

# Realism in Theology and Metaphysics<sup>†</sup>

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Over the past decade or so, increasing attention has been paid in two separate disciplines to questions about realism and ontological commitment. The disciplines are analytic metaphysics on the one hand, and theology on the other. In this paper, I shall discuss two arguments for the conclusion that realism in theology and metaphysics—that is, a realist treatment of doctrines in theology and metaphysics—is untenable.<sup>1</sup>

‘Realism’ is variously defined in the literature. For purposes here, I shall adopt the following characterizations:

- where ‘x’ is a singular term, *realism about x* is the view that there is a y such that  $x = y$
- where ‘F’ is a putative kind-term, *realism about Fs* is the view that there are Fs and that F is a genuine kind-term
- where ‘T’ refers to the linguistic expression of some claim, theory, or doctrine, to *interpret or treat T realistically* is (a) to interpret T as having an objective truth-value (and so to interpret it as something other than a mere evocative metaphor or expression of tastes, attitudes, or values); and (b) to interpret T in such a way that it *has realist truth-conditions*—i.e., it is true only if realism about the xs and Fs putatively referred to in the theory is true.

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- where 'D' refers to a discipline (like metaphysics or theology), *realism in D* is or involves interpreting the canonical statements of theories or doctrines in D realistically.

Thus, one way to be an anti-realist about God, say, is to affirm explicitly that there is no such being as God; but another way to be an anti-realist about God is to say, for example, that 'God exists' expresses a truth, but that the truth it expresses *isn't* that there is an x such that x = God. Likewise, one way to be an anti-realist about beliefs, say, is to affirm explicitly that there are no such things as beliefs; but another way to be an anti-realist about beliefs is to offer paraphrases of belief-talk according to which 'there are beliefs' expresses a truth, but the term 'belief' doesn't pick out a genuine kind of mental state. Furthermore, in light of the above characterizations, theists and atheists alike can interpret the same theological claims realistically. Indeed, their disagreement will most perspicuously be expressed as a disagreement over the truth value of the claim 'God exists' *realistically interpreted*.

One motivation for doubting that we should interpret doctrines in metaphysics or theology realistically is the vague worry that practitioners of both disciplines are spinning out theories with no reliable way of determining which of the competing theories is true. The worry is that the practitioners of each discipline are simply talking past one another, that their "debates" lack substance, and that their theories don't tell us anything of interest about the world or its inhabitants. In short, theorizing in both disciplines is but idle word play; and so it is doubtful that the theories in either discipline have objective truth values or truth values with realist truth conditions.

Those caught in the grip of this worry then face the question of what to do with metaphysics and theology. In the case of metaphysics, the verdict is often that we should

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simply view it as a game and either stop playing it or else leave it to weekends and spend our day jobs on more serious activities—like, perhaps, philosophy of science. Theology is more complicated because many of the objectors still want to maintain that there is some value in religion, and they recognize that the sentences typically taken to express the core doctrines of religions like Christianity still have some value even if they can't be taken with literal seriousness. Indeed, whereas the objectors to metaphysical realism tend also to be objectors to metaphysics in general, the objectors to theological realism often style themselves as people interested in *saving* religion from the pernicious influence of modernism, fundamentalism, onto-theology, or other villains. Still, for many of us, theology is of far lesser interest and import if the anti-realist verdict is allowed to stand. If, in the end, the theories produced by theology are not fitting objects for belief, it is hard to see why we should take the discipline very seriously.

In this paper, I want to examine two ways of making the vague worry more precise. In *God and Realism*,<sup>2</sup> Peter Byrne offers an argument against realism in theology that is readily modified to cut against realism in metaphysics as well. And in *The Empirical Stance*,<sup>3</sup> Bas van Fraassen offers an argument against the very practice of analytic metaphysics that is both readily seen as an argument against realism in metaphysics and easily adapted into an argument against realism in theology. In what follows, I will examine these two arguments and defend four conclusions: first, that Byrne's argument is answerable; second, that van Fraassen's argument is unanswerable if we adopt what he calls the "empirical stance"; third, that there is (and can be) absolutely no reason why metaphysicians or theologians *ought* to adopt the empirical stance; and, finally, that for those who don't adopt the empirical stance, van Fraassen's objections can be answered in precisely the same way as we answer Byrne's.

