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REALISM AND THEISM: A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

SIMON HEWITT

For though we hold indeed the Objects of Sense to be nothing else but Ideas which cannot exist unperceived; yet we may not hence conclude they have no Existence except only while they are perceived by us, since there may be some other Spirit that perceives them, though we do not. Wherever Bodies are said to have no Existence without the Mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular Mind, but all Minds whatsoever. It does not therefore follow from the foregoing Principles, that Bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or exist not at all during the Intervals between our Perception of them.

[4, 48]

In the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley presents us with a possible argument from the existence of objects independent of the epistemic states of any creature to the existence of God. Realism motivates theism. For a period of his career Michael Dummett revived a version of this argument. In the preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas* he writes:

I once read a paper. . . arguing for the existence of God on the ground, among others, that antirealism is ultimately incoherent but that realism is only tenable on a theistic basis. . .

I have not included the paper [in *Truth and Other Enigmas*] because I do not think that I know nearly enough about the

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question of realism to be justified in advancing such an argument. [13, xxxix]

The paper about which Dummett writes is not extant.¹ As we will see, Dummett later hinted towards reasons this line of argument might be rejected.² Nevertheless, I want to explore reasons why one might think, with the early Dummett, that realism forces theism, as well as reasons theism might support realism. My argument will be to the conclusion that there is no interesting logical or epistemic relationship between theism and realism.

Why does this matter to those not interested in a somewhat niche corner of theoretical philosophy, if indeed it does so matter? Our concern is with the relationship between realism, in a sense that will be made precise in a moment, and theism. Which relationships of implication obtain between the two doctrines; if one accepts theism, ought one to accept realism about paradigm classes of non-theological discourse?³ Conversely, if one is a realist, ought one to be a theist? Now whilst there are few anti-realists about our talk of material objects around these days (so the particular form of realism taken by Berkeley to support theism could easily seem unimportant) anti-realists about moral discourse are much more plentiful.⁴ It is often maintained that those who believe in God after the fashion of the monotheistic religions ought to be realists about moral discourse. To couch the point in current philosophical vocabulary, divine commands act as truthmakers for

¹Confirmed by Ian Rumfitt in private correspondence.

²This is not always noticed. For example, Adrian Moore takes the argument described in the 1978 preface to be indicative of Dummett's settled position [35, 7].

³The move from the implication claim to the epistemically normative claim might be thought not entirely straightforward; see [32] and the subsequent literature. Following Rumfitt, I am taking the relevant *implication* relation here to be a narrower relation than logical *entailment*, which is implication according to the laws governing all implication relations [39, 52-56]. The details here will be ignored for present purposes.

⁴For exceptions to the rule that anti-realism about material object talk is unpopular, see the contributions to [27], many of which are in explicit conversation with theism.

moral propositions. On the other hand, arguments from the phenomenon of morality, conceived of in a realist fashion, to the conclusion of theism are commonplace in both philosophical and popular contexts.[37][24].⁵ In both directions, then, supposed implications between moral realism and theism play an important role in a crucial point of intersection between philosophy and everyday life.⁶

Moral realism provides only the most obvious case of potential routes from theism to realism and vice-versa. A loose movement in recent philosophy has bequeathed appeals to theism in support of realism about modality, mathematics, and property talk, without the problematic ontological commitments these realisms are often supposed to bring with them [3][8][30]. Meanwhile, a theistic realism about personal identity has been invoked to defuse problems about continuity of identity in patients with neurodegenerative illnesses [44].

Quite apart from these debates, there are reasons internal to the philosophy of religion to take serious the question of theism and realism. I suspect that the views on which God can serve as a prop for realism or be supported⁷ by forms of that doctrine is not one with which theists, at least those who take seriously the strand of apophaticism running through the monotheistic faiths, ought to be happy. It is, if this is correct, important *for an adequate theism* that theism not be enlisted for certain metaphysical and semantic tasks. That I favour an approach sensitive to religious practice, and

⁵It is, I think, a mistake to include Kant's argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason* here, since that is not to the conclusion of theism as a metaphysical claim [29].

⁶A particularly disturbing example of this is the suggestion sometimes made that those who do not believe in God cannot possess adequately justified moral beliefs.

⁷In an epistemic sense: *i.e.* the belief that God exists is supported in a fashion that constitutes justification for that belief.

to apophaticism in particular, conditions my approach in the present paper.⁸ So, for example, I do not engage directly with the only other published paper on the theism/ realism interaction, in spite of its undoubted merits [40] nor with Dummett's Dewey lectures with which it engages [19].⁹ This is because, although its conclusion is consonant with my own, the approach I favour – centred around linguistic considerations – opens up space within the philosophy of religion for a more satisfactory acknowledgement of divine otherness.

To that theme I will return at the end. For now the paper will proceed as follows: §1 will offer a working definition of realism drawing on Dummett's own work, and motivate this as capturing what is at issue in a broad range of metaphysical disputes. Then in §2 I will argue against the view that theists should accept realism, before in §3 undermining the converse case from realism to theism. The paper concludes in §4 by sketching an apophatic account of the relationship between God and language users which I take to be consistent with both themes in classical theist writings and with many contemporary anti-realisms.

⁸This is particularly apparent in Sections 2 and 3 below: where fairly recourse will be made to claims about how God could relate to linguistic communities that, whilst unremarkable in many religious contexts, may seem unusual within the context of analytic philosophy of religion. As I acknowledge below there is of course more that could be said here. The implicit challenge to the reader who doesn't want to follow me down my path of reasoning is as follows: provide an account that (a) preserves the doctrine of creation, (b) allows a (non-magical) understanding of language, and (c) supports arguments in at least one direction from theism to realism.

