

- Andrew Moore & Micheal Scott (Eds.), *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007, 172 p.

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This book contains eight separate essays from distinguished theologians and philosophers and a general introduction into the realism/antirealism debate in the philosophy of religion. The debate revolves around three key issues: the question of God's independence from human constructions, the nature of religious truth, and our access to religious truth. On the one hand, religious realists normally maintain that religious claims represent truths which are independent of the human mind and to which we have some means of epistemic access. They also often hold that at least some religious claims are actually true. On the other hand, religious antirealists present various contrary claims such as the assertions that religious claims are primarily expressive rather than truly representational; that religious truths are inaccessible to us; that religious truth is a matter of the satisfaction of internal standards of religious language (or 'language games'); that religious claims are systematically false. As the editors note in the preface, this debate has seen little sustained exploration compared to its counterpart in ethics and the philosophy of science, and that there is also yet no general consensus on how to approach the problem. This book is by no means an attempt to bring about such a consensus, but presents a firm basis upon which the debate can be advanced.

The essays fall into two categories: Gordon Kaufman, Peter Lipton and Simon Blackburn provide the opening chapters and the context for the collection, while Alexander Bird, John Hare, Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis, Merold Westphal, and John Webster explore topics that are central to the debate. A variety of different theoretical positions are expressed by the contributors, and each touches upon a different area. In the introduction, the editors list four critical problems raised in the collection that merit particular attention: (1) The appropriate paradigm(s) for pursuing the realism debate; (2) The possible lessons from comparable debates in science and ethics; (3) The ways in which religious realism is distinct from other kinds of realism; and (4) The relationship between philosophy and theology. This is then followed by a discussion of the approaches to and arguments of the debate, concentrating on the cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions in philosophy and their relative strengths when applied to religious issues. Next, there is an examination of each of the following essays, marking out the main approaches of each contribution and the contrasting theses they express.

The first essay is written by G. D. Kaufman, who sets out to explore the interconnections and interdependence of 'Mystery, God, and Constructivism'. Kaufman avoids analysis of the general problem of religion and realism, and instead provides a kind of case study of the problem as it appears in connection with some of the central claims of Christian

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faith concerning the 'ultimate reality'. The first section of this essay articulates the natural reasons for awe and mystery that we as human beings experience when thinking about the universe and our place within it. This is then followed by an examination of the concept of God as an answer to that natural wonder, as well as the epistemic problems that we seem to face when seeking knowledge of Him. Kaufman identifies God primarily as an imaginative construction or symbol whose contents or meaning we are rather unable to verify. The findings of this examination are then applied to theology, which is thus identified as an imaginative and socio-cultural activity. Here Kaufman notes the changing notions humans have had of God's nature, where a kind of reality-testing based on cultural and scientific developments can lead to new activity and shifts in theology. The next sections look at how such activity could be carried out and questions whether such activity is able to credibly maintain the traditional idea of God. Having identified certain aspects of our received concept of God to be difficult to maintain, Kaufman presents the central claim of his essay, and offers two substitute ideas (namely, *serendipitous creativity* and *directional movements*) in order to explain, or rather, correspond with modern and postmodern scientific and historical findings.

In the second essay, Peter Lipton focuses on the cognitive tension between science and religion, giving special attention to the contradictions between some of the claims of current science and religious texts. Lipton takes note of two different approaches in the philosophy of science that may help to manage the tension, namely, *adjusting content* and *adjusting attitude* to facts. From these he chooses the second strategy in order to deal with the claims of religious texts. This leads to a consideration of Kuhn's doctrine of multiple worlds and then the Immersion Solution as inspired by constructive empiricism from the philosophy of science. Throughout these discussions Lipton is concerned with three main things, maintaining a realist position about science, an antirealist position about religion, while preserving the literal content of religious and scientific claims. This is done, in part, to maintain the normative, that is, ethical contents of religion despite the notion that these are not observable or scientifically testable. Lipton's ultimate claim in the essay is a resolution of the tension between science and religion inspired by empirical constructivism that entails substituting faith in supernatural entities and events with an acceptance of normative values that are to be found in religious texts.

