

## Can Philosophy of Religion Move Beyond Kantian Skepticism?

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**Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion**, Dan Arnold, Columbia University Press 2006 (ISBN 0-231-13280-8), 328 pp., hb \$50.00

**Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion**, Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (eds.), Indiana University Press 2006 (ISBN 0-253-21800-4), 288 pp., pb \$24.95

**Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004**, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), SCM Press 2006 (ISBN 0-334-04008-6), x + 262 pp., pb £18.99

Immanuel Kant marks a turning point in Western Philosophy of Religion. His response to Hume's skepticism, his distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds, and his postulation of God as a requirement of practical rationality to justify morality, have affected subsequent thinking about religion and God. These features of Kant's philosophy place restrictions on thinking about God and metaphysics. One way to avoid the confines of Kant and his dismissal of metaphysics and proofs for God's existence is to offer an alternative interpretation of Kant's philosophy. Another way of avoiding these is to see that there are entirely different traditions of the philosophy of religion and epistemology. These traditions do not culminate in the skepticism of Hume and so do not need the Kantian solution to that skepticism. A final way of avoiding the parameters imposed by Kantian philosophy is to see that Kant is a response to particular problems arising in a specific philosophical tradition. An alternative solution to those problems would offer an alternative path to Kantian philosophy and avoid the problems

that have arisen in the Kantian tradition. This essay will consider these attempts to address Kantian philosophy with the aim of suggesting ways to make progress in contemporary problems facing the philosophy of religion. Perhaps the most pertinent problem is that of common ground between religious traditions and the manner in which world-views can work to settle disputes.

The most common interpretation of Kant has been one that is theologically negative, or has negative implications for theology. This is particularly due to Kant's claim that the human mind structures experience so that knowledge of things in themselves is impossible. Theologians after Kant tended to emphasize experience of God (Schleiermacher), but this soon turned into a view of God as a human construct (Feuerbach), or an infantile illusion (Freud). This leaves little room for theology or religious belief. One way to make such room is to question the interpretation of Kant that led to this conclusion. *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* develops a theologically positive interpretation of the philosophy of Kant (p. xxi). It is composed of three parts discussing philosophical foundations for Kantian philosophy, theological applications for Kantian religion, and religious instantiations of Kantian philosophy.

Part One argues that atheism is not a viable option in Kantian philosophy because of the need for God to justify morality (p. 74). Nor is Deism acceptable because of the need for assistance in the form of special revelation (p. 88). In Part Two the argument is presented that God-talk can be meaningful within Kant's philosophy (p. 137). 'Kant is able to speak intelligibly about the divine prototype, and he provides a vision for a robust rational theology. God-talk/God-thought is intelligible because of reason's need to cognize the descent of the divine Son of God taking on humanity, and because of the subsequent narrative that reason reveals to us concerning his dispositional perfection'. This interpretation of Kant involves the justification of special revelation (against atheism and deism) but not a defense or foundation for natural theology. Even when God-talk is justified it is through analysis of special revelation about the Son of God. However, some of Hume's most important attacks on religious belief involved challenging belief based on testimony/scripture. Furthermore, where Kant did defend Christian belief based on scripture it is almost unrecognizable when compared with historic Christian belief. This leaves the question unanswered: is Kant's reconstruction of Christian belief still Christianity?

*Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief* is a rich book that deserves careful reading. Dan Arnold develops fascinating connections between Buddhist epistemology and foundationalism, and Purva Mimamsa and Reformed Epistemology. For our purposes here it illustrates an

alternative philosophical path to that provided by Kant. Hume's analysis of the self as a bundle of mental images is importantly similar to Buddhist belief that the self is a 'demonstrably false description of what can really be known to be only a series of evanescent sensory events' (p. 31). As developed by the Buddhist philosopher Dignaga (ca 480–540 CE) this results in a skepticism about the ability to infer propositional judgments from perceptual cognitions (p. 38). The theory of truth that emerges can be called an epistemic notion of truth, as opposed to a realist notion of truth, in that truth is related to the epistemic virtues of the knower and not some state of affairs (p. 50).

In contrast to this empiricist foundationalism, Purva Mimamsa appeals to scripture and seeks to justify belief in the Vedas (p. 65). This is an appeal to special revelation, as we saw earlier by those seeking a positive interpretation of Kant that would support belief in God. Kant's development of transcendental arguments is studied in Part Three of this book. 'A distinctive feature of such arguments, then, is their urging that one cannot argue against their claims without already presupposing them' (p. 124). Kant used this form of argument to respond to the 'normative-epistemological challenge of Hume' (p. 125). This discussion leads to R.G. Collingwood's idea of 'absolute presuppositions' (p. 128). These are those beliefs which are presupposed by any other belief. Candrakirti (ca 600 CE) develops a transcendental argument to defend the belief that 'while our conventions are in important senses erroneous, it is nevertheless the case that there is nothing *more real* than our conventions – nothing that is not (like our conventions) dependently originated' (p. 173). This leads to his further claim that the only ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth (p. 184) and that essencelessness is the essence of things (p. 189). Arnold's discussion of how to understand this claim is judicious, but what is interesting for our purposes is how it uses a transcendental argument to respond to skepticism and yet arrives at a very different conclusion than did Kant.

