

## Book reviews

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Andrew Moore and Michael Scott (eds) *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Pp. 163. £55.00 (Hbk), £16.99 (Pbk). ISBN 9780754652328

*Realism and Religion* brings together eight original essays by a distinguished, international group of contributors. The volume addresses the long-standing philosophical debate between realism and anti-realism, with a view to its relevance for our understanding of the character of religious belief and commitment. In their introduction, Andrew Moore and Michael Scott observe that recent developments in this debate, particularly in ethics and the philosophy of science, have not yet been assimilated by philosophers of religion. In response to this situation, *Realism and Religion* aims to stimulate discussion of the realism/anti-realism debate within the philosophy of religion.

Moore and Scott point out that, as it plays out within the philosophy of religion, the realism/anti-realism debate has two dimensions which it is well to keep apart. One dimension focuses on arguments about the existence of God, while the other is concerned with issues about the meaning and knowability of religious claims. The clarity with which this distinction is made at the outset of the volume is encouraging. Too often discussion of realism versus anti-realism in philosophy of religion runs aground because it blurs the distinction between the ontological and epistemological dimensions. One cause of this is the common assumption that epistemic (or semantic) anti-realism entails ontological (or metaphysical) anti-realism.

*Realism and Religion* is explicitly concerned with the epistemic dimension of the debate. This focus, which brackets out questions concerning the existence of God, is welcome in a field traditionally dominated by discussion of God's ontological status. After reading the essays in the volume, however, one may be left with the impression that much remains to be done within philosophy of religion to clarify the distinction between these two dimensions of the debate. Many of the essays explicitly or implicitly illustrate the difficulties involved in maintaining the distinction. For example, Simon Blackburn suggests in his contribution that in this field the distinction may even be unhelpful because religious

people themselves take for granted the ontological commitments of the language they use.

An underlying difficulty in keeping the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the debate separate is that non-realism in the religious domain is often motivated by a prior commitment to the view that God does not, or cannot, exist in a realist sense. Adopting some form of non-realism about religious claims is often the fallout position after having despaired of successfully arguing for the existence of God, or of making sense of religious claims, within a realist framework. Indeed, two essays in the volume which advance non-realist positions, Gordon Kaufman's and Peter Lipton's, are explicitly motivated by the conviction that traditional realist forms of religious belief are a dead end.

Lipton's essay, 'Science and religion: the immersion solution', is the most adventurous contribution to the volume. The problem Lipton seeks to solve is this: how can we accommodate the tensions between the claims of science and religion without giving up either? Understandably, Lipton finds it unconscionable to withhold belief with respect to the content of scientific claims, yet he is reluctant to give up his commitment to religious belief, even given the apparent conflict between it and science. He looks to philosophy of science for a way of thinking about this problem which might allow us to preserve the content of scientific claims, while resolving the incompatibility with religious claims by altering our attitude to them.

Lipton first explores a possible Kuhnian solution to the problem. Perhaps the claims of science and those of religion simply describe different worlds? If that is the case, they are not about the same thing, so there is no real conflict between them. He rejects this approach on the grounds that religious texts are not sufficiently similar to scientific theories for us to regard as credible the view that each describe 'worlds' in Kuhn's sense. Claiming that the worlds described by religious texts 'are significantly closer to imagined worlds than to the worlds of science' (41), Lipton recommends that we adopt what can be described as a fictionalist attitude toward religious claims. Essentially, Lipton hopes to dissolve the tension between the claims of science and those of religion by being a realist about the former and a non-realist about the latter, while still interpreting both in a literalist fashion.

Lipton appeals to Bas van Fraassen's theory of constructive empiricism for a model of how we might be able to preserve the literal content of the claims of both science and religion, while circumventing the problem of conflict between them. He explores what it would look like to import into the religious domain the three key components of constructive empiricism: literal interpretation, immersion, and acceptance. Regarding literalism, scientific theories and religious texts are both to be given a straightforward interpretation: they are to be taken as about the entities that they appear to be about. Regarding immersion, just as a scientist immerses herself in the 'world' of the scientific theory and works within

that world, so a religious person immerses himself in the 'world' of the religious text. The person who is 'immersed' in a scientific theory acts and thinks *as if* that theory were true, and the person 'immersed' in a religious text practises religion *as if* the claims made by the text were true.

