

Book Review

***Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind.* By Dan Arnold. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.**

In his recent book, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*, Dan Arnold has waded into what is known in philosophy and cognitive science as the “really hard problem”: how to explain our reflexively self-aware mental experience (consciousness) in a world that seems to be made up of stuff (matter and energy) that is decidedly not consciously self-aware. Arnold draws on scholastic Buddhist philosophy and contemporary physicalist philosophies of mind to demonstrate that these disparate traditions possess important philosophical similarities regarding their attempts to solve “the really hard problem.” But, as Arnold ably shows in this book, these similarities (i.e., attempts to “naturalize” the mind by explaining mental processes in terms of underlying causes that are themselves not reflexively aware) leave both traditions open to the same effective counterarguments that doom causally reductive accounts of the mind.

A notable feature of Arnold’s book is that it is fundamentally a work in *philosophy*, not intellectual history. There’s nothing wrong, of course, with intellectual history, and there is plenty of excellent intellectual history in the book, too. But Arnold goes beyond intellectual history to make the ideas of historical thinkers part of a current philosophical conversation. Specifically, Arnold demonstrates that contemporary research on the philosophy of mind would do well to take account of the arguments of scholastic Buddhist philosophy, as scholastic Buddhist philosophy has much to say about some of the same issues that frame contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. The book’s major themes are addressed

by weaving together philosophical ideas and arguments drawn from an exceptionally long list of heavy hitters in modern and contemporary (Western) philosophy (Kant, Sellars, Dennett, McDowell, Locke, Hume, Wittgenstein, Fodor... just to name a few). On the Buddhist side, the main focus is on the contributions of the seventh century Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti, and to a lesser extent Dignāga —contributions that are developed within the broad continuities of Buddhist thought from the Abhidharmikas to the Sautrāntikas and, finally, to the Madhyamika philosophers Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. In handling such a broad sweep of philosophical ideas East and West, Arnold excels at explaining what is inherently difficult to grasp, making the main thread of argumentation intelligible, if not always easily accessible.

As a Yogācāra idealist, Dharmakīrti would appear to be at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum from contemporary cognitive-scientific philosophers of mind who argue that the mental can be reduced to brain processes. So it is an unexpected and brilliant insight on the part of Arnold that there is important philosophical common ground shared by Dharmakīrti and contemporary physicalist philosophers of mind. But rather than offer further support for the theories of scholastic Buddhism and physicalist philosophies of mind, Arnold argues that these similarities show that these traditions share vulnerabilities to objections that threaten all causally reductive explanations of the mind.

Giving a plausible account of mental experience (reflexively aware consciousness) has long been a philosophical problem of the first rank. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that the mind is *intentional*. Whether one is thinking of a tree, seeing one's hand, or considering menu options in a restaurant, all such mental activities have a common intentional structure. In other words, intentionality refers to the fact that consciousness has an object; experience is always *about* something. But because of the mind's intentional structure, mental events are vastly different (different in *kind*) from other (non-intentional, non-experiential) events. It is a peculiarity of mental events (like perceiving, thinking, and believing) that they *exist as* one kind of thing (as events in a mind/brain), but they are *about* something else (e.g., a perceived tree). Despite the difference between the intentional and the non-intentional, many contemporary cognitive scientists (and the philosophers of mind who build their theories on the cognitive sciences) hold that the mental is caused by, and ultimately reducible to, complex neuro-chemical processes in the brain. Philosophically, this means explaining the intentional in terms of the non-intentional or, what amounts to roughly the same thing, giving an ac-

count that reduces the mind to brain processes. Arnold's main purpose here is to demonstrate that such a reduction inevitably runs into serious philosophical obstacles.

Arnold traces how the same causally reductive move found in contemporary physicalism is evident in the Yogācāra (idealist) philosophy of Dharmakīrti. Ostensibly, Dharmakīrti's philosophy attempts to work out a number of philosophical problems about knowledge, consciousness, and reality using what he understood to be the essence of Buddhist philosophy as it was expressed in the Abhidharma literature. Yet, what is clear from Arnold's presentation is just how acceptance of key Buddhist doctrines such as dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the no-self doctrine (*anātma*), filtered through a certain version of the Abhidharma interpretation of these theories, ends up painting Dharmakīrti into a philosophical corner. All Buddhists have urged a reductionist account of persons because there is no enduring self; but in the scholastic interpretation this becomes the claim that only particular and momentary causes are themselves real. Thus, Dharmakīrti must provide an account of the mind that is compatible with the scholastic interpretation of Buddhist ontological and epistemological commitments. For example, Dharmakīrti is at great pains to explain how perceptual knowledge is possible without ever committing himself to the existence of anything permanent: what is finally real are only momentary particulars (as will be discussed below). Most importantly, this means avoiding giving universals (e.g., what makes all trees "trees") a fundamental ontological status. For Dharmakīrti, this implies that "whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is ultimately existent, everything else is just conventionally existent." (p. 4)

