

Westerhoff, Jan. *The Non-Existence of the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 329.

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Jan Westerhoff is an eminent scholar of Buddhism. Previously, Westerhoff has published seminal works explicating Buddhist traditions from an analytic perspective. What makes *The Non-Existence of the Real World* rather interesting is that, outside of the preface, Westerhoff does not appeal to Buddhist figures, or directly appeal to Buddhist thought. In fact, if you miss the preface and you are unfamiliar with Buddhism, you might even think the book has nothing to do with Buddhism. Nonetheless, Westerhoff states in the preface that his aim in this work is to spell out how analytic philosophy and cognitive science can be used to defend essential elements of Madhyamaka doctrine. The core elements include a denial of the self and an endorsement that reality, as we normally understand it at least, is empty of own being.

The Non-Existence of the Real World is broken up into four large chapters. Chapter One centers on external world skepticism. Westerhoff introduces the Demon Deception Hypothesis in an attempt to destabilize our intuitions about whether we know that the external world exists. There are primarily two models in which Westerhoff engages. The first model is a direct realist model which says we encounter the world and objects within it in an immediate way. That is, our minds directly link up to the objects of the world without any mediation of other processes. The second model discussed is a representational model where we encounter real objects of the world, but in a way that is mediated or indirect. The analogy Westerhoff gives is that there is the world we experience, but a veil separates us from the world as it is. Westerhoff develops various objections to both models. With respect to direct realism, he argues that we do not actually observe objects as they are in a way that is simultaneous to our perception of them. For example, he discusses how the speed of light plays a role in our perception. Due to the time it takes for the light to reach us, we can observe stars on earth as if the stars are still alive, but by the time the light reaches us, the stars could already be dead (p. 23). In this case, the object of our perception is distinct from the cause of our perception. The same could be said about our perception of objects more generally. What we perceive is the object as it was, not as it is right now, even if there is only a millisecond difference between the two.

With respect to objecting to representationalism, Westerhoff argues that the purpose of our human capacities is to pass on our genes, not to possess true beliefs (p. 35). He compares our perception of the world to a computer's interface where the graphics on the monitor do not represent accurately what is going on with the

computer itself (pp. 35-36). What appears on the monitor helps us utilize programing, but it is actually a distortion of what is really going on inside a computer. If there is a veil separating us from the objects we experience, why think we have true beliefs about the objects we experience? Readers familiar with Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism will already be acquainted with this line of reasoning.

Westerhoff instead endorses what he calls an irrealist epistemology. Roughly put, he thinks, for simplicity reasons, we should reject the existence of an external world, that is a world behind the veil (p. 57). Westerhoff rejects a realist metaphysic more broadly that draws a distinction between what is perceived and the independence of the objects that are represented in our perception (p. 69).

Perhaps the reader concedes that Westerhoff has given good reasons to embrace skepticism about the external world, but in a Cartesian fashion, one tries to grasp certainty by appealing their so-called indubitable beliefs about their own mental state. If Chapter One can be summarized as arguments for embracing skepticism about the external world, Chapter Two can be summarized as arguments for skepticism about our internal world (i.e., mind). Is there really a person or self that is currently reading this review? What is a self supposed to be? Westerhoff takes it that a self is supposed to be the following: substantial, unified, temporally extended, an agent, and something subject to prudential concern (pp. 103-141). Yet, Westerhoff appeals to scientific and philosophical reasons for why we should be skeptical of such a self.

For starters, Westerhoff argues that our conscious experience is not a steady stream of experience (perhaps only uninterrupted by sleep or being in a coma). Our eyes for example, are moving back and forth at high speeds. Our visual system however, prevents the unsteady appearance of motion and blurs and opts for a more clear image of our surroundings by excluding certain visual data. Our visual systems are rather gappy. As Westerhoff puts it, 'We do not receive a continuous stream of images, but a cut-up succession of visual data frequently interrupted by periods of non-perception (or visual unconsciousness). The whole thing still appears continuous to us, but this appearance is deceptive.' (p. 87). Westerhoff argues that our visual systems act more like a film camera which can create the appearance of continues motion (p. 88). And, according to Westerhoff, this gappy feature of visual perception can be said to plague perceptual faculties more broadly (p. 92). So, it appears that our conscious experience is not continuous.