⁹In particular, since my concern is first-order philosophy of religion rather than Dummett Studies as such, I don't assess Dummett's 2004 modification of his argument, with the conclusion weakened to the claim that God knows every truth, nor the (as he acknowledges, question-begging) argument to bivalence from the self-reflexivity of God's knowledge. Scott and Stevens discuss these in [40]

Our concern is with *realism* about a variety of subject matters, for example morality, modality, and personal identity. In rough outline realism is the view that there is a determinate fact-of-the matter concerning broad classes of questions we might ask about these subject matters, and that this fact of the matter is independent of our epistemic, evaluative or constructive practices. The moral realist not only thinks that it is either true or false that it is always wrong to needlessly harm the harmless, and determinately so, she will also want to reject the view that this is the case because we react to such harm with a feeling of disgust. Similarly the mathematical realist thinks that it is simply *true* that there is no largest prime number and that the reason this is so, as distinguished from the reason we know this to be so, is not that mathematicians have worked through a proof. Can we say more than this?

Throughout his career, Michael Dummett proposed a semantic account of realism/ anti-realism debates.¹⁰ Suppose there is a debate concerning the claims made by some part of a language; call this part \mathcal{L} . Then a realism about the relevant area is implicit in the use of \mathcal{L} just in case an adequate meaning theory for \mathcal{L} delivers a bivalent semantics which interprets sentences in a compositional fashion with singular terms functioning referentially over the apparent subject matter of \mathcal{L} . One is a realist about \mathcal{L} if one reflectively thinks that \mathcal{L} *should* be supplied with such a semantics. Realism might be challenged either because it is under-motivated in a particular case or because of internal incoherence. Dummett's own argument that classical negation violates constraints on an acceptable theory of meaning is a good

¹⁰This has developed in details, compare [14] with [16]. My focus will be on the later version.

example of the latter form of challenge [15].

Realism of this sort may be either global or local. Global realism is realism about \mathcal{L} in the case where \mathcal{L} comprises all the declarative sentences of a language (or perhaps, if we want to prescind from issues around vagueness, all the declarative sentences concerning non-vague subject matters).¹¹ Local realism meanwhile concerns some particular part of language, sentences about the material world for instance or ethical sentences. Obviously a local anti-realism entails the failure of global realism. However, where global *anti*-realism is the view that there is no part of language for which bivalence holds, it is important to note that anti-realism about some area need not lead to global anti-realism. There are, it is true, some areas anti-realism about which is likely to force anti-realism about others. The language of semantics is one such area; a claim of the present paper is that language about God is not.

As our introduction hints, the focus here is on various local realism/ anti-realism debates, and the relationship of these to theism. In each case, we can explain what is at issue in a Dummettian manner by attending to what an appropriate semantic account of the relevant sentences would look like. Characteristic of realism, in our sense, is openness to sentences having verification transcendent-truth conditions. It is in no way constitutive of what it is for a sentence to be true or false than language-users are able to recognise

¹¹The exclusion of sentences concerning vague subject matters could, as a referee points out, be extended to cover other cases thought to provide counter-examples to bivalence lacking philosophical depth (such as some deployments of indexicals, instances of presupposition failure, and so on.). On such cases, see Dummett's own distinction between deep and shallow grounds for rejecting bivalence [17, 467-8].

it as such. The extension of the truth predicate, in other words, is not constrained epistemically. Bivalence follows naturally on this picture. Faced with a challenge from the anti-realist, the realist about some area needs to explain how the relevant sentences can be determined as true or false without requiring that language users be in a position, at least in principle, to be able to recognise them as being so, and to do so in a fashion compatible with them being meaningful sentences in a public language. One generalised form of challenge to such realism, again owing to Dummett, argues that verification-transcendent truth-conditions cannot be manifested in the use of sentences, and that this is incompatible with any acceptable theory of meaning.¹² If this is correct, then one can only be a realist about an area if every sentence concerning it is decidable. A tempting thought for the theist is that this situation can be assured in virtue of God's being available to decide otherwise intractable sentences. Here, as elsewhere, I will suggest, we should not give in to temptation.

Two points require clarification before proceeding. First, I am not committed to realism in the sense understood here being what is at fundamental issue in every debate philosophers describe using the word 'realism'.¹³ In fact, I think this is clearly not the case. All that is required for the purposes of this paper is that realism, in the Dummettian sense outlined above, is at issue in an interesting subclass of such debates and that appeal might be made to theism to achieve resolution in the realist's favour.

But isn't this too quick? Responding to an earlier version of the present paper, a referee writes,

¹²For a detailed account of the manifestation argument, see Tennant's [45].

¹³For a sample of these, see for example [6].

It is arguably a . . . niche . . . question how these questions pan out when articulated within the framework of the realist/anti-realist disputes as described by Dummett and others. After all, the relevant semantic issues are rarely discussed these days . . . and the realism/anti-realism debate as it occurs in moral philosophy tends to be neutral with respect to whether one should be a semantic realist or anti-realist.

That an issue is rarely discussed is, of course, no reliable indication that it has been resolved. Philosophy is as prone to fashions as any other area of human life, and it seems to me that Dummett's writing on anti-realism has not so much been answered as ignored in contemporary metaphysics-orientated philosophy, of the sort with which much contemporary philosophy of religion engages.¹⁴ That aside, it is worth recalling Dummett's original intention in his pioneering papers on realism: to *recharacterise* the debate between the realist and the antirealist in such a manner that a clearly identifiable question, offering some sense of progress, can be placed on the table.¹⁵ Dummett was of the opinion that, particularly within those realism/anti-realism debates belonging to metaphysics, there had often been no such question at issue, leading to confusion and the appearance of irresolubility. I think that Dummett was correct: defending this is a task for future work.¹⁶ This being so, the thrust of what follows is that, *for a large class of realism/anti-realism debates*, on the best (Dummettian) clarification is what is genuinely at issue, the question theism is irrelevant to the resolution of those

¹⁴For ignoring under the guise of refutation, see – for example – the swift dismissal at the beginning of [31].