This characterization of immersion brings into question the difference between acting as if a theory were true and believing it to be true. Lipton observes that constructive empiricism is a theory crafted to exclude the need to talk about truth, at least at the theoretical level. This is emphasized in 'acceptance', the third component of constructive empiricism. To accept a scientific theory, in van Fraassen's sense, is to believe that it is empirically adequate. One can accept a theory while being agnostic about its truth, and nevertheless believe that what it says about empirically observable entities is true.

Applying van Fraassen's notion of acceptance to the religious domain we would, Lipton claims, be 'enjoined not to believe that the Bible is true, but only that what it says about observable states of affairs is true' (43). Lipton recognizes a potential problem with this idea, which would seem to commit a religious person to believing the truth of precisely those empirical claims made by the Bible which are most likely to conflict with scientific claims (claims about miracles, for example). This exposes a further problem caused by applying constructive empiricism to the religious domain: the religious person is saddled with one of the most troubling by-products of text-based religions, namely, biblical literalism.

Lipton tries to overcome such difficulties by suggesting a modified account of 'acceptance', one which does not leave the religious person burdened by the empirical claims made by the Bible but only by its normative claims. He quickly admits that this approach is also untenable unless one is inclined to accept *all* the Bible's normative claims – which he is not. Resorting to what appears to be an ad hoc approach, Lipton concludes: 'Accepting a religious text thus means believing some but not all of its claims, but which claims we believe is largely externally determined, by moral reflection, and in some cases by science' (44). As he acknowledges, this notion of acceptance is far removed from that notion at work in constructive empiricism. The claims of the Bible are to be accepted or rejected on the basis of considerations external to the world of the text. Given such criteria for acceptance, Lipton proposes that accepting a religious text involves commitment to 'using the text as a tool for thought, as a way of thinking about our world' (45).

Perhaps Lipton could have made this approach more palatable by emphasizing that religious texts are used in the way he describes by interpretive communities, not just individuals. The hermeneutical tradition provided by the religious community that uses the text could be appealed to for criteria of acceptance that were, if not exactly internal to the text, at least in some non-accidental relation to it. Lipton mentions the communal dimension of religion towards the end of his essay, in the context of a pragmatic argument for immersion: 'the immersion

solution can provide a great deal', he claims, 'more than even the most enthusiastic book group' (46).

The comparison of a religious community to a book group is, of course, superficial. Nevertheless, it does highlight a limitation of Lipton's approach. His analysis of the meaning of religious claims has focused exclusively on a very specific class of them: the claims made in the Bible. This raises the methodological worry that it may be inappropriate to compare the way people read religious texts and the way they interpret scientific theories. The problem is that scientific theories are not sufficiently akin to religious texts, as Lipton appears to recognize in his criticism of the Kuhnian way of dealing with conflicting scientific and religious claims. A more appropriate comparison might have been between scientific theories and the theories of systematic theologians. Lipton's suggestive essay leaves it to others to explore the potential of an approach of this kind which considers religious claims at a higher level of abstraction than is found in the Bible.

Simon Blackburn takes a broader view of religious language than does Lipton. Focusing, in Wittgensteinian fashion, on the varied uses of religious language leads Blackburn to consider an 'expressivist interpretation' of religious practice. Such an interpretation, he argues, leads to a theology without ontology; in other words, it offers a way to keep religious language without embracing its apparent ontological commitments. Blackburn criticizes this position, mostly because it fails adequately to explain what motivates 'the person in the pew' to believe and act on their religious claims. He argues that such motivation cannot be explained without reference to ontology. For this reason, he summarily dismisses positions such as Lipton's (which he would regard as a form of expressivist interpretation), concluding that there 'is no evading the fact that the person in the pew needs the ontological dimension' (58).

Next, Alexander Bird provides a very useful survey of the main contours of the realism/anti-realism debate in the philosophy of science, while considering the parallels between the issues raised there and those that are important within the religious domain. The strength of the article lies in Bird's careful charting of the similarity of the issues confronting the philosopher of science and the philosopher of religion, which he achieves without underplaying the differences. Concluding that the difficulties of adopting an anti-realist stance in the religious domain are more severe than those encountered in the scientific domain, he notes the oddity of the fact that while anti-realism is on the decline in philosophy of science, it is on the ascendency in theology. One reason for this, he suggests, is that religious beliefs are much more susceptible to doubt than scientific ones. Lacking strong empirical support, theologians may be more tempted than scientists to shore up their claims by appealing to some form of anti-realism.

