Reviews

Actual Minds, Possible Worlds. By JEROME BRUNER. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986. 192 pages. $15.00.

Jerome Bruner, professor of psychology at New York University, has written prolifically enough to develop a reputation for producing shocking and thought provoking theses. This book is no exception. Most reviewers, mainly psychologists and philosophers, have favorably and adequately reviewed this work from the vantage point of their own disciplines. Yet to my knowledge, no one has examined the book for its relevance and its contribution to a better understanding of ideologies of religion and ideologies of science.

Bruner's thesis is that no ultimate reality exists, only perceptions of reality. The author supports his thesis by unravelling procedures whereby humans develop multiple perceptions of reality in the areas of the literary, the artistic, the historical, the psychological, and the philosophical.

In the title, "Actual Minds" are minds in the process of creating perceptions of reality, a proposition which is hardly shocking. However, Bruner offers his book as fact and not theory. His apparent arrogance is diminished as one realizes that he is writing in the nominalist tradition of Peter Abelard. Abelard (1079-1142 A. D.), in *Sic et Non*, abandoned ideology and manifested faith in the ability of his students to make sense of what he perceived as two distinct perceptions of reality, that is, Aristotelian science *versus* theology. Unlike Thomas Aquinas, who came after him and who wrote the most comprehensive *summa theologica* of all, Abelard left the two arguments intact and sought to establish no synthesis of the two perspectives. Similarly, Bruner repossesses this relativistic stance and extrapolates it into a belief in multiple perceptions of reality.

Both the works of Abelard and those of Bruner create a relativistic posture which in some cases may have debilitating effects for some people, but Bruner goes beyond Abelard to encourage the upcoming generation to focus not on solutions of old paradoxes but on the creation of new worlds.

The creation of new worlds which he calls for should be subjected to his suggested criterion, "right" instead of "true." Bruner describes how humans create perceptions of reality beginning with (and using it as an example) the way in which we develop different perceptions of a literary piece, such as a story or play. He determines that there are "two modes of thought" (p. 11), deduction and induction. The former is used by psychologists who start with a theory or "hypothesis" then "swoop on this text" to find the correct answer. The latter is employed by playwrights, poets, and so on "who start with a story (or a line) which is "their morsel of reality" (p. 10). The author says much about the "right" explanation instead of the "true" explanation. Relying upon the works of Richard Rorty, Bruner thinks we too much emphasize "how to know truth" and not enough "how we come to endow experience with meaning" (p. 12). He maintains that the right explanation is the one which is appropriate for an

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individual in time and place and has "a base in the psychological process people use in negotiating their transactions with the world" (p. 92).

As a constructionist, Bruner believes that we create and do not discover our perceptions of reality. Jean Piaget has a different slant on this, but Bruner takes his lead more from Carl G. Jung and Immanuel Kant (especially Kant) than he does from Piaget. According to Bruner, "What exists is a product of what is thought," an idea which can be traced to Kant (p. 96). Kant's world "out there" is made up of mental products (p. 96) and with this much Bruner concurs, but where Kant stated that we all have "a priori knowledge" (p. 96), that is, before any reasoning, Bruner relies instead very heavily on Nelson Goodman (pp. 96-97), who answered Kant with an emphatic no. "Goodman refuses to assign any privileged status . . . to any particular world that mind may create" (p. 96). According to Bruner, Goodman makes a distinction between worlds and versions. Bruner concludes that "versions exist independent of a world they are versions of. Right versions make worlds" (p. 99) so one could have true versions of the world that conflict (Copernicus *versus* Ptolemy).