The fourth chapter contains Simon Blackburn's contribution, which concerns the ontology and ontological nature of religious language. He begins with an account of approaches to ontology in theology and philosophy, looking more specifically at phenomenology and then, with more positive comment, the work of W. V. Quine, and David Lewis's credo argument. He goes on to argue that the credo argument provides a good way to think about ontology in general, because it leads to a 'deflation' of truth claims that benefits from being immune to postmodernist scepticism this deflation makes truth not a matter of metaphysics, but rather locating, collecting, and generalizing the claims of a theory. In the next two sections Blackburn presents an example of deflationism in action, specifically, by taking David Lewis's realism about possible worlds as a test case. He then considers instances of discourse that may or may not

be realist at all and argues that there is a space for real philosophical debate, as long as we take a Wittgensteinian defence of philosophical theory, where it is the *activities* associated with a use of language, rather than ontological claims, that are regarded as most important. Blackburn, finally, goes on to identify religious language as something that is symbolic or expressive, which serves to orientate us towards each other, ourselves, and our place in this world. But he is quick to point out that such a theory of religious language, lacking ontological claims, is unlikely to be accepted by religious believers because ontology is crucial to providing the grounds for explanation, justification, and also power to religious language that would not be possible without the ontological backing that religious believers subscribe.

In the fifth chapter, Alexander Bird presents a comparative study of realism in science and theology with the aim of illuminating the debate. This essay may be divided into two main parts: an examination of realist and antirealist positions in science, and then the same again for theology. Thus, Bird begins by outlining the various aspects of metaphysical realism in science, arguing for the applicability of truth values to theoretical assertions. In the next section, he examines epistemological scientific realism, analyzing the intimate relationship between metaphysical antirealism and scepticism, before finally considering by comparison the scientific realist position. The fourth part of the essay briefly presents the conflict between realist and anti-realist claims about the aims of science. In the fifth section, Bird begins his examination of realism in relation to theology, identifying parallels that are to be found first in metaphysical realism and then in epistemology before finally considering the aims of theology in section seven. Bird concludes his essay by remarking upon the many obstacles metaphysical and epistemological antirealism faces both in science and theology while at the same time drawing a clear distinction between the two. It seems Bird finds that the safest position for the theologian is antirealism, since as a metaphysical realist one is threatened by epistemological antirealism; yet as an epistemological antirealist one does not face the strong objections their counterparts do in science.

In his contribution, Jon Hare offers a discussion of 'prescriptive realism' and how it may be related to theism. Prescriptive realism is a position Hare develops in a previous work by combining the merits of several major theories in the debate between realism and expressivism that have arisen over the last century. This paper is divided into two parts. The first gives an account of prescriptive realism, where Hare explains in what sense the theory is expressivist (discussing especially the notions of 'expression' and 'acceptance') and in what sense it is realist (discussing especially the notion of 'objective truth' and the thought experiment of moral twin-earth). The second part of the paper provides an account of a theist version of prescriptive realism, which clarifies how this position can explain the different relations to God of the two main families of value terms, that is, the one that includes 'good' and 'bad', and the other 'right' and 'wrong'. Each of the two parts of the paper are intended to be more or less independent from each other, so that it is possible (for a non-theist, for example) to accept

the first and reject the second. However, the second is intended to present a coherent model for how a particular normative theory might be endorsed.

In the seventh chapter, Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis discuss what they identify as ‘the Wittgensteinian school of philosophy of religion’. They begin by introducing criticisms levelled at the school and those such as Crispin Wright, whose theoretical stance is understood to be very close to the school itself. This examination is conducted in light of Paul Grice’s idea of ‘conversational maxims’ that are held to be essential to the ‘conversational competence’ of a speaker and the idea of ‘knowing’, as opposed to mere believing. Thus, Grice’s theory is presented as an alternative means to describe, explain, and understand religious language. The next section focuses on the work of an eminent member of the Wittgensteinian school, D. Z. Phillips. Here the authors examine two important and related aspects of Phillips’ perspective on religious language. First, they begin by discussing Phillips’s critique of the traditional philosophical understanding of God as a ‘metaphysically real’ or ‘independently existing’ being. Then they continue by considering his reasons for rejecting the view that religious language is in some important respects ‘fact-stating’. In the final section of their paper, Oppy and Trakakis consider Phillips’ emphasis on the distinctiveness of religious language, contrasting his thought to that of thinkers such as Richard Swinburne and Michael Martin. Here, they assert that Phillips’s position is unable to provide a satisfactory account of religious language, providing a list of four ‘disanalogies’ between his view and the views of religious believers. Their main conclusion is that the Gricean theory of conversation offers several advantages to Phillips’ approach.

