

# H-Net Reviews

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**Daniel Anderson Arnold.** *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xii + 311 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14546-6; ISBN 978-0-231-51821-5.

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Think of a waterfall. A cherry. The smile of a loved one. Such thoughts are, of course, not themselves waterfalls, cherries, or smiles, but they can nevertheless be *directed toward* (or be *about*, or be *of*) such things. In contemporary philosophy of mind, this quality of directedness is labeled “intentionality,” and considerable attention has been devoted to elucidating and explaining it. Accounts of intentionality tend to fall into two broad kinds. Some treat intentionality as reducible to something else, with a favored form of this reductionism holding that intentionality is ultimately a matter of “causal relations among local particulars” (p. 7). Others deny this, and treat intentionality as an irreducible hallmark of mental (as opposed to physical) events. Dan Arnold’s sympathies are with the second group, for reasons that he makes explicit—and for which he cogently argues—in *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind*.

Arnold’s aims in this book are multiple. He is concerned to sketch and argue against various attempts at offering an efficient-causal explanation of intentionality—attempts that he terms “cognitivist” (in chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5); to develop and defend an alternative account of intentionality (in chapters 3 and 6); and to show the considerable intellectual payoff of informed and careful comparative work (on display throughout).[1] The reader is treated to detailed discussion of accounts of mind that have been offered by influential thinkers from very different times, places, cultures, and religious traditions. Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Dignāga, and Dhar-

makīrti make appearances, but so do Jaimini, Ābāra, Kumāri Bhaṅgī, Rāmakaṅgīha Bhaṅgī, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Jerry Fodor, Wilfrid Sellars, and John McDowell, among others. None of these thinkers (with the possible exception of Hume) is renowned for his accessibility, and Arnold proves himself a very capable guide through the difficulties each presents.

Much of *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing* is devoted to unpacking the thought of Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660 CE). On Arnold’s reading, Dharmakīrti develops a non-intentional account of intentionality, according to which the characteristic “aboutness” of mental states is to be explained by appealing to phenomena that can enter unproblematically into causal relations. The emphasis on causation that one finds in Dharmakīrti’s work is found also in earlier Buddhist Abhidharma traditions, which likewise endeavor to explain events of awareness in causal terms: if one is seeing a blue flower, one is being *caused* to see it, and a story can be told about the causal components (sense organs, their objects, etc.) involved in the production of the relevant event of visual awareness. This event of awareness is also presumed to bear *content*—a blue flower—which may lead one to suspect that what one’s awareness is *about* is, under normal circumstances, the very thing that is *causing* the awareness. When I see a blue flower, I do so *because there’s a blue flower before me*.

For all its immediately intuitive appeal, however, this simple account does not do justice to the complexities of awareness. For one thing, it does not help us much

toward understanding outlying cases—cases of hallucinations, dreams, and the like, in which my awareness seems to have the intentional content it does even in the absence of relevant causes. The fact that such cases are even possible suggests that the relation between the causes of an instance of awareness and the intentional object of that instance is more complex than the simple account above can explain. But even when one brackets such outlying cases, one might still ask how, precisely, a certain set of causes might conspire to produce effects that have the peculiar property of being *about*—and not simply responsive to—those causes.

For Dharmakīrti, an admissible answer to this question will need to be compatible with certain closely held ontological and metaphysical assumptions. One such assumption, phrased in general terms, is that events must be “ontologically homogenous” (p. 33) with their causes: moments of sentient awareness have as their causes prior moments of sentient awareness. Another assumption is that only momentary particulars—unique events that lack spatial, temporal, or conceptual extension—possess causal efficacy. These assumptions add to the difficulties of crafting a satisfying efficient-causal account of intentionality. Only particulars can cause, but what they cause are further particulars that seem to be *of things* (waterfalls, cherries, smiles, blue flowers) that are precisely *not particulars*—things that appear to take up a certain amount of space, to last for a certain amount of time, and to occur as token instances of categorical types. The causal dimension of a given cognition (i.e., that in virtue of which it enters into causal relations) must thus be distinguished sharply from the intentional object of that cognition: cognitions may cause and be caused, but not in virtue of the content they carry.

