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Anonymous	<p>  Posted: 01 Nov 2006 20:18 Post subject: November 2006: Justification and Truth </p> <hr/> <p>Throughout the month, the invited commentaries from Michael Kremer and Ronney Mourad will be posted in this section. To leave your own response to Daniel Arnold's essay or to one of the commentaries, choose "post reply." In order to post a reply, you must register with a personal user ID and password.</p> <p>Thank you for visiting the Religion and Culture Web Forum.</p> <p>Debra Erickson Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum</p>	
Anonymous	<p>  Posted: 03 Nov 2006 15:59 Post subject: Ronney Mourad's response to Daniel Arnold </p> <hr/> <p>Dan Arnold makes several valuable observations about the independence of justification and truth in this essay. Taken in one way, I find myself largely in agreement with those observations, but taken in another, I do not. Arnold's argument appeals at several points to a realist conception of truth, but his view of the meaning of such a conception of truth remains somewhat unclear to me. Some of the controversial implications of his position turn on this matter.</p> <p>Arnold does tell us that according to a realist conception of truth "something's being true is logically independent of how or whether anyone happens to know it" (and here in a footnote he suggests that in speaking of a "realist conception of truth" he is "skating on thin ice" due, in part, to the contested semantic range of the phrase. I propose to join him out on the ice; hopefully I will not drown us both). What is</p>	

the “something” the truth of which is independent of its being known in this characterization? Let us tentatively say that it is a description of a state of affairs. I suspect that Arnold’s characterization draws on two realist observations. First, realists point out that the fact that someone happens to believe a description of a state of affairs is never a sufficient condition for its truth, because beliefs are inescapably fallible and can be caused by (as Arnold points out) “all manner of subjective facts.” Belief becomes no more sufficient for truth if we add the agreement of some extra believers, because (put abstractly) widely shared beliefs are still held by fallible subjects, and (put concretely) it is easy to point to historical examples of widely shared beliefs that are now widely considered false. Second, realists point out that descriptions of states of affairs have the truth values that they do quite independently of whether or not there are any sentient beings around to think about them. However, even this apparently uncontroversial claim needs an important qualification. If there were no sentient beings around at some point, then, even though realists can assert that there would still be states of affairs, there would be no descriptions of states of affairs at all. In other words, truth is a property of things (descriptions of states of affairs) that can only be actually instantiated by subjects. This qualification suggests an important sense in which truth is not “logically independent” from knowledge (or belief). Something’s being true logically requires that someone formulated it as a possible object of belief (otherwise it – a description of some state of affairs – would not “be” anything).

It is always easier to criticize a definition than to develop one, and in this forum I at least have a word limit to excuse this paltry paragraph. Still, I contend (without really being able to defend the contention) that from a realist perspective a true description of a state of affairs can be simply, though roughly, characterized as the best possible description of that state of affairs. The realist intuition about the objectivity of truth is captured by the (admittedly vague) phrase “best possible.” One subject’s being justified in believing a description of a state of affairs might sufficiently indicate that the description was the best available one for that subject, but it could not sufficiently indicate that it is the best possible one, for all the reasons already discussed. Thus far, then, although my characterization of a realist conception of truth differs from Arnold’s, its implications regarding the insufficiency of justification for truth are consistent with his conclusions.

The water gets a bit murkier, though, when Arnold writes “to think... that the ‘objectivity’ of true beliefs consists in the likelihood of their compelling the assent of all rational persons...is to forfeit a realist conception of truth; for this just is to think that what causes a belief is at the same time what makes it true.” I find this statement vague with respect to two possible interpretations. The statement could be read to deny that the consensus of some finite number of actual subjects about a belief is a sufficient condition of its truth. Read in this way, the statement seems true, but uncontroversial. The statement could also be read to deny that the consensus of all ideally rational subjects



about a belief is a sufficient condition of its truth. Read in this way, the statement seems more controversial and problematic. If a true belief involves assent to the best possible description of a state of affairs, then it seems that all ideally rational subjects (the existence of whom is counterfactual) would hold it. Furthermore, if the best possible description of a state of affairs would not compel the assent of all ideally rational subjects, what else can the truth of true beliefs consist in?

Arnold tells us that the "objectivity of beliefs has to do, rather, with their being intersubjectively available – with their being, in other words, framed in language, and at least possibly expressed and tested for their inferential consequences in the eminently social game of exchanging reasons." So far, so good, but what seems to be missing is an account not only of objectivity but also of truth. It seems to me that the objectivity of beliefs, as Arnold articulates it, only explicates the sense in which they have a truth value and are therefore either true or false. If the meaning of a truth claim does not imply the anticipation that one's belief would pass the test (of its coherence with other beliefs, its value in explaining, predicting, and controlling experience, and its being the epistemically "best possible" on any other measure) among ideally rational subjects, then what distinguishes "being true" from "having a truth value"?

Another way to get at the same question is to point out that Arnold makes two claims regarding the nature of justification and truth that could be read as inconsistent. The first claim, arguably the primary thesis of his constructive comments, is that justification and truth are "logically independent." The second claim is that "to be justified [in holding a belief] just is to be entitled to think that the belief in question really is true." If the first claim only asserts that the justification of a belief for some actual subjects is an insufficient condition for the truth of that belief, then there is no contradiction. A more controversial reading of the first claim would interpret the phrase "logically independent" in the first claim to mean "in no respects logically related." This reading is controversial because the second claim points out (correctly I think) that one of the most important kinds of epistemic justification subjects can have is justification that they believe to be truth-conducive. If this is correct, then we are not far from saying that the criteria of truth simply are the criteria of seemingly truth-conducive justification, so long as it is clear that we mean not only my or our criteria of justification. The justification criteria relevant to truth belong to all ideally rational subjects who could reflect on a claim and would thereby have to attend to the criteria relevant to establishing its truth for themselves.