The paper will have three sections. In section one I briefly present and respond to Byrne's argument against theological realism. In section two, I present van Fraassen's argument against analytic metaphysics and I show how, if sound, it constitutes a reason to reject both metaphysical and theological realism. In section three, I show how van Fraassen can be answered. Obviously what I am doing here falls far short of a full-blown defense of realism in either metaphysics or theology. But the objections raised by van Fraassen and Byrne are tokens of a type of objection that I think is rather widely endorsed among those who are suspicious of these two brands of realism. Thus, responding to those objections constitutes an important first step in the direction of a defense.

## **1. BYRNE'S ARGUMENT**

Peter Byrne sums up his argument against theological realism as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- 1) All disciplines of thought that can be interpreted realistically show the accumulation of reliable belief.
- 2) Theology does not show the accumulation of reliable belief.
- 3) Therefore, theology cannot be interpreted realistically.

Byrne declares that this argument is "simple" (162) and "decisive" (161). As a matter of fact, however, it is no simple matter at all to figure out precisely what Byrne means by terms like 'interpreted realistically' or 'show the accumulation of reliable belief'; nor is it a simple matter to figure out why exactly he thinks that the two premises of the argument are true. Since time will not permit the sort of detailed exegetical discussion it would take to sort out the terminological issues, I will simply offer glosses that I think are faithful to what Byrne was aiming at. I will then try to reconstruct as best I can his defense of the premises. Readers who think that the resulting product is not something Byrne would be happy with are welcome to take the argument of the present section as one of my own invention (albeit inspired by the

work of Byrne and others) and offered primarily as a prelude to the discussion of van Fraassen in sections 2 and 3.

Byrne seems to think that to *interpret a discipline of thought realistically* is just to see it as the sort of discipline whose methods of inquiry are successfully aimed at truth, whose theories are grounded in and responsive to evidence, and whose conclusions are intended to tell us the literal, objective truth about the world. (Cf. Chapter 1, *passim* and, especially, pp. 155 – 159.)<sup>5</sup> Thus, those disciplines which we can interpret realistically in Byrne's sense are presumably just those disciplines whose theories we can sensibly interpret realistically in my sense.

Byrne also seems to think that a discipline *shows the accumulation of reliable belief* just in case it generates an increasing number of statements that we can rationally expect not to be contradicted by future well-established theories in the discipline. (Cf., especially, pp. 159 – 161.) Reliable beliefs in a discipline D are just those beliefs that can be expected to remain permanently sanctioned by D's theoretical apparatus.<sup>6</sup> To say that a belief is reliable, then, is *not* to say that it is likely to be true (though it might in fact turn out that the reliable beliefs of a discipline are just the ones that are likely to be true). Rather, it is just to say that it is unlikely to be overturned by future evidence or theoretical developments.

Given all of this, Byrne's argument might be restated as follows: Consider some discipline D. We can take D's theories as worthy of belief and as aiming to tell us the literal truth about the world only if the practice of D over time generates an increasing number of statements that we can rationally expect not to be contradicted by future well-established theories in D. But we don't find such an increase of "reliable belief" in theology. Thus, we should not treat theological theories as worthy of belief or as aiming to tell us the literal truth about the world. And, we might add, what goes for theology also goes for metaphysics: we

don't find the accumulation of reliable belief in that discipline either. Thus, we should not be realists about theories in metaphysics either.