According to Arnold, Dharmakīrti holds a "solipsistic and causalist position in the philosophy of mind." (p. 197) On this view, experience is subjectively private, and there are underlying causes that give rise to the appearances that are apprehended in consciousness. Arnold calls such a position "cognitivism." Cognitivism has had a number of proponents in Western philosophy, including George Berkeley and the contemporary philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor. Like many early modern (Western) empiricists, Dharmakīrti's conception of the mind is modeled on the structure of perceptual experience. For this reason, he recognizes only perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) as valid means of knowing (*pramāṇa*); all other modes of knowledge are reducible to these. As a consistent empiricist, Dharmakīrti's ultimate ontology contains only two kinds of things: unique particulars and the abstractions inferred from perceptions that conven-

tionally form universals (universals are what allow us to categorize or label particular objects that occur in our experiences—recognizing a tree as a “tree,” for example).

From reading Arnold’s account of Dharmakīrti’s epistemology, one cannot help but see the strong similarities to Berkeley’s representationalist model of the mind — a model that led Berkeley to metaphysical idealism just as it did Dharmakīrti. Both philosophers take the phenomenal content of experience as an ontological constraint: they reject the naïve realist notion that the causes of perceptual representations are real (physical) objects external to the mind (as Locke and the Sautrāntikas held, for example). Dharmakīrti went beyond the Berkeleyan model by claiming that the representations apprehendable by the mind are the causal effect of a unique particular that remains beyond what the mind itself can conceptually or directly grasp (i.e., something that is a raw, non-intentional, fact). On Dharmakīrti’s view, the representations we are directly aware of are not even the kinds of things that can be the causes of the representations; the truly real are unique particulars that act as causes for the representations, and thus are non-intentional by definition. Arnold shows how this view harkens back to the position taken in the Abhidhamma literature that atomic particulars are real, but it is not atomic particulars as such that appear before the mind; instead, what appear to a mind are whole things like tables, trees, and bodies.

The fact that the things we are aware of, namely representations or appearances, cannot be the causes of cognition poses a grave problem for Dharmakīrti’s epistemology. Put simply, how are we to give a causal account of these unique particulars that we have no direct empirical access to? It would be like observing a film in a movie theater and being asked whether the things appearing on the screen are real. If one could never leave the movie theater to check, there’s really no way to find out the source or accuracy of the images that appear on the screen. This leaves Dharmakīrti’s project in a quandary because his model of experience makes impossible an account of the non-conceptual causes of what appears to a mind. In fact, on such a view there’s really no reason to posit anything other than appearances — and certainly no reason to think that appearances are the effects of causes. As Arnold effectively argues, Dharmakīrti’s only recourse is to impute intentionality to the causes of appearances that he has already determined to be non-intentional.

Dharmakīrti must also explain the apparent (and ultimately false) continuities in experience and personal identity in terms of an ontology that claims that

all existents are *momentary*. It is problematic for Dharmakīrti that he accepts momentariness as the metaphysical implication of Buddhism's central doctrine of dependent arising. This is unfortunate for Dharmakīrti's philosophy because such a view (which is *not* the understanding of dependent arising that one finds in the Pali Nikāyas) adds an insuperable difficulty to his account of consciousness and his explanation of the "appearance" of personal identity over time. Conscious awareness, for Dharmakīrti, can have only other moments of conscious awareness as its cause, but given that each instance of consciousness is a momentary particular, it seems impossible to explain how our experience presents a *continuity* that has a *history*—that is, momentariness cannot explain even the appearance of personal identity through time (even if we think that the appearance of personal identity is an illusion).

A key philosophical issue regarding intentionality is that non-intentional causes do not carry semantic content. That is, meaning is something that requires intentionality. But, then, how can the non-intentional (electro-chemical brain states, for example) give rise to intentionality, that is, to an awareness that is reflexively *about* something else? Such questions only widen the gap between the non-intentional and the intentional. In an early chapter, Arnold explores Jerry Fodor's physicalist philosophy of mind, a position wherein brain states (non-intentional) can cause semantic (meaning-laden) experience. But, as Arnold relates, it just is not clear how brain events, which few would doubt are closely related to someone having an experience, can cause an experience that is *of* something else, since it is not brain events themselves that are the objects of experience. Thus, even though Dharmakīrti is an idealist (not a physicalist), and Fodor is a physicalist, both are in effect trying to "naturalize" intentionality. And yet, as Arnold convincingly shows, such projects make a mystery out of trying to get the meaningful out of a causal account of the non-intentional (i.e., the "natural"). The prospects for any such causal reduction of the mind are very dim indeed.