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Michael Kremer

Posted: 22 Nov 2006 18:32 Post subject: Comments on Arnold's paper

Dan Arnold's paper is, as any attempt to boil down the content of a book into 20 pages must be, highly compressed. I found the paper fascinating in the way that it illustrated how debates familiar in Western philosophy can be rediscovered in a quite different intellectual tradition – here of Indian thought. I find myself wishing for the time to read the book itself. But my role as commentator is of course to be a critic and a provocateur, so I will turn from praise to questioning. Arnold's paper falls into two parts, in the first of which he discusses the epistemological views of three schools of Indian thought, drawing connections and parallels to historical and contemporary debates in Western philosophy, while in the second he draws some general morals from this story about the importance of a distinction between truth and justification for humanistic studies. I have some concerns about the second part of the paper, but as this has already been addressed in an earlier comment in the thread, I will here focus on the first part.

Arnold begins by discussing a foundationalist school of Buddhist thought, associated with Dignaga and Dharmakirti. He argues that this school of thought can be seen as "basically empiricist." He characterizes empiricism as the view that "the world is most basically 'given' to us in causally efficacious 'impingements by the world on the possessor of sensory capacities' ... and that we ought, therefore, to see our knowledge of the world as having its surest 'foundations' in the perceptual experience that can be described in such causal terms." (4) Arnold quotes contemporary philosopher John McDowell in giving this characterization of empiricism. Yet, as I will discuss below, McDowell himself claims to be an empiricist philosopher, even though he would reject the account of experience involved in this passage Arnold provides two related responses to the form of empiricism he associates with this Buddhist school. The first is the "rationalist ... rejoinder" that "in thus taking causally describable, perceptual sensations as foundational, one inevitably ends up basing the objectivity of knowledge on something subjective – specifically the subjectively occurrent representations (what a tree looks like to me, what one looks like to you) that happen to be produced by the world's 'impingements'." The rationalist urges that to "account for the objectivity of our knowledge" we have to turn to "something intersubjectively available ... the discursive sphere of concepts that allow us to give expression to commonly held judgments." (4-5) Similarly, the rationalist complains that "causally precipitated moments of awareness are not themselves beliefs at all" and therefore cannot serve to ground or justify our beliefs about the world. (5-6) Arnold associates this sort of move with Robert Brandom; we can also see here the influence of Donald Davidson's view that only a belief can serve as a reason for a belief. As I understand Arnold's paper, something like this rationalist line of thought is to be attributed to the Brahmanical Mimasakas in their critique of the Buddhist empiricism with which he began.

But in the history of Western philosophy, early modern empiricism and rationalism were followed by Kant's critical philosophy, which attempted to do justice to the insights of both traditions by insisting that knowledge derives from the interdependent interplay of intuition and concept, sensibility and understanding. Is there, in Arnold's story, a corresponding position to be found in Indian thought? It might seem that Arnold's third tradition, the Buddhist "middle way" of Candrakirti, could fit the bill. At several points, Arnold speaks of Candrakirti as advancing "transcendental arguments" for his views, and of course the very idea of transcendental argumentation is associated with Kant. Yet the transcendental argumentation mentioned by Arnold is entirely concerned with the need to maintain a realist, rather than an epistemic notion of truth – the argument Arnold sketches in this connection seems to me to parallel considerations to be found more in Frege than in Kant. There is no suggestion in anything of what Arnold says about Candrakirti of a form of philosophical critique leading to an overcoming of the rationalist/empiricist divide in a synthesis of the insights of both. If anything Candrakirti's transcendental arguments seem to reinforce the Brahmanical rationalism of the Mimasakas.

In terms of contemporary debates in epistemology, Candrakirti's position (and, I think, Arnold's as well) seems most to resemble that of Robert Brandom, whose "inferentialism" Arnold correctly associates with rationalism. What is missing from this story, however, is the critique of Brandom's inferentialism advanced by his colleague John McDowell, and the latter's defense of a form of empiricism that does not seem to be countenanced in Arnold's paper. McDowell explicitly models his empiricism on Kant's view that sensibility and understanding are interdependent cognitive faculties, such that our knowledge of the world cannot be made intelligible without reference to both. McDowell agrees with Brandom in rejecting the thought that "causally efficacious 'impingements by the world on the possessor of sensory capacities'" can serve as the foundation of knowledge. He would also accept Arnold's diagnosis of this form of empiricism as leading to a narrowing of our knowledge to the merely subjective, and leaving us in need of an account of our beliefs as "about something more than just what's appearing in my head ... about something in the world." (6) But for McDowell, a move to the "intersubjectively available ... discursive sphere of concepts," conceived of as independent of experience, leaves us in exactly the same position. Thus for McDowell, contemporary epistemology finds itself oscillating between two unsatisfactory extremes: a foundationalist empiricism based on the "myth of the Given" and a coherentism which threatens to leave our conceptual scheme "frictionlessly spinning in the void." McDowell then tries to develop his own "middle way" in which experience itself is conceived of (1) as an experience of the world, in which real things come into view as they really are, and not merely as they subjectively appear to be and (2) as itself thoroughly conceptual, in that in human experience the same conceptual capacities are called into play as are freely exercised in the formation of beliefs so that (3) experiences can themselves serve as reasons for belief, even though they are brought

about through our interchange with the world.

It is the possibility of such a Kantian-inspired epistemology that I find to be missing from Arnold's fascinating account of three schools of Indian philosophy. So I will end with a question: is there an Indian Kant or McDowell? And if so, who is it?

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