

Must God Be a Realist

By G Hackett, for the Metaphysics Programme

In considering this question I found myself faced with a number of problems inconsistencies and contradictions arising from the assumption of the existence of god and the concept of realism.

When I assume the existence of God, I am following the example of Anselm, and supposing Him to be a being of whom there is none conceivably greater. To follow the language of Plantinga, he is a being who is "maximally great". In addition, he exists necessarily, and is maximally great in all possible worlds. Further, in spelling out the meaning of "maximally great", we would say that our God exemplifies the "three O's"; omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. This is the god I will be considering in this question.

Additionally, we need to be clear what we mean by 'realism'. We could be using the expression to settle questions of existence. Here we would be equating reality with what actually exists. We might be particularly interested in realism within a particular area of discourse, for example the question of moral realism might be of particular importance to God. Scientific realism is also worth mentioning here. However, realism might also be more concerned with truth than existence; what sorts of matters or states of affairs make things true or false. One form of realism holds that things which are true are true by virtue of matters which are totally independent of our minds. In this version of events, reality is never subjective or socially constructed. In addition, realism might be modal, where some things may be true only in some worlds, but not others, and where other things might be true in all possible worlds.

Concerning questions of existence, it seems possible that God could be a realist in the Berkelyan sense. Reality refers to ideas and minds, and God, as the supreme mind knows that his mental projections constitute the furniture of the universe. I do not see that God could sign up to a view which holds that some kind of non-spiritual matter such as the Higgs-Boson constitutes final reality. This would seem to place limits on His omnipotence. God could not sign up to scientific realism, as this view holds that truth and reality are what emerges from the process of scientific enquiry. The adherents of scientific realism hold that the truth shown by science is only a "state of the art" picture of reality, and that it is "finished" science which completes this picture.

Remember that God is omniscient and already knows the end product of science. It is even possible to argue that God might be guiding the formation of scientific knowledge by collapsing the wave function and creating quantum uncertainty.

However, if it is any consolation to scientific realists, similar arguments apply to the truth as contained in divine revelation; it is only a partial account of reality; the part which God deigns to reveal to us.

If we regard realism as concerned with truth rather than matter, then the problem contained in this essay question becomes more interesting. According to realists, the truth is "out there", existing independently of our, or anyone else's mind. Additionally, many realists hold that for every true proposition there is a truth maker; some state of affairs which support this truth. Not all realists support such a maximal truth maker view. It seems to be compatible with realism to hold that there might be some truths for which there are no corresponding truth makers. Because of the mind independence of reality, there might also be truths of which we are unaware, and may never be aware. Could a maximally great God sign up to such a belief? Remember that such a god is omniscient, and will know everything that is. Arguably, since a maximally great God cannot be bounded by time or space, then this will cover past and arguably future truths. Of course, God does not have knowledge of such things as the present day address of Sherlock Holmes, or the existence of a herd of winged horses - things which do not exist (though the existence of other worlds might allow for such things). The important conclusion is that there are no truths of which God is unaware, so it looks as if God cannot be a realist.

However, considering the truthmaker account of reality, our conclusion might be different. In this account of realism what makes propositions true is the existence of truthmakers. For each truth there is a state of affairs which constitute the grounds of that truth. It would seem that God might be a realist from this point of view, since He alone provides truthmakers for true propositions. In particular, God would be a moral realist since He would be the sole truthmaker behind true moral propositions. However, it would have to be noted that, as the truthmakers are not independent of God, then this would point in the direction of Him being unable to subscribe to the truthmaking account of reality.

It might seem from the above, that God can be both a realist and a non realist. This is entirely due to the paradoxical nature of a maximally great deity. After all, what other being would be so omnipotent as to be able to create a rock so heavy that he himself could not lift it (thus contradicting his omnipotence). As I see it, the only way that God could adopt realism in a non- contradictory manner is to give up some of his powers, for example, by becoming a God operating on the principles approved by the likes of Isaac Newton and other deists.