Bruner's thesis is not completely relativistic; there are two major points, which may be thought of as criteria upon which the right explanation depends, that is "the psychological process" (mentioned above) and "culture." Bruner uses the phrase *possible castles* to signify "creations produced by different uses of the mind" (p. 44). John Milton created a castle in *Paradise Lost*; Isaac Newton created a castle in *Principia*. Neither castle is "true," but each is created within an objective world, the world of culture (here Bruner relies on Karl Popper, a philosopher who termed such a world "World Three"). Bruner believes this objective world to be dynamic (although he does not use this term); somehow it must experience constant change because he clearly believes that there is no objective world "against which one can compare a possible world in order to establish some form of correspondence between it and the real world" (p. 46). He seems to say that this dynamic, objective world of culture is a product of negotiations between human actors (p. 149).

How does one create a world? Bruner feels that this is done through negotiation. On the face of it Bruner is right in insisting that there is no reality, only perceptions of reality, for everyone knows that there are many perceptions of reality. Anyone who has served on a jury knows that this is true and that the verdict which occurs following a trial is not really what happened, not an independent reality, only another perception of what happened. However, Bruner's claims go far beyond common sense understanding. He claims "that meaning and reality are created and not discovered" (p. 149). If he had stopped here this would have been nothing more than a doctrine of conceptualism, wherein Platonic ideas are thought of as only concepts of the mind. Yet he goes on—and to my mind this is the saving factor about his book—to say that new meanings are created through negotiations. "Negotiation is the art," according to the author, "of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (p. 149).

Many writers today contend that children do not have the capacity for negotiation or "transaction" (p. 60) with others, but Bruner clearly thinks they do. He states that the mechanism for "disambiguation" is there from the beginning; that is, that "the infant seeks to negotiate sense in his exchanges with others" (p. 64).

In addition to containing brilliant analyses of perspectives of reality in many areas of behavior, Bruner does not rule out the possibility of the existence of God, a universal force, which knows, or is, the supremundane reality behind

our perceptions. Similar to René Descartes, however, he indicates that we do not know anything about such a possibility except that it is one perception of reality. There are many such perceptions and none is *true*. Bruner maintains, however, that some versions of the truth may be *right* for their time and place. In this vein his work may also be considered as a book of prophesy, a fact that has been overlooked by most of the reviewers of his book. As long as we are engaged in a "cultural revolution"—and Bruner definitely thinks we are—no broad overriding theory of human behavior containing predictions of future concepts is likely to emerge. Our age is, in this respect, a transitional one but will in time produce a new concern "to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible" (p. 149). In short, he forsees a time when the thesis of his book will be accepted as fact, and he believes that when this happens young people will be encouraged to create new worlds.

Bruner is one of the most articulate modern writers in the nominalist tradition, but his contributions go far beyond those made by nominalists and conceptualists in history. Ever since the days of Abelard, humanistic and scientific writers have celebrated the adaptation of nominalist and conceptualist dicta to religion and to institutions of religion, affirming their non-existence in any real sense except as names for and concepts of materialistic reality. Bruner, stretching as far as the mind will stretch, questions all reality. Thus he puts science and religion on equal footing, because science as well as religion, he maintains, is created by humans. If medieval scholastics could question the reality of ideologies of religion, surely scientists of the twentieth century—who are far more accustomed to skepticism—can and should question the reality of institutions of science.

This book is recommended for the adult reader who is interested in science and/or religion. It should be required reading in all university departments of religion and of science, physical and social, and for seminaries which are seriously endeavoring to free theological students from ideological restraints.

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Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? By GARY HABERMAS and ANTONY FLEW. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987. xvi + 190 pages. $14.95.

Did Jesus in fact rise from the dead on Easter? Antony Flew says "no." This is the neo-Humean Antony Flew so widely known thirty years ago for his invocation of John Wisdom's parable of the invisible gardner to announce the death of the God-hypothesis by a thousand qualifications. The counter position is defended by Gary Habermas who says, "yes," Jesus rose. Habermas is a professor of apologetics at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, formerly Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist College. This book, edited by Terry Miethe, records a face-to-face debate which took place in 1985 and adds additional essays by Wolfhart Pannenberg, Charles Hartshorne, and James I. Packer.