¹⁵For a survey of the issues here, sympathetic to, but not ultimately in agreement with, Dummett, see [34].

¹⁶See [28]

debates.

As my respondent suggests, the moral case might seem more marginal here (although an author such as Blackburn both ties this debate to others around realism, and foregrounds linguistic considerations).¹⁷ To an extent my conclusions will concur, but the picture which emerges of how an understanding of God relates to other philosophical enquiries offers little hope that theism (or, for that matter, atheism) might be of substantial use to the moral philosopher.

The second consideration requiring clarification is that whilst the semantic principle of bivalence is not to be identified with the proof theoretic principle of Excluded Middle (LEM) – for instance, supervaluationist logic validates LEM for statements for which bivalence (understood in terms of truth, rather than supertruth) doesn't hold – failure of LEM is evidence of non-bivalence. So when assessing whether an anti-realist account should be offered of some part of language, an important technique will be to consider whether the use of that part of language underwrites unrestricted LEM for its sentences.

We now have a working account of realism. With this in hand, I will next go on to suggest that realism provides us with no reason to accept theism, and conversely that theism provides us with no reason to accept realism.

Assume realism about some contested part of discourse. For the sake of concreteness, let's take this to be mathematics. The realist holds that for

¹⁷See here Dummett on moral realism [17, 467].

any mathematical proposition ϕ , ϕ is either true or false¹⁸, is so determinately, and is so independent of our capacity, however idealised, to produce a proof of its truth or falsity. Take some open question of mathematics, say Goldbach's Conjecture.¹⁹ We possess a proof neither of Goldbach's Conjecture nor of its negation. Nonetheless, maintains the realist, Goldbach's conjecture *is* determinately either true or false. Because of this we are entitled to assert the instance of the Law of Excluded Middle (where GC is Goldbach's Conjecture):

$$(1) \qquad GC \vee \neg GC$$

It is licit in classical mathematics to prove some proposition N of number theory by proving it from (1) in the following way. First, prove N on the assumption of GC . Next prove N on the assumption of $\neg GC$. Finally, appeal to (1) to conclude that N holds categorically by means of disjunction elimination. An intuitionist mathematician, motivated by anti-realism, will not accept this proof of N , since she will not in general accept instances of Excluded Middle in cases where we possess a proof of neither disjunct²⁰ and in particular will not accept (1).

Suppose that a classical mathematician, confronted with a philosophically motivated intuitionist, wants to shore up her practice. What might she say in order to motivate her conviction that every mathematical proposition is either true or false regardless of our ability to recognise it as such? One

¹⁸Realism needn't, interestingly, rule out it being both. See, for example the dialetheism of [38], which is realist in the present sense. I do not find this position attractive, since I do not think that it permits an adequate account of negation, but this is not our current topic.

¹⁹Goldbach's conjecture is that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes, not necessarily distinct (hence, $4=2+2$).

²⁰An exception being cases where there is an effective decision procedure for determining which disjunct holds. For details of intuitionism, see [18].

thought with common appeal is that the truth of mathematical propositions is underwritten by mathematical reality. There are mathematical objects, such as numbers and sets, which exist independently and it is in virtue of these, and their possession of certain properties, that mathematical truths obtain. So, for example, if Goldbach's Conjecture is true that is because every even number greater than two does indeed have the property of being the sum of two primes. Whether or not it has this property is a feature of reality quite apart from our practice of mathematical proof, and so we are entitled to assert (1) in the absence of a proof of either GC or $\neg GC$.

There are, of course, notorious problems of epistemic access attached to the proposal that abstract objects are the subject matter of mathematics, and these provide *prima facie* reasons to try to avoid it [2]. In present context, though, it deserves minuting that the theist who is a mathematical realist of the sort described above might be vulnerable to an additional difficulty regarding abstracta, which has been pressed in recent work by Craig [9][10]. Paradigm examples of abstracta such as numbers exist, it is commonly supposed, necessarily if they exist at all. However theists customarily maintain that God is the creator of every entity not numerically identical with God. They also hold that creation is a free action, not compelled by anything external to God. Yet if mathematical entities exist of necessity and are not numerically identical with God, which they surely are not, then we are faced with the conclusion that God of necessity freely creates mathematical objects. It is, however, difficult to make sense of the idea of creation being both genuinely free and genuinely necessitated in the required fashion. Is it not part of what we mean when we say that the creation of some x is free is that God could have failed to create x ? Against the objection that this

transfers a conception of an act's being free just in case it proceeds from the agent's unconceered character from the creaturely case, and then on the basis of the consistent perfection of God's character argues for the necessary creation of mathematical objects, we can simply ask why it would be to the detriment of divine perfection not to create numbers. Indeed, it looks incompatible with divine aseity for there to be any x such that the creation of x might be incompatible with divine perfection. Another route out is offered by van Inwagen, who suggests that God is creator only of contingent beings [46].²¹ This route, however, is blocked if the theism at issue is a classical one that maintains (with the Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed) that God is creator of *all* that is, with the quantifier used to state this belief being unrestricted (as it is surely intended to be read).

