

Forthcoming in Journal of Religion.

Book Review

Dan Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 328 pp, hb. US\$50, ISBN: 978-0-231-14546-6

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There are several ways to approach the study of pre-modern Indian Buddhist philosophical texts. One might focus on providing an adequate translation, addressing textual and hermeneutical issues and mapping the commentarial terrain. One might contextualize the text in dialogue with competing philosophical traditions in that historical context. One might also rationally reconstruct the author's position on an issue given their stated position on related questions. Finally, though not exhaustively, one might critically engage these texts in dialogue with contemporary Western traditions, either demonstrating that the author may have something to contribute to non-Buddhist conversations and/or is vulnerable to challenges that emerge when so contextualised. Rarely does one find a philosopher who engages with Buddhist texts in all these modes with the level of clarity and philosophical breadth demonstrated by Dan Arnold in his book *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*.

Brains, Buddhas, and Believing is outstanding. It is exegetically robust, providing richly informed expositions of historical positions, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, the contemporary physicalism of Fodor as well as Kantian approaches to epistemology and practical reason. It also has much philosophical depth. Arnold is no apologist for Buddhism. He is a philosopher concerned with the cogency of the philosophical arguments and presuppositions of the traditions under consideration. The aim of *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing* is to show that at least one particular Buddhist tradition, that informed by the thought of Dharmakīrti, is irresolvably problematic. And, we are invited to suppose, the reason for this is the very same reason why the Fodorian cognitive analysis of mind is irresolvably

problematic. This is surprising as Dharmakīrti is a dualist about the nature of mind, and Fodor defends reductive physicalism. The problem with both, Arnold argues, is that they assume causal efficacy as the only criterion of what is real. When this assumption is mobilized to explain the nature of conscious awareness, Arnold argues, it pushes both traditions towards the view that only inner representations (brain states for Fodor, and momentary, mental particulars for Dharmakīrti), purified of the organizing conceptual, linguistic, and inferential activities of the mind, are real. Arnold appeals to contemporary Kantian thought to mount the case that a philosophy of mind exhaustively constructed out of causally efficacious particulars cannot explain the intentional structure of conscious experience in the sense of being *about* objects, as Brentano puts it, or as having meaning or significance for the experiencing subject. Not only does this strictly causal explanatory approach fail to explain the intentional structure of conscious experience, Arnold argues that such accounts *presuppose* this structure. As such, Arnold takes his argument to provide a compelling *reductio* of the entire enterprise.

This conclusion is controversial and intriguing. While many current scholars emphasize the relation of Buddhism with cognitive science to strengthen the respectability of the former given the plausibility of the latter, Arnold's book advocates the surprising view that this relation may not do credit to either. Arnold contends that neither a Dharmakīrtian epistemology nor a Fodorian cognitive theory of mind can solve Chalmers 'Hard Problem' nor Flanagan's 'Really Hard Problem' of how intentionality or semantics can emerge from a philosophy of mind premised on causal relations between mental particulars. Any such attempt, Arnold concludes, will unavoidably presuppose what it seeks to explain and, as such, should be held suspect. It must be noted, however, that while Arnold considers his arguments to undermine the Fodorian cognitive philosophy of mind, he does not consider it to thereby undermine Buddhism. To block this conclusion, he examines competing Buddhist philosophical traditions as well as non-Buddhist traditions and argues that they contain arguments which support or reinforce his own view.

