is a misleading way of talking about what is required or commanded, which misleads by failing to mention the requirer or commander. It is interesting to see how Anderson just manages, in his hostility to what he calls moralism, to avoid saying that his readers *ought* to do or think anything, while leaving it perfectly clear that he has firm designs on their conduct and beliefs.

There are anticipatory glimpses in what Anderson has to say about mind, of what has come to be called Australian materialism. But he did not feel impelled to explain just how mind is located in space, as it has to be on his view of it. He was more concerned to argue that there has to be more to mind than the merely relational characteristic of consciousness. The indispensable qualitative element of mind he saw as feeling or emotion, an idea for which he claimed Freudian support, as he did also for his bold denial of the indurated prejudice that the mind or self is a unity, even a 'simple substance'. To him the mind or self is a society of interacting, and indeed conflicting, emotions. Society proper, as a collection of interacting selves, is a complex of very much the same sort, even if writ a good deal larger, in firm opposition to the reductive pieties of liberal individualism, for which the individual is real or substantial, society an abstraction or construction.

In his social theory his factualism combines with his account of the self and his rejection of moralism to provide something new and unusual, even if he admitted a debt to Sorel. Society is a scene of conflict, not so much between individual human beings as between the social movements and institutions on which human beings depend for the humanly distinctive characteristics they have. There is no such thing as the common good and no necessity about progress, indeed there is perhaps no possibility of it, if it is taken to be the continuous enhancement of the

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common good. Anderson applies these ideas to education and fiercely opposes education for citizenship or social adjustment in the interests of what he sees as true education, the acquisition of habits of critical inquiry and of independence of mind. If it is none too clear how his committed endorsement of non-utilitarian education is able, on his principles, to pass as a strictly theoretical description of social fact, it is abundantly clear what he himself favours.

Anderson's views about most of the central topics of philosophy and many major topics in the surrounding intellectual country form a system, held together by a definite style of thought. System, for Anderson, is the prime virtue of Hegel, whom he takes to be its greatest exponent, for all his faults in other respects. Anderson's ideas are refreshingly bold and original and are sustained by fertile and tenacious argumentation. For all his emphasis on description his philosophical practice is indefatigably inferential. His doctrines and the reasoning that supports them challenge the reader who comes on them for the first time. They do not invite, and are unlikely to get, unquestioning acceptance. But at the very least it is invigorating to wrestle with them. Their constitutional force is such that they cannot be quietly contemplated from a distance. Whether one accepts his views or rejects them, the business of coming to terms with them is one which makes one's thoughts markedly different afterwards from what they were when one first embarked on it.

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Preface

John Anderson, 1893–1962, studied philosophy in Glasgow University under members of a flourishing idealist school that had been established by Edward Caird in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was one of Caird's Glasgow students and another idealist, Francis Anderson, who became Sydney University's first Professor of Philosophy in 1890. However, John Anderson received a powerful stimulus towards realism when he heard Samuel Alexander give his Gifford Lectures in Glasgow in 1916–17, and he began to work out his own realism while lecturing in the 1920s in Edinburgh University. But it was in Sydney University, where he was Challis Professor of Philosophy from 1927 to 1958, that he developed, and wrote in detail on, his own far-reaching realist position.

Alexander was born in Sydney (he left Australia in his late teens) and Professor Passmore has speculated (in *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*) that Alexander's opposition to idealist Absolutism had a connection with the 'democratic' spirit of his Australian origins. That is a feasible view, though Anderson once speculated in a different way when he suggested that, while the Australian is commonly regarded as having a stoical or philosophical temperament, this is really 'an attitude of mere apathy and indifference, of acquiescence in the vagaries of an environment which one cannot master', as distinct from 'the strictly philosophical recognition of the fact that things have their own ways of working'. However, even on that view one can argue for a connection with the realist movement which developed around Anderson in that the force of that movement and its tough-minded approach obviously flowed in part from the need to surmount the harsh environment and prevailing intellectual apathy. Perhaps, too, I can suggest (as will please partisans of the theory that the spiritual climate of Sydney differs sharply

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from that of places like Melbourne) that the abrasive life and outlook of Sydney was conducive to the abrasive, uncompromising approach of Anderson and his followers.

