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Reviews

Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion, by Dan Arnold. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 328 pp., £32.50 (hb). ISBN 978-0-231-13281-7.

This book centres on the criticisms of the important Buddhist thinker Dignāga advanced by both Kumārila in defence of Mīmāṃsā's affirmation of the authority of the Vedas and Candrakīrti in setting forth Madhyamaka's teaching on emptiness. The discussion, identifying similarities between the approaches adopted by Kumārila together with his commentators and Candrakīrti in terms of a realist understanding of truth, is located in the context of the emergence of a common philosophical culture encompassing Buddhists and Brahmins alike in the middle of the first millennium CE and begins with a survey of the epistemic understanding of truth associated with Buddhist foundationalism as the springboard for the foregoing analysis. Crucial to Arnold's thesis is the manner in which Dignāga was indebted to, and in turn developed, Abhidharma, emphasizing his pivotal role as an exponent of pramāṇavāda, here translated as 'discourse on reliable epistemic warrants' and defined as uniting 'the fields of logic and epistemology' (p. 14). Arnold demonstrates that Dignāga's, and his successor Dharmakīrti's, privileging of perception involves an epistemic understanding of truth that fails to distinguish between truth and justification which means that it cannot establish the truth of beliefs, but only explain why beliefs are held.

Such empiricist foundationalism, as Arnold observes, poses particular problems for Mīmāṃsā's championing of Vedic ritual based on textual injunctions promising future rewards, thus committing Mīmāṃsākas to an agenda that attacks the primacy attached to perception. It also runs counter to Madhyamaka's insistence upon the dependent origination of all phenomena since that excludes the possibility of prioritizing perception. Accordingly, albeit for different reasons and in different ways, Arnold shows how Mīmāṃsā and Madhyamaka endorse conventional notions of knowledge and espouse a realist understanding of truth that does distinguish between truth and justification.

In his examination of Mīmāṃsā, Arnold states a persuasive case for what he calls the doctrine of intrinsic validity, rather than truth, denying perception a special status among cognitions. Similarly, in relation to Madhyamaka, Arnold presents a compelling argument concerning the rejection of the two truths in the sense that, insofar as there is an ultimate truth, it consists in the truth that nothing is ultimate hence perception too is relative. Arnold's choice of subject and the sympathy and sophistication with which he delineates these philosophies is notable. Arnold himself observes on the neglect of Mīmāṃsā which is routinely written off as a species of fundamentalism, though on his account it appears as credible and convincing. Further, against what Arnold attributes to the influence of the Tibetan tradition that connects Candrakīrti with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, he finds significant areas of disagreement

and in the process recovers Candrakīrti's distinctive position. What Arnold offers is, then, an insightful interpretation of Mīmāṃsā and in many respects an innovative interpretation of Madhyamaka that reveal some fascinating comparisons as well as contrasts. While those with specific expertise may take issue with points of detail in this wide-ranging investigation, it addresses a challenging and complex theme in a commendably clear manner that repays careful, if not also repeated, reading.

There are a number of reasons for welcoming this impressive and provocative book, not least because it draws attention to 'Indian philosophy', a discipline that is often marginalized whether within Philosophy where the 'Western' heritage has been so dominant or even within Religious Studies where the division of 'Eastern' thought into discrete religions has delimited the prospects of a broader cultural conversation. Arnold treats Dignāga, Kumārila and Candrakīrti as participants in the same South Asian tradition of debate. In so doing, he takes their work seriously as philosophical projects when 'Indian philosophy' is frequently denigrated on the grounds of its particular character (as against the supposed universality ascribed to 'Western' philosophy) and includes Buddhist and Hindu schools instead of confining his exploration to one or other religion. Thereby Arnold makes a valuable contribution towards a genuinely global philosophy of religion that goes beyond the subject's normal Christian monotheistic curriculum by integrating Buddhist and Hindu thought and, vitally, extending to their concerns.

More generally, returning to the distinction drawn between truth and justification, Arnold asks whether arguments are intended to produce, and answers that they are intended to justify, belief. Here he casts new light on the purpose of argument and, of course, the conduct of the scholarly enterprise that has far-reaching implications. Consequently, he contends that '[w]e can conclude without contradiction that Mīmāṃsākas like Kumārila and Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti have cogently argued that their beliefs are rationally held and that they are, moreover, entitled to consider those beliefs true—and yet just as rationally choose not to adopt them as our own' (p. 217). Drawing upon the work of contemporary 'Western' philosophers in illumining the nature and relevance of selected examples of ancient 'Eastern' thought, this book is recommended to advanced students of Philosophy and Religious Studies who will find in it much to stimulate and engage their interest.

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