There is much to which one might philosophically respond. Each chapter is interesting and worthy of focused critical attention. By way of some brief critical engagement, I will focus on the most fundamental issue that I would press against Arnold for clarification or reply. I would ask him to clarify and defend his understanding of the relation between the intentionality of conscious awareness (in the Brentano sense of aboutness) and semantic or propositional content. Arnold appears to take these notions to be equivalent insofar as both are substituted with the notions of meaning, 'taking under a description', and what is linguistic. There is reason to think these are not, in fact, equivalent notions

where this bears on Arnold's argument. Arnold appeals to John McDowell to defend a broadly Kantian view of intentionality. Arnold analyses this as the claim that perceptual experience is necessarily in the space of reasons insofar as it constitutively involves perceptual *judgment* and thus is semantic and propositional. McDowell does not hold this view, however. McDowell distinguishes intuitional content, which is conceptualized but not yet propositional, from assertoric judgments about such content which is properly propositional.¹ McDowell's refusal to identify perceptual experience with perceptual judgement is a matter of some dispute with Robert Brandom. It is also a matter of dispute with Donald Davidson, who held that perceptual experience was propositional and thus took the form of perceptual belief. There is much to be said about this. My point, however, is that if McDowell is right, and Arnold wishes to follow McDowell in his analysis of perceptual experience, there is room to challenge those arguments in *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing* which rely on a very tightly closed space of reasons unifying the intentional with the semantic or propositional. I am not sure if this will help Dharmakīrti in the final analysis given his other commitments (I suspect it both will and will not), but it certainly allows room for rejoinder.

This equivalence of intentional and semantic content is also important for Arnold's central argument against both Fodorian physicalism and Dharmakīrtian dualism. Arnold argues that explanations of intentionality in terms of non-linguistic causal events are incoherent because such explanations constitutively involve language and thus presuppose what they seek to explain. While I am not entirely convinced by this argument, the threat of incoherence subsides if one distinguishes intentional content, as that which is explained, from the semantic or propositional content of the linguistic utterances in which such explanation is given. Of course, this is not the only argument Arnold has available to him to challenge physicalism. I believe his strongest argument concerns whether intentional or semantic content can emerge from an ontology of pre-intentional or pre-semantic neural events in causal relations. This *is* a hard problem and I don't believe contemporary physicalism has a good answer. However, it is with the incoherence of explaining language by using language that Arnold concludes his book and for which he seeks textual support from Indian philosophical sources. I would want him to say more.

Finally, I would press Arnold to provide additional defense of his claim that the above represents the basic logic of the Madhyamaka arguments of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. On the face of it, this claim

¹ McDowell, J. (2008) 'Responses' in *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature*, J. Lindgaard (ed.) Blackwell Publishing, p.200

is false. Nāgārjuna provides a series of reductio arguments that challenge the coherence of assuming an ultimate ontology consisting of dharmas with *svabhāva* if one accepts the Buddha's doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) articulates this negated idea. What, if anything, can be positively inferred thereby is a subject of some dispute. Most Mādhyamikas accept that, since everything is devoid of *svabhāva*, whatever exists does so (only) *conventionally*. But this does not yet amount to showing that “a semantic or intentional level of description is ineliminable from a final account of what there is” (229). Arnold claims that Mādhyamikas show this by demonstrating the incoherence of the contrary claim. It is not obvious that (a) the claim critiqued by Nāgārjuna is the contrary to the Kantian view Arnold wishes to defend, or (b) Nāgārjuna intended us to positively infer this Kantian view from his reductio arguments, or even (c) whether positively inferring a claim from a reductio is a legitimate move for a Mādhyamika (Prāsaṅgikas think not). In my view, Arnold's appeal to Madhyamaka is, at best, a rational reconstruction aimed at supporting his argument by showing its consistency with some Buddhist philosophical tradition. This is certainly legitimate and perhaps philosophically plausible. A Madhyamaka position on conventional reality may well turn out to be consistent with the view Arnold wishes to endorse. However, I believe it far too strong to identify Madhyamaka as explicitly defending such a view and I would press Arnold for some qualification.

While I believe Arnold's overall project, like all philosophical projects, is vulnerable to challenge and critique, the issues I have raised are not trivial. This speaks to the intellectual depth of *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*. Moreover the scope of philosophical issues that are implicated speaks to its remarkable breadth. In an age of ever increasing specialization in the humanities, it is exciting and refreshing to read a book that coherently explicates common issues between distinct intellectual traditions with such philosophical rigor and independence of thought.