Yet it is at this point that theism might earn its place as a legitimate conclusion to be arrived at from realism. As we have noted, the realist who tries to support her account of mathematics by appeal to an independent realm of mathematical entities faces difficulties whether or not she is a theist. Perhaps, though, the theist, unlike the non-theist, can underwrite her realism without appeal to such entities. First she must take a detour through the theory of meaning. Against the view that the truth of ϕ consists in the satisfaction of some condition, sense of which can be made apart from any grasp of what a satisfactory reason to assent to ϕ would look like, it might be proposed that no such account of truth is available for any language we could acquire and use. *Inter alia* then, it is not available for any language in which we could express *GC*. Such a view has been maintained by anti-realists such as Dummett and Tennant. The alternative to the realist take

²¹See [1] for the same assumption about the remit of God's creative agency being made in the context of a challenge to theistic platonism.

on truth is to take truth to be determined by assertibility conditions. In the normal course of things, this will involve rejection of Excluded Middle in the absence of a reason to believe that the questions to which the thoughts in the range of the propositional letters have effective decision procedures. This being so, we are not entitled to assume $GC \vee \neg GC$ for the purposes of mathematical proof, and realism about mathematics fails more generally. However, it might be suggested that the theist can appeal to the decision of mathematical questions *by God*. So, for instance, for any number theoretic proposition P since God – who is unlimited in any respect – can decide the question whether P either P or $\sim P$ must hold. Realism about number theory is correct, and there is no need to postulate a realm of independent numbers.²² Given an antecedent commitment to realism and the problems which beset other accounts of realism, we have here an argument for theism.

Or at least we do if theism does allow a genuine defence of realism. Before assessing this, it is worth noting that the prior assumption of realism is indispensable to the argument for theism sketched above. For unless we already think that there *is* a fact of the matter regarding GC we are not entitled to hold that God decides the question. Why should God not simply leave it undecided?²³ In the absence of a prior commitment to classical mathematics, we are not entitled to argue from realism to theism in this fashion.

²²It might well be that we incur a commitment to numbers which are *dependent* on God, as indeed everything other than God is. For perhaps we incur a commitment to numbers in virtue of singular terms for numbers occurring in non-opaque contexts in true sentences. How then does the theistic assertion-theoretic account differ from the standard realistic truth-conditional account? Just in this way: the numbers are not invoked to *explain* the truth of mathematical sentences. Rather the explanation runs in the opposite direction. Or so it will be claimed. And certainly I think the order of explanation is salient to the distinction between realism and anti-realism in general. As will be seen, I think that it is dubious that the requisite sense can be made of appeals to God in this context. Note also that if the proponent of our theistic realism *doesn't* incur any commitment to numbers then her realism is of a mitigated sort in the terms of [16]

²³See the discussion of arguments from theism to realism below.

We will return to this point in greater detail in the next section. For the present, our concern is with whether the argument from realism to theism is successful. I will suggest that it is not.

Review the dialectic to this point. In the light of worries about accounting for the truth of mathematical statements in terms of an independent domain of mathematical entities, we appealed instead to assertibility-based account of truth. It is important that the language of decidability, or of the surveyability of infinite domains, doesn't distract us from this fact.²⁴ Say that mathematical ϕ is true just in case ϕ is assertible. The present proposal is that whether or not *we* could be in a position to assert or deny a given ϕ , *God* could be, and therefore ϕ has a classical truth-value. The position is seductive in so far as it invites us to forget what is supposed to be at issue. Having turned our back on any suggestion that sentences might have verification-transcendent truth-conditions, we have taken refuge in an account of truth as determined internally to the practice of natural language. To say that ϕ is true is to affirm that some language-user could be in a position to assert that ϕ ; by extension, to say that $\lceil \phi \vee \neg\phi \rceil$ is true is to affirm that some language-user could be in a position either to assert that ϕ or to assert that $\lceil \sim \phi \rceil$. But of *which* language is ϕ a sentence? It is part of mathematical English, or some other natural language of mathematics. So to say that God can decide ϕ is to say that God could be in a position to assert either ϕ or $\lceil \phi \vee \neg\phi \rceil$.

²⁴It may be proposed that the concepts of decidability or of surveyability provide *alternatives to assertibility* (rather than explications or synonyms) in accounting for mathematical truth. The most obvious fleshings out of this position are addressed when discussing mind-first and proposition-based accounts below. Myself, I want to maintain that we have no grasp on the relevant concepts independent of understanding what it would be to assert justifiably salient sentences in a public language.

This is a profoundly odd idea. If it doesn't strike us as such, that is because we are lulled by the use of a grammatical proper name 'God' to denote the divine and by the use of personal language of God into thinking of God as similar to ourselves *qua* language users in some relevant respect. This idea, however much it might be implicit in contemporary philosophy of religion²⁵ lies well outside the historical mainstream of classical theism. Aquinas, for example is quite clear that the attribution of such characteristically corporeal actions as speech or writing to God is metaphorical. Equally absent from the bulk of theistic history is the thought that God is a *person*,²⁶ an observation to which we will have cause to return [33, 8-9]. It is true that philosophy is not the same enterprise as the theology of any tradition, and that arguments from authority are not decisive, although if philosophy of religion aspires to be the philosophy of a human ensemble of activities, religion, rather than simply of a metaphysical doctrine, theism, it should undoubtedly pay more attention to the apophatic strand running through religious thought and practice than has been typical since the revival of the subdiscipline within analytic philosophy. However, the refusal to predicate of God attributes characteristic of ourselves as language-users and thinkers is not simply inherited aspects of a religious tradition but, for a Maimonides or an Aquinas, the conclusion of a philosophical *argument*.²⁷ Indeed, it is difficult to see how the conclusion could be resisted given what God is supposed to be (non-bodily, transcendent, atemporal, the Creator), on the one hand, and the manner in which language functions as a social practice to

²⁵So for example, Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism* begins 'By "theism" I understand the doctrine that there is a God in the sense of a being with most of the following properties: being a person without a body (that is, a spirit). . .' [43, 1]. Compare [12, 559-60].

