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Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion

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Review of *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*

Roy Tzohar*

Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion. By Dan Arnold. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, vii + 318 pages, ISBN: 978-0-231-13281-7 (paperback), \$24.50 / £14.50, ISBN 0-231-13280-8 (cloth), \$52.00 / £30.50

At the center of Dan Arnold's thought-provoking book on Indian epistemology is the philosophical critique of Dignāga (sixth century) by the Brahmanical Mīmāṃsā school and the Madhyamaka philosopher Candrakīrti. Arnold's philosophical reconstruction of this dialogue presents challenging interpretations of both the Mīmāṃsā and the Madhyamaka that are likely to stir up debate and leave their mark on the field. Arnold's frequent appeals to contemporary theory are extremely helpful in highlighting the issues at stake, as well as in demonstrating the ongoing relevance of classical Indian epistemology to current philosophical discourse. Furthermore, the philosophical discussion of the truth and justification of beliefs, which runs through the entire book, offers valuable insights into the rational evaluation of religious convic-

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tions, which lend the book relevance to the general field of Religious Studies.

The book consists of three parts. Part one deals with Dignāga's transformation of the Abhidharma's ontology into a philosophical trajectory that Arnold characterizes as a Buddhist "empiricist foundationalism." Pivotal to this transformation is a new understanding of *svalakṣaṇa*, which is no longer taken to mean "defining properties" of the *dharmas*. Rather, in the hands of Dignāga, the term is used to designate "unique particulars," irreducible ontological primitives which cannot themselves be said to have any properties (30). These particulars, which according to Arnold perform approximately the same philosophical work as "sense-data" in modern empiricism (36), *causally* give rise to perceptual cognitions. This inevitably leads to the privileging of the epistemic faculty of perception (*pratyakṣa*) as the sole access to what ultimately exists (*paramārthasat*), and therefore as the ultimate source for knowledge.

Arnold then proceeds to point out some inherent philosophical difficulties within this philosophical trajectory. Insofar as perception is required by Dignāga to be in contact with true reality it is by definition nonlinguistic; however, as such it cannot constitute knowledge (as necessarily involving inferential propositional judgments). Furthermore, approaching this difficulty by arguing that subsequent propositional judgments are *causally* related to the perceptions upon which they supervene, as done by Dignāga's commentators, is itself problematic (41, 46). Drawing on John McDowell and Wilfrid Sellars's powerful criticism of empiricist foundationalism, Arnold points out that for Dignāga also, experience seems to occupy a fundamentally different "logical space" than knowledge itself (36-42).

The foundationalist attempt to seek justification for beliefs in the causes that brought them about, concludes Arnold, amounts to what he terms an "epistemic conception of truth" (48-51). The latter is at odds

with a “realist conception of truth,” which Arnold defines—drawing on Gottlob Frege—as “the understanding that truth of (at least some kind of) beliefs is logically independent of the question of how (or even whether) anyone happened to hold them” (54). This distinction between an epistemic and a realist conception of truth—as exhibiting different relations between truth and justification—is constitutive of Arnold’s overall argument. It allows him, for instance, to notice and highlight some surprising affinities between the epistemological projects of the Mīmāṃsā and of Candrakīrti, both of which are compatible with a realist conception of truth (209).

The Mīmāṃsā’s critique of Buddhist foundationalism is presented in the second part of the book, where Arnold focuses on the seventh-century philosopher Kumāriḷa and two of his commentators: Bhaṭṭa Uṃveka (early eighth century) and Pārthasārathimiśra (early eleventh century). In contrast to Dignāga’s deep suspicion of naïve epistemic intuitions, the Mīmāṃsākas were guided by a need to both preserve a realist epistemology while maintaining the authority of the Vedas. This they attempted to achieve by a doctrine of the intrinsic validity (*svataḥ prāmāṇya*) of the Vedas, which were taken as a “reliable warrant” (Arnold’s translation of *pramāṇa*).

The doctrine of the intrinsic validity of the Vedas has often been dismissed, both by earlier Indian Buddhist thinkers and recent scholars, as dogmatic and somewhat incoherent. Arnold’s close reading and meticulous interpretation of these Mīmāṃsā texts, however, reveals a highly sophisticated religious epistemology that is not so easily dismissed. Drawing on William Alston’s *Perceiving God*, Arnold argues that underlying the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of intrinsic-validity is the phenomenological observation that people generally take their representation of the world to be an accurate one (81-82, 96). The Mīmāṃsā therefore understand validity to be at the beginning rather than at the end point of the epistemic

process, as each cognition is *prima facie* justified (until proven otherwise) (61, 88). In this scheme, there is no epistemic need for our cognitions to be warranted by some other source—perception for instance—that would serve as a sort of higher court of appeals for knowledge (102, 114). The Vedas, argue the Mīmāṃsā, are therefore no less a valid source of knowledge than perception (and all are equally viable for subsequent falsification) (104, 108-109).