Merold Westphal’s paper attempts to set forth a form of Kantian anti-realism that he claims provides sensible grounds for theistic belief. He begins by comparing Kant’s antirealism to realist views in an attempt to avoid confusion between the two and defend the former. In this analysis Westphal identifies the combined existence of two theses, namely metaphysical realism and epistemic anti-realism, as essential to the Kantian anti-realism he attempts to lay forth. Before going on to defend this position in response to concerns raised by Alvin Plantinga, Westphal first deems it appropriate to distinguish his theory from three other anti-realist views, namely, ‘theistic anti-realism’, ‘creative anti-realism’, and finally, ‘Rortian anti-realism’. In the next section, he turns to the question Plantinga asks about Kantian anti-realists: ‘What leads its protagonists to adopt it?’ Here Westphal offers three types of reasons under separate headings for being a Kantian theological anti-realist. The first is titled ‘The Metaphysics of Finitude’ where Westphal explains that ‘the human mind is finite and suited to grasp finite realities. But God is infinite and will always exceed our grasp’. In the second of section of this survey, Westphal identifies a ‘Hermeneutics of Finitude’ in Kant’s distinction between divine and human knowing, where there is a significant contrast between time and eternity. Finally, a ‘Hermeneutics of Suspicion’ is used to claim that our thinking and talking about God do not correspond to God’s reality because they are distorted by the noetic effects of sin upon the human mind. These three points form the basis for adopting what Westphal views as a plausible theistic theory.

The final contribution is provided by John Webster, who aims to ease tensions between philosophers and theologians 'by careful, courteous and self-critical self-explanation' of God's aseity. The term 'aseity', we should note, refers to the existence of a being that is derived from itself, having no other source. In the first section, Webster writes how the attributes of God, as conceived in the Holy Trinity, primarily act not to establish conditions for conceivability but rather for believers to have rational dealings with God. Here he identifies two different concepts of aseity, one that explicates the self-expressive being of God, and one that emerges out of a consideration of the nature of contingent reality. This second conception Webster calls a 'deformation' which, since modern times, has often been read back into patristic and mediaeval texts by such writers as Clark, Schleiermacher, and Tillich. The next section discusses ways that theology can move beyond this stripped-down conception of aseity via granting conceptual priority to the materially rich notion of God in Trinitarian teaching. Webster then closes his account with some comments on two closely associated concepts previously used to state God's self-existence, namely, God as *causa sui*, and God as *ens necessarium*, both of which he deems inadequate to account for the material dimension of God's life. He therefore finally attempts to complete the material description of God's aseity by expanding upon the self-expressive being of God through the use of Christian exegesis taken from Augustine and Calvin. Webster's ultimate message is that both theological and philosophical inquiry into the Christian faith should be led by the material content of the church's confession of faith.

The main strength of this book is that it presents in an intellectually provocative and enlivened fashion a fresh approach to an area as yet neglected in the philosophy of religion. This religion realism debate has traditionally been dominated by arguments for the existence of God and or coherence claims regarding God's existence, but by giving emphasis to issues about meaning and the accessibility of religious claims, this book promotes exploration of areas that are in some ways even more fundamental and that have received sustained and groundbreaking treatment in other areas of philosophy. It contains the work of realist and antirealist philosophers and theologians from several different theoretical backgrounds and in this way the reader is presented with an array of different proposals regarding the truth status of religion and science that can often be fruitfully compared. The diversity is not only evident in the approaches, but also the aims of the writers in this single area. This means that many of the contributions can be engaged with on a different basis. The editors could have provided a more illuminative examination of the essays in their introduction, some of which receive little more than a few words, but in so far as giving the background and framework of the debate, it will prove extremely useful to new students. While the essays of all the contributors focus mostly on the details of Christianity, the nature of their observations are of recognizable significance to other religions and would occupy any scholar or student working in the field. In sum, this book provides a representative collection of philosophical and theological perspectives that introduces new comers into a key and relatively unexplored area paving the way for new research.