John Hare's paper is self-consciously ambitious, and serves both as a good introduction to his previous work and as an indication of the direction in which

that work is moving: towards the development of an explicitly theistic form of 'prescriptive realism'. This is followed by an excellent expository piece, jointly authored by Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis. They provide a thorough and convincing critical analysis of the kind of Wittgensteinian anti-realism advanced by D. Z. Phillips.

The provocative piece which follows, by Merold Westphal, champions a Kantian form of 'theological antirealism'. Westphal carefully elucidates what it might mean to be a theological anti-realist by distinguishing between two theses that are often taken to be jointly constitutive of realism. The first thesis is that 'the real is and is [*sic*] what it is independently of what, if anything, we may think or say about it'; and the second is that 'we human knowers are capable of knowing it as it is in that independence, mirroring it without distortion' (132). Westphal claims that a theological anti-realist can accept the first thesis while rejecting the second; if she does so, she will have adopted the form of Kantian anti-realism he advocates. By distinguishing between realism as a metaphysical thesis and realism as an epistemological thesis, Westphal highlights the easily overlooked point that there is no obvious incompatibility in embracing classical theism as a metaphysical commitment along with anti-realism as an epistemological thesis. Westphal's approach provides a model of how to address both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the realism/anti-realism debate, while maintaining a firm distinction between them.

Westphal outlines a pluralist form of Kantian anti-realism and provides reasons for holding it; notable among these reasons are theological arguments and appeals to scripture. He argues that the distinction between creator and creature, which is ubiquitous with the Christian theological and biblical tradition, provides strong grounds for accepting the kind of theological anti-realism he endorses. A finite human mind can never come to full knowledge of God. All thought about God by finite minds, as so many theologians have argued, will always be inadequate to the divine reality.

John Webster's fine essay, 'God's aseity', follows neatly from Westphal's stress on the creator/creature distinction. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the specialized character of the realism/anti-realism debate, and the technical philosophical vocabulary in which it is usually conducted, Webster's is the only essay in the volume authored by a systematic theologian. It illustrates the difference between philosophical and theological approaches to the notion of realism, while reminding the reader of the shared concerns of theology and philosophy of religion.

Many of the essays in the volume explore the value of importing into philosophy of religion manoeuvres made in the more general realism/anti-realism debate. Westphal's approach is a refreshing departure from this strategy because he recognizes that commitment to theism can be a motivating factor in embracing certain forms of anti-realism. It is surely significant that the form of anti-realism Westphal adopts emerged from an intellectual context within which theism was

an intrinsic component and shaping force (which was certainly not the case with constructive empiricism, for example).

This suggests the bold idea that, rather than borrowing theories of realism and anti-realism from elsewhere, philosophers of religion could profitably become more ambitious and creative in developing their own theories. These theories would be directly responsive to the specific focus of philosophy of religion, and may well make a distinctive contribution to the realism/anti-realism debate as it unfolds in other areas of philosophy. By developing theories suited to their discipline, philosophers of religion might avoid the difficulties caused by trying to account for religious discourse by means of theories designed to solve problems in other areas of philosophy. In keeping with this sentiment, the present volume would have benefited from more contributions arguing for non-realist approaches to religious discourse on the grounds of philosophical or theological conviction, rather than as the only alternative to straightforward atheism given the assumed non-viability of realist conceptions in the religious domain.

One virtue of *Realism and Religion* is that it throws into sharp relief how much remains to be done by philosophers of religion in working through the issues raised by the realism/anti-realism debate. Each essay repays careful reading and a key strength of the volume is the variety of perspectives it presents. Insofar as Moore and Scott have aimed to stimulate discussion of realism and anti-realism within philosophy of religion, they will surely have succeeded. The book will be especially useful to professional philosophers of religion and graduate students who already have some sense of orientation about the contours of the debate. Such readers will find much in the volume suggestive of new avenues of research.

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Stewart Goetz *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil*. (London: Continuum, 2008).  
 Pp. 216. £60.00 (Hbk). ISBN 9781847064813.

Early in *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil*, Stewart Goetz expresses his conviction that those who favour a compatibilist understanding of freedom do so not 'because of its own merits', but 'only because they become convinced that libertarianism is too problematic and must, in the end, be abandoned for some other view' (3). His reason for this judgment appears to be that a libertarian understanding of freedom comes closest to capturing our immediate experience of ourselves.