Arnold proceeds to discuss some of the implications of this doctrine, asking whether the *prima facie* validity of the Vedas (or any other scriptures for that matter) compels us to take them as authoritative, and therefore “all should be persuaded to become Mīmāṃsakas?” (110). Invoking Gadamer to point out the ways in which hermeneutical considerations participate in the determination and ordering of knowledge, Arnold answers in the negative. Although from the strictly epistemic point of view all cognitions are equally valid, he argues that because understanding necessarily takes place within the constraints and in the context of a specific tradition, some cognitions will always be taken to be more reliable than others. Thus, unless one is already a Mīmāṃsaka, it is not likely that the Vedas will be considered equally authoritative to perception (110-113).

This line of argumentation seems to consider tradition to be the final judge of the hierarchy of reliable warrants, and in that way seems to come very close to a neo-pragmatist understanding of knowledge. What salvages it, however, from sliding into full blown relativism is Arnold’s insistence on a distinction between the justification and the truth of beliefs in the Mīmāṃsā’s case (114). This distinction is taken up again in Arnold’s concluding remarks (discussed more fully below) where he points out that under a realist conception of truth, whether beliefs are justified is logically independent of whether they are really true. This, he argues, stands in contrast to the relativist’s tendency to conflate truth

and justification, which a realist conception of truth deems incoherent (212-217). Regretfully, Arnold's insightful discussion of these important issues is very brief and it would have been interesting to see its implications more fully developed by him.

Part three, "The metaphysical arguments of the Madhyamaka," deals with the critique of Dignāga in the first chapter of the *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti's commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. As is evident from his section title, Arnold proposes an unorthodox reading of Candrakīrti, in which the latter promotes a metaphysical claim conveyed by a transcendental argument. By this Arnold does not mean to argue that Candrakīrti was a sort of crypto-essentialist. Rather, arguing in opposition to some readings of the Madhyamaka as a form of global skepticism and antirealism, Arnold's point is that the school's radical appeal to conventionalism should be considered a bedrock presupposition (120, 127-130). This presupposition is that the only way anything can exist is conventionally and interdependently or in its epistemic version, that there cannot be anything more true than the world conventionally described (120, 140).

This claim, Arnold argues, is presented via a transcendental argument (in the West classically associated with Kant) framed in such a way that one cannot argue against its claims without already presupposing them (124). Applied by the Madhyamaka, it demonstrates that there can be no explanation of our interdependent conventions that does not itself exemplify the same conditions (of interdependence).

Casting Candrakīrti as invoking a transcendental argument allows Arnold to deal with two of the most tenacious problems for interpreters of Madhyamaka. The first is how to deal with the claim that essencelessness is itself the essence of things (i.e., what Jay Garfield and Graham Priest have called "Nāgārjuna's paradox") (183-192). The second is how to interpret the school's claims not to have a "thesis" of its own (131-

142). The scope of this review does not permit a full appreciation of Arnold's intricate and rich analysis of these issues, which involves a discussion of the various forms of skepticism in the West, and of the ways in which the Madhyamaka claims can be seen to be operating in various levels of discourse. Concerning the alleged lack of a "thesis," however, Arnold interprets this as a disregard for any sort of justification that is not already conventionally given, such as the sort of epistemic justification Dignāga sought (142). The latter's attempt to posit perception as a privileged perspective on existence is seen by Candrakīrti as incoherent and undermining convention, because there is no possibility of pointing out anything "more real" that warrants our experience. The Madhyamaka's critique of foundationalism therefore targets not merely Dignāga's ontology but also the very fundamental premises of his epistemic project.

In his concluding remarks, Arnold points out some of the implications of his analysis for the general field of Religious Studies. As mentioned above, he argues that the realist conception of truth held by both the Mīmāṃsā and Candrakīrti (but not by Dignāga), is constituted by a strict distinction between the truth and the justification of beliefs. Invoking Frege, Wittgenstein, Stanley Fish and Jeffrey Stout, Arnold's main point is that maintaining this strict distinction enables us to view others's arguments (and religious convictions) as rationally held justified beliefs without being compelled to adopt them as true (215, 217).

Writing on Indian philosophy is a tricky job, in which one must shun the temptation of readily imposing Western terminology and categories, on the one hand, while on the other avoiding the fate of professional solipsism, in which highly technical terminology and the demand for linguistic expertise render one's material impenetrable to outsiders. In this respect Arnold's book presents a middle ground that successfully avoids both extremes. His work is a remarkable example of a comparative study combining the best of both worlds. As it seeks to expose rather than to

diminish difference, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief* is most revealing of the presuppositions both of Indian medieval epistemologists and of us as contemporary readers of philosophy.