Of course, one might object that there still could exist a perceiver or subject of the mind who is still continually conscious, even when our cognitive faculties are not obtaining live and continuous data. But Westerhoff sees little reason why we should embrace this dualistic thinking as he states, 'Consciousness is nothing over and above the processing of various sensory inputs...' (p. 93). If consciousness is gappy, then we aren't talking about the self as that which exists through time, nor as an entity that is unified as one continuous stream (p. 127). Westerhoff also appeals to Libet's famous free will experiment (among other reasons) to show that it is not the self that is actually causing our bodies to move (p. 132). The self is an illusion of sorts.

Chapters Three and Four argue against metaphysical foundationalism and metalevel metaphysical foundationalism. Foundationalism is the view that there is that which is fundamental to members of a chain, where what is fundamental can be said to ground the members of the chain. For example, we might ask what explains

the existence of human beings. Immediate answers will invoke evolution and natural selection. We can continue to appeal to more fundamental items, which would invoke our planet or more broadly the conditions needed for life to emerge in our universe. The theist, of course, thinks that ultimately the grounding of all things is God. This can be contrasted with coherentist and infinitist metaphysical views where grounding is circular or goes on *ad infinitum*. One argument used to reject foundationalism is Westerhoff's argument from intrinsic properties. Westerhoff argues that at the foundational level, whatever exists would need to bear its properties intrinsically (p. 195). But Westerhoff argues that things can't bear their properties in this way. A lonely state for properties is impossible. So, there must not be properties at the fundamental level of reality.

Chapter Four then takes antifoundationalism to another level. Not only is there no foundation for the grounding of every day objects, the fact that there is no grounding for every day objects is also not a foundational truth. Rather, Westerhoff attempts to make plausible a coherentist theory of truth as it pertains to the truths about the relevant grounding truths (p. 257). It's antifoundationalism, ironically, all the way down.

Westerhoff's arguments are woven together in an innovative way. This volume showcases Westerhoff's brilliance as a thinker and as a systematizer of Buddhist and eliminativist thought. For these reasons, the volume deserves to be on the bookshelf of all those interested in the plausibility of Buddhist philosophy. With this said however, I do think the volume could have taken more seriously, a perspective that emphasizes the possibility of the transcendent. A theist could endorse various arguments from the book without reaching the same conclusion Westerhoff does.

For example, the philosophically inclined theist could agree that on naturalism, we have no reason to think that our beliefs are true, but rather, we should think that our cognitive faculties and the beliefs they produce are merely there to help us survive and reproduce. Nonetheless, the philosophically inclined theist will think that God guides the process of evolution in such a way where human cognitive faculties are reliable (which in a way, Westerhoff very briefly acknowledges on p. 46). Representationalism can be saved.

With respect to the existence of the self, while Westerhoff briefly acknowledges a transcendent or mystical view of the self, the perspective is quickly dismissed. Yet, the person, or self, might just be mysterious and not explicable. In fact, this was plausibly the position of the Pudgalavāda tradition. And yet, there could be reasons to postulate the existence of the person or the self, perhaps to make sense of karma or perhaps to make sense of divine reward and punishment.

Even when it comes to Westerhoff's argument against foundationalism from intrinsic properties, a Classical Theist of a certain stripe could concede to Westerhoff that at the foundational level, there can't be intrinsic properties. Nonetheless, Classical Theists are foundationalists who believe that God is beyond existence and lacks properties altogether. For these types of theists, God is no-thing (i.e., propertyless), and yet, grounds the existence of all things. Properties at the fundamental level need not apply. This view even appears to have much in common with Shinran's Pureland Buddhism and Dölpopa's Tibetan Shentong tradition.

Of course, Westerhoff can't be faulted for not dealing with every possible perspective. His book as it stands is over 300 pages. Westerhoff likely engaged the responses he felt were most plausible and more likely to be endorsed by his future interlocutors. Nonetheless, what I have attempted to demonstrate is that those who see room for the transcendent, might not come to the same conclusions Westerhoff does, even if they concede many of the arguments given.

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