The heart of Arnold's study of Dharmakīrti's philosophy relates how Dharmakīrti tries to explain the phenomenal content of experience — that is, how such experience can appear to be meaningful. Here Dharmakīrti espoused a variant of the *apoha* doctrine that was developed earlier by Dignāga. Brahmanical philosophies like Pūrva Mīmāṃsā argued that language is the eternal reality that makes things what they truly are. Thus for Pūrva Mīmāṃsā a tree is really a tree because there is an ontologically real linguistic *universal* that makes trees the kind of thing they are. In Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, to think of something conceptually is a kind

of judgment that requires an objectively real universal, because to judge that one is perceiving a *tree* requires a prior knowledge of what it takes to “be a tree.” But given the Buddhist claim that everything is dependently arisen—everything is a nexus of change and thus lacks a permanent essence—it is the hallmark of Buddhist thought that the existence of such (permanent) ontologically fundamental universals is rejected. However, rejecting the objective ontology of universals requires Buddhists to give an explanation of semantic content (that a word carries a certain meaning, for example) by some other means consistent with dependent arising—and the *apoha* doctrine claims to accomplish just that.

Apoha means “exclusion.” Using this doctrine, a concept, say “dog,” is defined by excluding everything that is non-dog. Philosophically, what is important here is that rather than have to account for something that all dogs share in the positive, which would lend credence to the reality of a universal that makes all dogs “dogs,” a *via negativa* is employed that purports to pick out dogs as “dogs” without ever claiming that all dogs share something in common. This is nominalism in the extreme. In short, the *apoha* doctrine is a very clever, if counterintuitive, way that scholastic Buddhists used to define semantic content without committing themselves to the objective reality of universals. Furthermore, the *apoha* doctrine has the fortunate implication for idealists like Dharmakīrti of making universals subjectively phenomenal: there need be no real similarities between things which appear to fall under a certain concept, only illusory abstractions. This doctrine fits into Dharmakīrti’s causal model of experience because what is excluded from coming under a concept is for Dharmakīrti everything that does not produce the same kinds of effects (images or representations in the mind). But the reply from philosophers in the tradition of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, some of Dharmakīrti’s strongest critics, is that to classify something by what it excludes requires that we know what “non-dog” means, and yet we cannot define or recognize perceptually “non-dog” without already presupposing we know what “dog” means. Arnold agrees that such criticisms have “purchase” because there seems to be no way to use the *apoha* doctrine to avoid invoking the existence of linguistic universals without falling into a circularity which begs the question.

Arnold explores further semantic problems with Dharmakīrti’s epistemology. Without contact between the mind and objects external to the mind, it is hard to see what provides the meaning content of an experienced object (a representation in the mind). For example, why is a tree experienced as a “tree?” For Dharmakīrti, given his representationalism, *seeming to be* is no different from *really being such*.

(Berkeley said as much in his famous pronouncement *esse est percipi*: “To exist is to be perceived”.) Thus experience for Dharmakīrti is intelligible without reference to anything external to the appearance, and certainly there is no need for a causal connection to a real object outside the mind (as Sautrāntika philosophy argued). Whatever constitutes the cause of an appearance and provides the ground for its meaning content must be the mind because, on Dharmakīrti’s view, we can only experience things as experienced by us, i.e., as the content of awareness itself. However, experience *does seem* to be about things that have intrinsic similarities to one another. For example, my perception of a tree seems to involve an awareness of how this particular tree has something it shares with other trees. Yet this cannot be true in any real sense, because, on Dharmakīrti’s model, experience is comprised of nothing more than unique particulars. This, and similar conundrums, pose significant difficulties for developing a plausible case for intentionality that is based on a causal link to the non-intentional. For example, this raises the question about how semantic content arises at all from the non-intentional. In response to such a challenge, Dharmakīrti argued that the semantic content of an experience is derived from the “sameness of effect” in terms of the representations that appear before the mind. While that answer seems logically consistent with his cognitivist epistemology, Arnold shows in a carefully traced argument that any attempt to unpack what “sameness” means will end up either begging the question or invoking the ontologically real universals that Dharmakīrti was at pains to reject.

The intentionality of perception, according to Dharmakīrti’s model of experience, requires a foundational kind of perception that he calls reflexive self-awareness (*svasaṃvitti*). *Svasaṃvitti* is foundational to experience because, by a kind of phenomenological analysis, it is revealed as a necessary concomitant to all perception. Without *svasaṃvitti*, the semantic content of experience could not become intelligible to a mind. Furthermore, the theory of *svasaṃvitti* reveals that that which appears before the mind is known indubitably by a subject due to the immediacy of objects presented. All semantic contentfulness (meaning or judgments) must be explained in terms of such *intra-subjective* presentation via *svasaṃvitti*. Dharmakīrti was willing to embrace the subjectivism that such a solipsistic model of experience implies, but this leaves him open to the charge that his epistemology cannot account for language use or communication. Meaningful linguistic communication requires *inter-subjective* semantic agreements; that is, communication can only occur when language users mean roughly the same

thing when they use a certain word. But isolated minds attuned only to their own subjective presentations can never establish the inter-subjectivity required to account for semantic agreement. So, for Dharmakīrti, there simply is no way to account for “meaning the same thing” across subjectively enclosed minds. Using philosophically technical terms, Arnold asks: “what is it in virtue of which Dharmakīrti’s first-personally known, phenomenal ‘sameness’ can be a constraint on the objectively normative character of linguistic conventions?” (p. 146) A philosophy of mind such as Dharmakīrti’s that renders meaningful linguistic communication impossible can be dismissed by *reductio ad absurdum*.