²⁶Christians, of course, maintain that there are three *personae* or hypostases who are God, but this is not the same thought.

²⁷Important here are standard arguments for divine simplicity. See [12].

communicate thought on the other.

To assert that ϕ I have to understand it, and at least part of the language of which it is a sentence. Understanding a language involves *knowledge how*.²⁸ If I understand ϕ I must, amongst other things, know how to assert it (how to produce written, spoken, or some other tokens as part of a communicative series of actions) how to appropriately introduce it into a conversation or an ordered succession of inscriptions, when to withdraw or deny it in response to conversation partners, and which characteristic moves in (what Brandom calls) the game of giving reasons are licenced by its assertions [5]. Such knowledge how is a matter of initiation into a social practice and hence irreducibly communal. There are no private languages. It is altogether obscure how God could come to possess this kind of knowledge: divine omniscience, however we understand it, cannot be a matter of God possessing every *aptitude*. God does not know how to cook an omelette²⁹ or how to edge away nervously but politely when confronted with a racist interlocutor at a drinks party. A central reason why God cannot understand a language is intimately related to the second of these cases. God, as classically conceived, is not a participant in human communities such that he could learn from them. Nor is God a participant in events or subject to change in the face of countervailing reasons, in the manner required for conversational participants. One motivation for thinking otherwise can arise from failing to recognise the metaphorical nature of language in religious texts concerning God's speaking, conversing with mortals, changing her mind and so forth. Such language is indeed central to religious traditions but is central

²⁸The question whether understanding is *entirely* a matter of knowledge how doesn't need adjudicating here.

²⁹God, we might think, can bring an omelette into being without acting through creaturely causes. But this is not evidence of God's knowing how to *cook* an omelette!

*precisely as metaphor.*³⁰ Yet to read this language as other than metaphorical is to generate a tension with the equally central conviction that God is the transcendent creator of all that is, and not simply an item in the world's inventory.³¹

God, on this account, does not understand ϕ , for any ϕ in our language, and so cannot assert ϕ . Thus the proposal that theism can underwrite realism by permitting an appeal to divine assertibility falls even before we consider the dubious claims that God could speak (as distinguished from the metaphor 'God speaks' being appropriate) or that God could write (as distinguished from God inspiring creaturely authors). The dialectic will play out similarly if we adopt a so-called *mind first* perspective, understanding the decidability of sentences in terms of assent rather than assertion [42]. We are concerned with thoughts that *creatures such as ourselves can think*; and there would seem to be ample reason to concur with the words deutero-Isaiah ascribes to God, 'my thoughts are not your thoughts'.³² But now a new objection might arise: ought we not to be concerned with the *objects* of thought (or with the *items expressed* by sentences), rather than with thoughts themselves? That is to say, perhaps we should be concerned

³⁰Note that we are concerned here with God speaking *qua* God. So nothing said here requires a metaphorical understanding of speaking in important cases internal to particular religions, such as the angel's words to the Prophet or (which would surely be absurd) the *human* words of God incarnate as Jesus.

³¹Of course much more could be said about the issues in this paragraph, which touch on key debates in the philosophy of religion. What I say here should be taken as motivating a position with respect to the current issue and as a gesture towards future work. To the objection that the denial that God *understands* language renders prayer superfluous I would want to reply that this rests on an inadequate account of the practice of prayer as not dissimilar from, say, my making a request of a colleague. That response needs to be made good elsewhere.

³²Isaiah 55:8.

with the decidability of propositions³³ rather than with token representations. Whilst God neither asserts sentences nor has mental states, it is less obvious that God does not stand in relation to propositions such that she could decide them.

What could this relation be? Supposing there are propositions, God decides them by *creating* them. Suppose that if God wills that it be true that Plato is wise then God creates the true proposition that Plato is wise, or creates the (neutral) proposition that Plato is wise and confers on it the property of truth. This just serves to illustrate the peculiar nature of the alleged realm of propositions. Is it really required that over and above creating Plato, the wise philosopher, God needs to create a *proposition* to render it true that Plato is wise? Could God have created a wise Plato yet failed to create the proposition, or could he even have created a false proposition thus making it false that Plato is wise even though Plato is wise? This would violate a constraint on an adequate account of truth, namely that it respect the transparency of the truth predicate. So, then, the believer in propositions should say that God *has to* decide the proposition as true once God has created the wise man Plato. Quite apart from the problems this raises concerning forced divine action, which are in my view a reason for the theist not to take God's knowledge about Plato to be mediated at all but rather not distinct from God's creating Plato, this has the consequence that God's relation to the proposition that Plato is wise cannot serve to explain that proposition's having a classical truth-value *unless* everything necessary for Plato to be

³³*Thoughts* in the Fregean sense.

wise is already the case. So it will be, *mutatis mutandis*, for the propositions of mathematics, ethics, science, and metaphysics.

Proposition-talk is harmless, and obviously useful in the day to day work of the philosopher of language. Reifying the supposed objects of that talk through postulating a realm of platonic propositions presents us, in combination with theism, with a misleading picture whereby God eternally surveys the propositions deciding them all, like some eternal and maximally competent mathematician with his exercise books spread out in front of him. Once this picture has been rejected, there is no reason to accept an argument from realism to theism, since it becomes apparent that God is simply not appropriately positioned to do the semantic work required. Nonetheless, might there not be some reason to suppose that, given independent motivations for theism, God's creation is determinate in a manner that secures realism? The burden of the next section is to provide a negative answer to this question.