Arnold's Conclusion considers whether relativism is the correct response to the reality of such different conclusions. He accepts relativism of the form which says 'many different (even mutually exclusive) beliefs might alike be rationally held' while rejecting relativism about 'the truth of beliefs' (p. 216). This is due to a distinction he draws between *possessing* the truth and the reality that we necessarily have recourse to talk of truth (p. 216), and the distinction between truth and justification (p. 217). 'What this distinction gives us more generally, as human persons with beliefs and commitments, is a way to explain the possibility of calling people wrong, without necessarily judging them to be irrational' (p. 217). But what happens to responsibility if many contradictory views of the good are all rationally acceptable?

*Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* is an exchange between thinkers in these two traditions on topics of importance to each. The overarching question is how these traditions can grow in their mutual understanding and in this process find common ground (p. 16). It contains four parts, each of which is composed of two essays (one from a Christian the other from a Buddhist) and then responses by the two authors. The parts address the topics of life and death, the ultimate, the mediators, and the quest for peace. The book does a good job of selecting its topics and avoiding a superficial reductionism that gives a look of common ground but empties each religion of meaning. Important differences are raised but not necessarily resolved.

A book of this length will of necessity be unable to provide all facets of a religious view, but one unfortunate part of this book is that the Christian voices appear to be from those theological schools that have been affected by Kantian philosophy. While none of the authors presenting the Christian viewpoint are explicitly Kantian, the effects of Kant on theology can be seen. This can be seen from their willingness to speak of God as 'the ultimate' who is known through religious experiences. God is indefinite, and can only be known as experienced. Further, God and religious belief are thought of in terms of morality. This means that Christianity can be thought of as one religion (among many) in which 'the ultimate' works to help persons find moral salvation (overcome harmful activities). While some of the authors do seek to preserve unique aspects of Christianity, the tendency is still to accept this Kantian framework as the way to understand one's own religion, the religion of others, and the interaction between religions.

The problem with this approach emerges when 'the ultimate' is given a more definite meaning, or when the particulars of salvation are detailed. In the part about 'the ultimate' differences clearly emerge as more definite meaning is given to this term. Similarly, when Christ and Buddha are compared as mediators of the transcendent (again, this latter term can be problematic if left ambiguous). Are Christ and Buddha similar in being teachers of a path to liberation, or should Christ be understood as the atoning sacrifice for sin (p. 177)? The limitations of the Kantian approach to theology are seen here as a hindrance to understanding one's own religion and the religion of others, and are therefore a hindrance to finding common ground. These limitations can specifically be seen in a skepticism toward knowing God (the ultimate, the transcendent), and thinking of religion and religious salvation in broadly moral terms. These are consequences of the manner in which Kant replied to Hume's skepticism. If an alternative solution can be found it will allow renewed study in natural theology and metaphysics, and a more robust, comprehensive view of morality and religion where morality is more than the avoidance of outward

physical harm to others (non-violence and forgiving love) and religion is more than experience of 'the ultimate' (p. 163).

The specific problem facing Kant was that Hume had shown that empiricism leads to skepticism. Rationalism had fared no better, particularly as developed by Christian Wolfe. Perhaps the skepticism of Hume can be avoided without resorting to Kantianism. Kant, like Hume, began with the assumption that all knowledge is through sense data. By noticing a slight but important mistake here much trouble can be avoided. It is not that all knowledge is through sense data, but that all knowledge is through the interpretation of sense data. Interpretations can be more or less coherent depending on the extent to which the person involved is conscious of the worldview through which the interpretations is made and the demands of consistency. The worldview used to make these interpretations involves beliefs about the basic nature of reality, beliefs about what is eternal and what is not, what is good and what is not. Experience cannot give knowledge of these because experiences are interpreted by a pre-existing framework that involves beliefs about these. The problem remains: can we have knowledge of these?

Hume and Kant are both skeptical on this point. Can common ground be built on the foundation of skepticism? The points quoted earlier from Dan Arnold's conclusion can be beneficial here. While there are undoubtedly many issues on which people disagree without either side being 'irrational', are there also some basic beliefs that it would be irrational not to accept? If so, identifying these would also be a significant part of responding to skepticism. Specifically, are there necessary presuppositions which must be accepted because to argue against them is to use them? One that comes to mind is the law of non-contradiction. In arguing against it, one would be arguing for a conclusion that is taken to be true in contrast to its contradiction (Arnold, p. 189). Historically this law has been called a law of thought because it is necessary for thought, and its rejection leads to incoherence. Arnold traces Candrakirti's use of the transcendental argument to defend the basic belief that all is empty (p. 189). But this belief leads to a paradox (contradiction) (p. 189). The alternatives to this belief in emptiness are that all is eternal/permanent, or only some things are eternal/permanent while others are temporal/changing.

This is illustrative of a response to the skepticism about theology and knowing God that followed Kant's philosophy. If there are necessary presuppositions, say the law of non-contradiction, and this law must be applied to basic beliefs because it cannot be avoided, then skepticism is an irrational option. While Arnold provides interesting discussion of the emptiness paradox (pp. 183–192), if this basic belief is in fact an instance of violating the law of non-contradiction then accepting it would also be irrational. Kant's response to Hume and the resulting

skepticism about the noumenal can be avoided through the use of a transcendental argument demonstrating the necessity of the law of non-contradiction (applicable even to things in themselves) and then the application of this to basic beliefs about existence can be used to justify a return to, and reexamination of, natural theology and the constituent metaphysics.