Flew's argument is that the resurrection must be a miracle by definition, that is, it must consist in a violation of the laws of nature. If it is not miraculous, then

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it is uninteresting. However, miracles are impossible. Therefore, this potentially interesting miracle did not happen (pp. 4-8; 34-35).

Habermas counters that Flew's argument, similar to David Hume's before him, begs the question. It argues in a circle. It assumes that the natural order is inviolate; so, when it confronts evidence to the contrary, it dismisses such evidence in order to preserve its naturalistic prejudice (pp. 16-17). If one would look at the historical evidence, insists Habermas, then one would have to grant that the most probable explanation is that Jesus actually did rise from the dead.

What counts as historical evidence for Habermas? He offers ten items. The most important is the disciples' eyewitness experience, which the disciples believed to be the literal appearance of the risen Jesus, and which was so convincing that these followers of Jesus proclaimed it and were willing to suffer for it. The historical fact is that discouraged disciples were transformed into bold witnesses by this experience. On this point Habermas along with Bultmann and most scholars agree: Our point of departure is the faith of the disciples and the report of their experience (pp. 22-23).

Flew is not convinced although he is willing to enter into the historical debate proper. He says we do not know enough to say for certain what happened in Jerusalem on the first Easter (p. 70). Flew says historical evidence regarding reports of miracles is admissable, but he adds a proviso: The evidence must be stronger than that for reports of nonmiraculous events (pp. 6; 37). In the case of Jesus' purported resurrection from the dead, the evidence is too weak because the reports we have are too far away from the event itself. Flew dates the earliest report, I Corinthians 15, as written somewhere in the A. D. 40s (this is generous because most scholars put it in the mid-50s), followed by the synoptic Gospels well into the 50s or later. To have confidence in the reliability of an ancient document, writes Flew, it must be contemporary to the event reported. The time lag of ten to twenty years is much too long. In addition, what documents we have are secondhand and inconsistent (pp. 11-12; 33; 67). Habermas counters that Paul's report of his Damascus road experience is firsthand and that the citing of witnesses in I Corinthians 15 is quite close to the event itself (pp. 66; 83; 88; 115). So it goes.

Pannenberg, as one might expect, tends to support the Habermas position. He argues here, as he did two decades ago in *Jesus—God and Man*, that the weight of the evidence favoring the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is found in the convergence of the empty tomb traditions with the appearance traditions (pp. 130-31). The early church could not have preached the Gospel of an Easter Jesus in Jerusalem if the tomb was not empty; yet, what we know about the nature of the risen Jesus must be discerned from the way he appeared to those who saw him. Similarly, Packer emphasizes "the sheer impossibility of accounting for the triumphant emergence of Christianity in Jerusalem" without an empty tomb (p. 149).

Hartshorne, also as one might expect, bypasses the question of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Hartshorne's belief in God is metaphysical and, therefore, is "not based on any historical occurences" (p. 137). He rejects belief in human survival beyond death. Our wanting to be immortal comes from our desire to rival God, and this debases theistic belief. God and God alone is immortal. Hence, Hartshorne concludes, "my metaphysical bias is against resurrections" (p. 142).

This book is valuable in two respects. First, it deals with the historical question. In the wake of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher, theologians in our era have tended to so subjectivize the Christian faith that

questions of historical veracity have been nearly abandoned. Existential meaning has been substituted for cosmic truth. Yet, at root the Christian faith is indelibly historical. It is based upon a particular event, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If such an event did not in fact occur in roughly the way that it is remembered by the community of faith, then that faith—as Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:17-19—is in vain. This is not to say that believing Christians need to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus' resurrection actually happened just the way we think it happened; but it does mean that it makes sense to confront the first Easter as a historical question. *That* this book does.

Secondly, the book has value because it provides us with a very readable summary of two distinct points of view: secular naturalism and evangelical theology. The opening affirmative statements are succinct and clear. Some of the transcriptions of the dialogue between Flew and Habermas are repetitious and a bit tedious. The concluding three essays are brief and helpful. In short, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* will make a fine classroom textbook.

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