3

The later Dummett makes an important contribution on the question we now face:

It is somewhat puzzling that many who believe the world to have been created adhere to the principle of bivalence. An author of fiction is not constrained to render determinate every detail of his fictional world; why should God be constrained in a way in which a human author is not? It may be answered that it is because God's creation is real, whereas the human author's word is only make-believe: but

why should this affect the determinacy of their respective creations? [20, 88]

Why indeed? I will consider two possible responses, one on the basis of *perfect being theology*, the other of considerations from particular realism/anti-realism debates. Neither is persuasive and, as I will argue, considerations about the situatedness of language look prone to block any attempt to motivate realism on a theistic basis.

Claimed as rooted in Anselm, perfect being theology has a significant presence in contemporary philosophy of religion [30, 9-10] [11]. Taking its cue from Anselm's identification of God with '*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*',³⁴ perfect being theology goes on to move from this to so-called omniperfection: God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent [36]. Divine perfection does not, however, end with omniperfection. For the perfect being theologian, God has other perfections – Nagasawa instances 'independence, timelessness, incorporeality, immutability, omnipresence, and so on' [36, 579]. If perfect being theology is supposed to be a *way in* to talk of God, it is far from clear how we are supposed to fill in the elipsis here. Setting this aside, might at least the following claim be reasonable?

Det: The attribute of x , *being such that anything created by x is determinate*, is conducive to the perfection of x .

From perfect being theology, creation and **Det** it follows that reality is determinate. We have not spelled out what it is for reality to be determinate, but let us assume that it involves realism about at least a substantial disputed class of subject matters.

³⁴Which is typically translated, incorrectly, and perhaps non-innocently as 'that *being* greater than which nothing can be thought'.

The problem with this argument is **Det.** What reason do we have to accept it? The comparison Dummett draws between divine creation and human authorship is useful for undermining any initial appeal the principle might be thought to possess. We do not think Jane Austen would have been a better author if she had supplied us with an exhaustive account of every hair on Elizabeth Bennett's head; quite the opposite. But perhaps here is where the differences between authorship and creation alluded to by Dummett manifest themselves. Isn't there something intrinsically imperfect about an indeterminate creation? And doesn't it follow that the creator of a determinate reality would be more perfect than one who left some matter undecided? One danger here lies in the background for all attempts to found theological discourse on an identification of God with the most perfect entity. There is a temptation to project our own likes and desires onto our conceptions of a perfect deity,³⁵ changing the topic of investigation into 'what I would do if I were God'. Our preferences, however, arise out of our experience and situation in the world. It is certainly frustrating for our creative projects to be left incomplete: if I *could* finish that paper on reliablism I *would*; if only I had time to paint the front door the same colour as the back. The mention of time should ring alarm bells with respect to the legitimacy of theological inferences from the human case. Creation, at least in its classical formulation, is not a process – something God begins and then may or may not finish. There is no gap, temporal or otherwise, between God's willing that something be the case and its being the case.³⁶ Now, the reason that we are prone to view our own incomplete projects as imperfect in some respect is that they fall short of what we will. In the case of an indeterminate creation, however, God's will is perfectly executed. It's just that her will is that there

³⁵This, of course, was recognised by Feuerbach [25]. See also [26].

³⁶See here Dummett's own argument in the final chapter of [20].

be an indeterminate world. In the absence of an argument that such a world must represent an imperfection on the part of its creator, **Det** fails.

It is natural to think, though, that there are certain realisms which at least most actually-existing theists ought to embrace. Call theism of the sort professed by adherents to the Abrahamic religions *robust theism*. The robust theist assents to a number of claims about divine concerns for human beings and their histories, individual and collective. They also make a number of claims about divine revelation, its content and its relationship to the ethical lives and ultimate destinies of human beings. Consider now ethical realism:³⁷

ER: For all ethical ϕ , ϕ has a classical truth-value.

Consider further personal identity realism:

PIR: For all x, y it is: (a) determinate whether x is a person, (b) assuming x and y are both persons, ' $x = y$ ' has a classical truth-value.

There are *prima facie* cases for both **ER** and **PIR** from the perspective of robust theism. Taking **ER** first, some form of ethical concern, and the making explicit of a relation between this and the divine, is characteristic of all major theistic religions. The ethical flourishing of human beings is intimately linked to how things stand between them and God, and – very often – robust theists hold additionally that we will be judged by God *qua* ethical agents. This might seem to rule out ethical indeterminacy. Depending on whether we take agents or actions to be the primary objects of evaluation, the problem appears to be that God cannot judge whether a particular action

³⁷Note here that our concern is with ethical realism as that contrasts with *anti-realism*, rather than with *irrealism* (of which non-cognitivism is one variety). The latter is a common object of discussion in meta-ethics.

is meritorious (or blameworthy), or whether a particular aspect of some agent's character is virtuous, unless there is a fact of the matter about this. On the basis of this consideration a certain pull can be felt towards the position that God secures there being facts of the matter in every case.

This pull should be resisted. Whilst robust theism surely does require that there be some ethical facts of the matter, it doesn't follow that *all* ethical propositions should be determinately either true or false. Indeed our own preparedness to deploy ethical language shows otherwise. Daily life provides ample examples of cases where, in spite of their being of ethical importance,³⁸ actions or characteristics frustrate our judgements: *is* he a good husband, *was* she right to do that, *is* it really correct to say that such-and-such an action is *always* prohibited? We are often unprepared to make a call either way, which is not to say that we fall back on the belief that the truth lies somewhere in the middle: his particular personality combined with patterns of behaviour could be variously taken to support his being a wonderful husband or an appalling one, but it simply is not open that he is a merely average one. Nor does it seem as though what is lacking in all of these cases is information, as though if we knew more about a particular case, we would reach a factive judgement. It is easy to imagine a maximally informed observer who simply does not know what to say about an action, a person, or a relationship they are watching unfold. Perhaps our ethical concepts are simply not finely tuned enough to deliver a verdict on some

³⁸So, I am excluding from consideration morally neutral actions, harmless quirks of character and so on.

cases. Why, after all, should we suppose it to be otherwise?³⁹

But then maybe there are limits to our capacity to know about our fellows and their actions that are, so to speak, built into our epistemic constitution and therefore unsurpassable. God has no such limits: for the psalmist God ‘knows the secrets of human hearts’, for St Augustine ‘You [God] are closer to me than I am to myself’. Surely then God can reach a judgement about every case. We can concede this much here: God can reach a judgement about every case *where there is a fact of the matter*. But whether or not there is a fact of the matter in every case is precisely what we are seeking to adjudicate. Appeal to divine knowledge in this context is circular, for even God cannot know what is not there to be known.