Apart from Alexander, Anderson was not quite the first Sydney realist as his predecessor in the Sydney Chair, Bernard Muscio (who died at the early age of thirty-nine), while he had studied under Francis Anderson in Sydney, went on at Cambridge to become a supporter of the New Realism that was then developing. However, this was revealed in some good articles Muscio wrote in the period around 1914, rather than in his teaching at Sydney University in the 1920s, and it was left to John Anderson to sponsor realism as a serious philosophical force in Australia.

At any rate, Anderson went on to become the most original, all-round philosopher Australia has had, and to have a striking influence through his teaching, his many articles in local journals, the enthusiasm of his followers, and his contributions at Australian philosophy conferences. With regard to those conferences, from 1939 on, when G. A. Paul and later D. A. T. Gasking and A. C. Jackson – all former students of Wittgenstein at Cambridge – came to teach philosophy in Melbourne University, the conferences became particularly alive and provided impressive contrasts in style and doctrine between Sydney ‘Andersonians’ and Melbourne ‘Wittgensteinians’.

Anderson influenced many students who went on to become philosophers or to specialise in various other disciplines or professions. But despite his influence his philosophical views have never been made widely known, even in Australia, nor have they ever been discussed as fairly and fully as they deserved. Of the several reasons for this, one is that he never worked out his position thoroughly, in part because he was an active educator and controversialist, but also because he was not very responsive to the need for detailed elaboration. Despite his belief in the value of *movements* and his sometimes saying that members of them, including members of ‘movements one could name’, would be wise to be prepared to extend and criticise their founder’s views, the fact is that he was quite possessive about his phil-

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osophy and discouraged or inhibited members of his school from themselves working and writing on core parts of his position. So the able people who were close in spirit to his thought either wrote little, or, in their writing, avoided tackling central issues. In some ways Anderson was quite opposed to publicising his philosophy – except by the medium of lecturing to his students and writing articles mainly directed at members of his school; although a part defence of this is found in his belief that a philosophical position can only be grasped by concentrated study of it, and in his lack of interest in the embourgeoisement of his views or their becoming fashionable for the wrong reasons. It is noteworthy that when Gilbert Ryle wrote to Anderson to ask if he would care to write for *Mind* he was uninterested, and when Ryle wrote a provocative article in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* criticising his views, Anderson did not deign to reply (except in part of a posthumously published essay), although the occasion was a good one for clarifying and publicising his views to what would have been a large and interested set of readers.

The 1962 collection of Anderson's articles is now long out of print, and in any case many of his articles are somewhat opaque to readers outside his school. Apart from Ryle, who clearly made some mistakes in his account of Anderson's position, I recall for example George Paul (who was one of my post-Sydney teachers at Oxford) pointing out to me that he found it hard to understand some of Anderson's writings, such as on causality. Consequently, this book is intended to fill the need for a clear, detailed statement of Anderson's overall position and of how he argues for it. That is why, while I do raise difficulties and develop criticisms here and there, I have concentrated on trying to communicate, in an organised way, the nature of his various views. That is why too, because of the greater difficulty of understanding that may arise for the reader in the case of logic, I have left Anderson's formal logic until a later chapter – instead of, as would be the most systematic approach, beginning with it. In my presentation I have, of course, given priority to what Anderson himself wrote or said, but I have also drawn on the general

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teaching of his school, and where necessary I have reconstructed missing views or arguments in a way that I believe is consonant with his position.

I should like to thank Dr Paul Foulkes, who also studied under John Anderson, for his help and advice.

Recurrent abbreviations used are as follows.

- Studies* John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Angus and Robertson Ltd, Sydney, 1962.
- A.J.P.P.* *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*
- A.J.P.* *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (which became the name of the *A.J.P.P.* in 1947)

The ‘*Anderson Archive*’ refers to the collection of Anderson’s lecture notes and other material that is located in the Archivist’s section of Fisher Library, University of Sydney.

The quotations from Heraclitus on the title page are taken from John Burnet’s *Early Greek Philosophy*. The quotations at the beginning of each chapter are taken from Anderson’s writings.

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