In this specific respect, Arnold argues, Dharmakīrti’s account is similar to the view of intentionality favored by Jerry Fodor. Fodor’s aim is to connect brain states, understood as efficient causes, with observable bodily behavior, while preserving the idea that such states may also bear intentional content (although, as for Dharmakīrti, it is not in virtue of the content they bear that they play the causal role they do). Just as the operations of a calculator can be described in purely *causal* terms—with certain inputs effecting changes in the electrical state of the device—so, too, may the same operations be read as *contentful*, when we see the device as performing a calculation with a determinate *representational outcome*. Fodor develops an account of intentionality in which the intentional object of a mental event “is somehow inextricably related to [that] mental event’s char-

acter as causally efficacious—a place, as it were, where the *intentional* properties of a mental state (its being contentful) come together with its *causal* properties” (p. 58, emphasis original). In pursuing this aim, Fodor develops the idea of “narrow content.” Narrow content may be described in causal terms—as brain states—but it may alternatively be described in epistemic terms, as how things seem to a subject of experience, irrespective of how things are in the surrounding environment.

As Arnold points out, however, Fodor’s account, like Dharmakīrti’s, may end up begging as many questions as it answers. Dharmakīrti’s purely causal story of the phenomenal content of mental states is one that appeals to a process of exclusion (*apoha*) in which “what is ‘excluded’ from the range of things to which any concept refers is all those particulars that do not produce the same effect” (p. 139). In helping himself to the idea of a shared “sameness of effect” that ranges across discrete particulars, however, Dharmakīrti arguably invokes the very sort of contentful abstraction that appeals to *apoha* are meant to circumvent. And while Fodor’s notion of narrow content is meant to help us to understand how a first-person, intentional description of a given mental state might effectively track a third-person, efficient-causal description of the same mental state, it raises a pressing concern: what entitles us to the presumption that the mental state identified in these two descriptions is the *same* mental state? After all, “however intimately brain events may be involved in our having of experience, surely it is not brain events that our experiences are *of*” (p. 64, emphasis original). Rather, we have experiences of, and beliefs about, states of affairs in the world. But these constitute the very “surrounding environment” that Fodor’s notion of narrow content would have us bracket. The result is an impasse: “[t]o the extent that Fodor is finally concerned to pick out such causal or ‘formal’ representations of the world as the senses provide—only such representations as can be individuated without reference even to their being representations *of the environment*—he cannot claim to be talking about *beliefs*” (p. 65, emphasis original).

What unites Dharmakīrti’s and Fodor’s accounts, in Arnold’s view, is that they attempt to naturalize intentionality by accounting for it in purely efficient-causal terms. Arnold understands “*reason itself* [to be] centrally implicated in the nature of intentionality” (p. 81, emphasis original), and so reads this move as amounting to an attempt to collapse reasons into causes—an attempt that he sees to be deeply misguided. “The logical space of reasons,” he argues, “is ineliminable.... [T]here is, then,

nothing it could look like to know that, say, intentionally describable states like knowing or believing might 'really' be something else, or that our conceptual capacities are explicable in terms of things that are not themselves conceptual" (p. 108). Drawing on the work of Kant, Sellars, and McDowell, Arnold develops a nuanced defense of the idea that "we cannot finally go any 'further down' in understanding or attributing rationality, than to our own first-personal experience thereof," while simultaneously insisting, with McDowell, that "to argue for the logical priority of the first-personal understanding of rationality is not to push toward solipsism" but rather to arrive at "the basis for what is arguably the best account of the objectivity of our knowledge" (p. 113).

There is more that might be said about all of this, of course, and this brief review cannot do justice to the sensitivity with which Arnold treats arguments mounted by the various authors he discusses—both those he opposes and those with whom he is sympathetic. The book is difficult; it is in no way an introduction to Buddhism and cognitive science, nor is it a work that I would consider assigning to undergraduates. But its difficulty is matched by its achievements. For philosophers of mind, the book offers a multifaceted argument for the irreducibility of meaning in accounts of cognition, the upshot of which is that "any philosophical account on which *meaning* is not real cannot, ipso facto, be a complete account.... [A]ny

account on which causal efficacy is the unique criterion of the real *is* cannot, in principle, capture everything there is to understand about us" (p. 237, emphasis original). For scholars in Buddhist studies, Arnold offers a timely reminder of the difficulties and rewards of sustained attention to the content of claims made by Indian Buddhist intellectuals, and to the ways in which this content is taken up and transformed over time. (The book is essential reading for anyone who is working on Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and other theorists of *pramāṇa*.) And for scholars in religious studies, Arnold offers a bracing riposte to recent attempts to explain religion in exhaustively causal terms—whether these terms be cognitive-scientific or materialist.

The book is strong both philosophically and philologically, with Arnold's characteristic erudition, analytic rigor, interpretive sensitivity, and enthusiasm evident throughout. *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing* is clearly intended to provoke discussion, and the book's claims and arguments deserve such discussion—both within and across the multiple scholarly fields Arnold targets.

#### Note

[1]. On efficient causes, see the seminal discussion in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 5. 2.

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