At this point it is worth recalling what is required to answer the denier of **ER**. It needs to be the case that the relevant ethical expressions have a meaning that is sufficiently determinate to deliver classical truth-values for the disputed sentences. Since language is a social practice, entered into by embodied persons such as ourselves, it is also required that some gesture be made towards how expressions with these meanings could be learned by members of the linguistic community – amongst whom, as we have seen, God is not to be numbered – and how the meaning is manifest in the use of the expressions. This makes clear a further reason why appeal to God’s judgement is strictly irrelevant to the question at hand. Whatever is meant by ‘God’s judgement’ it cannot be that God spends eternity making assertions in English and thereby manifests the meaning of those sentences; nor

³⁹Here and in what follows I take a *concept* to be simply the meaning of an expression, grasped by a competent user of that expression and manifest in the use of it. So, in particular, I am not using ‘concept’ to denote anything private or primarily mental.

can it be that God comes to believe, or to know, something in the manner in which we relate doxastically to the content of natural language declarative sentences. Once spelled out, the idea is crudely anthropomorphic, yet it is what would be required to answer the anti-realist at this point. The path to this kind of anthropomorphism is set out upon at the moment the analogical and metaphorical nature of religious language is forgotten, and this is a constant temptation for those engaged in debates at the intersection of metaphysics and the philosophy of religion.

Once that path has been blocked we ought to be on our guard against appeals to God to resolve the disagreement between the ethical realist and anti-realist. Remember that we are envisaging cases where mastery of ethical language in no way places language users in a position to judge either way. The use of the salient expressions just isn't equipped to underwrite either assertion or denial. The way, the only way, in which matters could be resolved is by precisification of the use, perhaps by an expert subsection of language users, to whom others defer (as with the chemist who calls all and only H₂O 'water'). God is not such a language user. For sure, if it is possible that there be such a language user then, by theistic hypothesis, God could create one. But if this were to happen, then the meaning constituted by the precisified use would be apparent within the linguistic community, and there would be no need to appeal to theism to safeguard realism.⁴⁰ After all, every language user is created by God; the experts are not special in this respect. Theism, robust or otherwise, is redundant in any successful case

⁴⁰I ignore the obvious question of what an ethical expert could be.

for **ER**.⁴¹

As for ethics, so for personal identity. There is a difference though. There is a *prima facie* attractiveness to the thought that robust theism needs **PIR** to hold, and so given a sufficiently justified acceptance of robust theism one is entitled to think that realism about personal identity obtains, even if one cannot explain how this could be the case. If this is right, then there is an argument from robust theism to one case of realism. And, I can imagine it being suggested, if God can (somehow) guarantee realism in one case, she can do so in others: the way towards global realism is open. The weak point here is the initial assumption that robust theism requires realism about personal identity. On the face of it, this might seem quite compelling. The concern of God for individual human beings is an important component of the robust theist's worldview. God, for a typical robust theism, cares for us from the first moment of our existence and has a particular concern with us at the moment of our death. Important ethical debates with which robust theists have a particular involvement are often thought to turn on matters of personal identity. For all these reasons, then, doesn't there need to be a fact of the matter whether there is a person in any given scenario?

⁴¹But hasn't the foregoing discussion, in conceding that there is a subclass of ethical propositions for which robust theisms entail the possession of classical truth-values, allowed a significant theism-realism relation of the sort attacked by this paper? I don't think so. There are two cases to consider: first, every ethical truth in the class may be capable of being known independent of the claims to revelation of the robust theism in question. In this case, whilst the ethical truths are prerequisites for, or at least congruous with, the robust theism, they are conceptually independent of it. The decalogue's prohibition on theft may be a case in point. Alternatively, at least one ethical truth in the class may only be known through claimed revelation. In this case it is not theism, as a metaphysical claim, but particular events in human history (the purported cases of revelation), texts, and traditions which are conceptually tied up with the restricted moral realism.

Not obviously, no. Take first of all the issue of divine concern for individual human beings. The robust theist needs it to be the case that, for any person x , God is concerned in the required manner x for every moment of x 's existence. This does not entail **PIR**. If **PIR** is false, there may be cases where it is indeterminate whether God cares for x *qua* person, but this is surely the right result if it is indeterminate whether x is a person. Remember that we are concerned with questions about personhood framed in terms of concepts we possess. It is hardly surprising that these deliver indeterminate verdicts in now ethically important cases since they came into use before medical technology presented us with questions, for example about the moment of death, which now appear urgent. This consideration prompts consideration of the ethical entanglements of robust theism. Here it may be that we ought to engage in conceptual engineering to obtain new concepts, better suited for the ethical purposes at hand [22]. Alternatively it may be the concept of personhood, focus on which is relatively recent and perhaps less embedded in the ethical practice of robust theism than is often thought, ought not to have such a determinative role in our bioethical deliberations.⁴²

Whichever response is made in order to reconcile robust theistic ethical practice with the non-truth of **PIR** *some* response will be necessary unless

