

Comparative Religious Epistemology

Buddha: “Householder, if you will debate on the basis of truth, we might have some conversation about this.”

Householder: “I will debate on the basis of truth, venerable sir, so let us have some conversation about this.”

Upāli Sutta, Majjhima-nikāya 1.376

1. The incompatibility of religious worldviews makes it challenging to find a criterion that will adjudicate between them.
2. All arguments have at least three parts, which are either stated or assumed:
 - 1a. The Proposition: That which is proved by the argument
 - 1b. The Criterion: That which the proof must meet to establish the proposition
 - 1c. The Proof: That which establishes the proposition as true
3. A worldview, either religious or secular, is the set of presuppositions used by an individual or group to evaluate and interpret all that is. Thus a worldview includes propositions and criterions.
4. Also, these presuppositions are used to exclude contrary evidence. An atheist may reject the historical evidence for the Resurrection because such an event would be incompatible with physicalism. Likewise, a Christian may think that the evil present in the world has a sufficient reason, known at least to God.
5. Each worldview offers its own means of establishing its claims and rejecting contrary claims. Examples include: experience in meditation, logic, scriptures, angelic revelation, methodological naturalism, or a burning in the bosom. However, each means is understood in terms of the worldview that informs its use. We must ask: Which scriptures? Which type of meditation? Angel or *Bodhisattva*? The answer to each of these questions will determine what a specific criterion *means* and how it is to be *employed*.
6. Consider the following:
 - 2a. Buddhism is the only epistemologically viable religion
 - 2b. Experience is the only means for verifying a claim
 - 2c. *Paṭiccasamppāda* (dependent co-origination) is evidenced in experience, and *paṭiccasamppāda* is the foundational doctrine upon which all the Buddha’s teaching rests.In the above argument (originally addressed to a Brahmin mystic in a much longer *sutta*) the Buddha is applying a criterion consistent with his system, but in a stricter application than is found in Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.
7. Likewise, the Christian, may argue:
 - 3a. Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.
 - 3b. Human nature is consistent, and one attribute of this consistency is it is highly unlikely that a group of people will die painfully for a known lie.

3c. At least a hundred people, that knew Jesus of Nazareth before his death, testified to seeing Jesus in very good health during the month after his crucifixion.

The Christian worldview claims that humans are created in the image of God. While affirming diversity in race and temperament, the Christian worldview can account for a uniformity of human nature, therefore historical proof is possible.

8. So a worldview not only makes claims, it also presents criterions to establish its claims. Both the claims and the criterions fit together in an actual or alleged unity, and thus it is appropriate to call worldviews “systems.”

9. It would *appear* then that it is impossible to adjudicate rival worldviews, because each is a system unto itself.

10. On the contrary, *it is possible* to adjudicate rival worldviews. One means for doing so is the use of *transcendental arguments*.

11. A transcendental argument argues to the preconditions of human experience. Recall the criterions employed in the two arguments above:

2b. Experience is the only means for verifying a claim

3b. Human nature is consistent, and one attribute of this consistency is that groups of people will not die painfully for what they know is a lie.

One argument first requires (2b) that one’s senses be reliable. The other first requires (3b) that human nature remains consistent, and that the logical faculties that distinguish between truth and lie be substantially reliable in individuals and within populations. These requirements are preconditions to the arguments.

12. A worldview must be able to account for the preconditions of intelligible experience, which at least include: the reliability of logic, the continuity of nature, the ability of the mind to understand the “external” world, the possibility of expressing truth in language, and the authority of moral norms.

13. If a worldview undermines the possibility of intelligible experience, it undermines the possibility of proof, and therefore adjudication.

14. The Buddha’s doctrine of *paṭiccasamppāda* undermines the possibility of logical laws. The Buddha’s epistemology rejects recursive proofs, yet it is circular, requiring faith in causal law to establish empiricism, but resting on empiricism to prove the law of causality. Also, the Buddha’s radical empiricism makes it impossible to establish the law of causality (see Hume and Russell).

15. When confronted with these kinds of problems, the Buddha appeals to pragmatism—“if you don’t want to end your suffering then you need not listen to me.” But he is assuming that suffering is bad, and that his method can actually end it. Both claims he cannot prove.

16. I maintain that the Christian worldview can account for the reliability of logical laws, both the continuity of nature and the ability of the mind to understand the external world (and thus the preconditions of science), the possibility of truth in language, and the authority of moral norms. Thus by transcendental argument the Christian worldview accounts for the preconditions of adjudication.