Not only is the inter-subjectivity of linguistic meaning difficult for Dharmakīrti to explain, but the metaphysical question of just how events on a non-intentional level (e.g., sound, a vibration in the air) can cause something on the intentional level (e.g., understanding the meaning of a sentence). How mere sounds become a symphony or clusters of molecules can exhibit aesthetic meanings as a painting is just another version of the “really hard problem.” This has long been a central issue in philosophy. Semantic theory that attempts to explain meaningful (contentful) experiences by means of raw perceptions that are not themselves semantically meaningful faces a huge, perhaps unbridgeable, gap. In other words, there’s no easy way to explain how the factual/non-intentional can become semantic/intentional. Arnold is convinced that Madhyamika philosophers have demonstrated that the intentional level of description is ineliminable: all experience is conceptually or semantically mediated. Thus there really is no gap to bridge. One might think that an idealist who holds a representationalist theory of mind, like Dharmakīrti, would have been keen to adopt a similar view, since it would appear to reinforce the idea that there is no ground of experience outside of the mind itself. But rather surprisingly, and inconsistently as it turns out, Dharmakīrti continued to hold that the non-intentional is the ground for self-aware experience.

Arnold sums up the many strands of argumentation in this book by stating categorically that the mental cannot be explained in terms of an ontology of unique particulars — whether those particulars are mental or physical. Arnold has made a strong case for the fact “that insofar as the project of ‘naturalizing’ intentionality consists in advancing essentially causal explanations of the contentful character of thought, there is something about intentionality that *cannot* be accounted for thereby.” (p. 236) As most of us today are not idealists like the Yogācāra Buddhists, but have a preference for the physicalist ontology associated

with the natural sciences, this result means that the rising expectations that neuroscience is on the verge of a complete reductive explanation of mental processes that will answer basic philosophical questions about the mind may well be disappointed. Maybe the philosophical issues at stake just are not something a natural science that only treats the non-intentional as real can solve. It remains a mystery within the paradigm of the natural sciences that something semantically contentful like thought can be gotten out of a reality that is characterized as semantically meaningless. So, in the end, “any philosophical account on which *meaning* is not real cannot, *ipso facto*, be a complete account.” (p. 237)

In conclusion, this is a difficult book that operates at the cutting edge of scholarship. It is certainly not a book for those looking for an introduction to Buddhism (or an introduction to the philosophy of mind, for that matter). Some non-academic reviewers of the book have expressed disappointment in the book because its primary title (*Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*) gave them the erroneous impression that this text, like several other popular books, focuses on how Buddhist meditation positively changes the brain. Had these reviewers given greater consideration to the sub-title (*The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind*), such misunderstandings would have been averted. Those with intellectual interests in Buddhism will appreciate Arnold’s work for showing how much scholastic Buddhist philosophy has to contribute to contemporary philosophical inquiry. For scholars whose research focuses more narrowly on scholastic Buddhism, Arnold’s book ranks as essential reading.

Although the book covers the connections between Dharmakīrti’s philosophical ideas and certain earlier textual sources, it does not explore how Dharmakīrti’s arguments relate back to the Pali Nikāyas, except in an indirect way by showing how the Madhyamikas (e.g., Nāgārjuna) develop an emergentist (non-reductivist) view of dependent arising much like the view expressed in the Pali Nikāyas. Neither the Madhyamikas nor the earliest discourses attempt to give a causally reductionist, non-intentional, grounding to self-aware experience. Thus, the philosophies of scholastic Buddhists like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti suffer from weaknesses that, from a longer view of the history of Buddhist philosophy, are self-created. Taking a cue from Arnold’s grand analogy, perhaps contemporary philosophers of mind may finally resolve the problems of “naturalizing” the mind by abandoning the reduction to the non-intentional and accepting, not dualism, but some form of emergentism. If they were to pursue that path, Buddhist philosophy

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may well be a key resource for a viable contemporary philosophy of mind after all—in spite of the fact that certain scholastic Buddhist philosophies offer only a dead end on this issue.

John J. Holder
Professor of Philosophy
St. Norbert College
(De Pere, Wisconsin, USA)