⁴²The robust theist may seek reassurance here that she has an adequate pastoral theology available to her. After all, doesn't the relative of the dementia patient want reassurance that it is *true* that their loved one remains in God's love? How do we make sense of the grey areas before death, and of what comes after? There are two things to say here: on the one hand, and here I am in sympathy with a broadly Wittgensteinian approach, it is to misunderstand what is being requested of a religious community in these circumstances if the response is a *metaphysical theory*, however sympathetically communicated. It is – for the robust theistic traditions – through love, comfort, and accompaniment that God is said to be present as reassuring. On the other hand, from a more abstractly theological perspective, realist responses here on personal identity simply postpone the issues that arise when we consider that, for the Abrahamic faiths, the human being *ceases to exist* at death (Aquinas '*anima mea non est ego*'), to be resurrected again. If this is not the expression of a false hope, in which case robust theism falls in any case, God's personal care cannot depend on unbroken personal persistence.

an argument for **PIR** is available that does not depend on theism. This is because theism cannot be invoked to support **PIR**. We have already seen the reason for this in making the case against robust theistic support for **ER**. God is not a member of our linguistic community, and so cannot be involved in fixing the meaning of our expressions in a fashion that would secure realism in a manner that could not be described without reference to God. We had agreed to put this consideration to one side for dialectical purposes, given the apparent importance of **PIR** to robust theism. I have suggested that this importance is more apparent than real. And this is just as well, since God's not being a member of our linguistic community is not the fancy of abstruse philosophical theologians, but rather an implication of a component of robust theism every bit as central as affirmations of divine concern and ethical norms, namely that God is the transcendent creator of all that is. Whatever we pick out with the word 'God', so lines of argument shared between the Abrahamic traditions proceed, it cannot be anything temporal, anything changeable, anything corporeal, anything passive, and so on. Negative theology seeks to preserve the distinction between creator and creature [7]. But once the denials of negative theology have been taken on board and once we understand what it is to be a language user, we see that God cannot be a language user. His existence, therefore, won't do the work on behalf of the realist that has sometimes been claimed.

Realism doesn't support theism. Theism doesn't support realism. To admit this much is not in itself to make a decision within either of the pairs atheism/ theism or anti-realism/ realism. It does invite, however, a certain reorientation away from a good deal of recent work suggesting some kind of affinity between theism and realist metaphysics, sometimes summoning

God to the aid of some realist project.⁴³ Moreover, our reasoning to this deflationary conclusion proceeded from a claim, supported on classically theistic grounds, that God is not a language user. This has serious implications, since it plausibly follows that God does not possess concepts (and so does not have reasons, at least in the sense that we do) and is not a propositional knower. If this is right, then the idea – taken as almost axiomatic in most debates in current analytic philosophy of religion – that God is a *person* looks strained at best. We are pushed towards a much more apophatic theism, and the interesting philosophical questions remaining look likely to concern religious language and practice more generally, rather than metaphysical questions about the nature of a divine reality which perforce eludes our conceptual equipments.

This is programmatic and suggestive in the manner that the final section of a paper permits but which will require making good elsewhere. Here is one way to think about where we have arrived at, in terms which Dummett's *Thought and Reality* lectures, from which I quoted in the previous section, share with the early Wittgenstein [20, Ch. 7-8][47]. The world is this contingent material reality in which we find our home and which we talk about using our language. Indeed, given that our only access to the reality is partial, and presented to us *via* our linguistic concepts⁴⁴ the only basis we have for considering it as a *whole*, thinks Dummett, is relative to God standing over and against it. God is precisely that which is not in the world. And it because of this that God is simply not available to resolve the

⁴³One obvious example here would be Leftow's work on modality [30].

⁴⁴c.f. Dummett elsewhere, 'Language may be a distorting mirror, but it is the only mirror we have' [21, 6].

question of realism, and conversely that realism about any given non theological subject matter provides no basis for answering the question of God.

Of course here too language strains to talk about what cannot but escape its grasp. Talk of God ‘standing over and against the world’, or of God as other than or distinct from the world, tempts us to think of God as an object *outside* the world, occupying some kind of quasi-space beyond the world, ‘not a thing amongst us, [but] a thing beyond us’ as an interlocutor put the point to me. This cannot be right; the reason for denying that God is a thing amongst things is that God is the creator of all other than God, but precisely for this reason thinkers across the diversity of religious traditions have insisted that God is uniquely, and intimately present to every entity. God’s transcendence is not a matter of her being alienated from her creatures, but of him being closer to them than is compatible with his occupying a shared logical space. Perhaps this realisation hints towards new directions for bringing the insights of religious traditions into dialogue with philosophical questions [41]. These are more likely to be informed by the particularity of traditions, more sensitive to religions as spiritual practices involving the whole human person (rather than as simply systems of doctrinal claims), and less concerned with grand metaphysical projects than the debates assayed above.⁴⁵ What, for instance, are the implications for ethics of thinking of the world as upheld by love? What must human beings be such that they can experience themselves as transformed by God? The kinds of enquiries initiated by these questions seem very distant from realism/ anti-realism debates. This is just as well, since God is irrelevant to

⁴⁵The contributions to [23] might suggest some ways forward.

those debates.

There is a pull towards thinking otherwise; but this issues from the mistake of thinking of God as an item in the world's inventory. God is not another agent, acting, speaking and thinking within the world – which is not of course to say that we err in saying 'God acts' or 'God speaks'.⁴⁶ Like Wittgenstein's philosopher, there is an important sense in which God leaves the world as it is [48, §124] [33, 6]. So, in particular, God leaves the world no more determinate than we can say it to be without assuming theism. Unless, then, we have an argument for realism about a particular subject-matter that does not depend on theism we might just learn to live with anti-realism. Such is our creaturely lot. *

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