So much for the argument. Now, what shall we think of the premises? Let us begin by observing that *neither* of the premises is obviously true. A relatively narrow discipline that hits on the truth right at the outset will show no *accumulation* of belief at all; but that by itself is not obviously a reason to doubt that it is to be interpreted realistically. Thus, there is *prima facie* reason to think that premise (1) is false. Moreover, many branches of theology within Christendom seem clearly to have shown the accumulation of reliable belief (as defined above) over the centuries. In the Catholic Church, for example, the Nicene Creed and the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent—to name just two of a variety of doctrinal standards within Catholicism—are not at all likely to be contradicted by future developments in (official) Catholic theology. The Nicene Creed and the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent are explications of and elaborations on doctrines that the Catholic Church claims to have found in scripture. They were needed precisely because their contents were not explicitly part of Christian belief prior to their formulation—so, in other words, they constitute genuine theoretical developments rather than being, like the scriptures, mere *sources* for theological reflection. Though plenty of Roman Catholics, including Roman Catholic theologians, disagree with them in part or in their entirety, the Catholic Church is set up in such a way that we can be virtually certain that they will not be contradicted by future established theories in official Catholic theology. Likewise, and for similar reasons, it is highly unlikely that either the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Confession will be contradicted by future developments in (traditional, orthodox) Presbyterian theology—here not because the Presbyterian church is set up so as to guarantee that those doctrinal standards will be preserved, but rather because theology as it is practiced by those with a traditional, orthodox bent is not at all revisionary in the way that certain other brands of theology might be.<sup>7</sup> And, of

course, similar things might be said for various other sectarian theologies. Thus, there is prima facie reason to reject premise (2) as well.<sup>8</sup> What then are Byrne's arguments for these premises?

Premise (2), oddly enough, is offered without any argument at all. Byrne simply declares that it is obviously true, and then follows that declaration with remarks that effectively just restate and elaborate on it. Thus, he writes:

Consider this question: do we know anything more about God than we did at the dawn of Christian theology nearly 2,000 years ago? Answer: No. During that period many theological theories have come and gone in Christian thought, but there has been no accumulation of insight and discovery whatsoever. The stock of reliable beliefs about the Christian God, about its attributes and plans, has not increased one iota. ... Theology has not possessed intellectual traditions and modes of discovery [analogous to those in science] to enable its practitioners to be open to influences from divine reality and its practitioners have not been put in cognitive contact with divine reality. The academic discipline of theology is simply not productive of reliable beliefs about God—or about anything else for that matter. It cannot be understood realistically. QED. (162)

But why should we believe any of this? The stock of reliable beliefs about the Christian God has not increased *one iota*? Again, it is hard to take this claim at all seriously in light of what we know of the histories of Catholic theology, traditional Presbyterian theology, and any of a number of other sectarian theologies within Christendom. The 'QED' at the end of the paragraph seems, to put it mildly, a bit premature.

Premise (2), then, is a natural target for resistance. But for present purposes I want to waive worries about premise (2) and focus instead on premise (1). Here Byrne does want to offer argument; though what the argument amounts to, exactly, is rather hard to tell. What he

says explicitly in favor of (1) is just this: “Premise (1) has been established through consideration of the example of science.” (162) What we find, however, upon reviewing his consideration of the example of science is that, really, he has defended not (1) but (1a):

(1a) Disciplines that show the accumulation of reliable belief are to be interpreted realistically.

And what he offers in support of (1a) is just a version of the familiar “no miracles’ argument for scientific realism. In his words:

The story of science is a human story, but one which is comprehensible only if we assume that human theory and practice are being in part, at least, shaped by what the world is really like. If there is a progressive, cumulative structure to the development of science, this strongly suggests real-world cognitive contact and influence; otherwise the accumulation of reliable belief would be the merest accident. (156)

A generalization on this argument yields (1a); but it yields nothing close to (1).

Nevertheless, there is an argument for (1) lurking in the neighborhood. Suppose we endorse the following premises:

(1b) For any discipline D, there is no initial presumption that D is to be interpreted realistically.

(1c) There can be no evidence supporting a realistic interpretation of a discipline apart from the accumulation of reliable belief.

(1d) Absent an initial presumption for interpreting a discipline D realistically, and absent evidence that D is to be interpreted realistically, D cannot rationally be interpreted realistically.

If we do endorse (1b – 1d), and if we are persuaded by Byrne’s argument for (1a), then we have a ready argument for (1).



The idea, then, is something like this: For any discipline D, the practitioners of D aren't entitled simply to adopt, without argument, a realist interpretation of D. Rather, if we want to interpret D realistically, we need to do so on the basis of evidence—evidence that D is really putting us in touch with the truth about things. But what evidence could we possibly acquire? In the case of science, we have (allegedly) the accumulation of reliable belief. And it is, one might think, very hard to explain how we could have that if science weren't putting us in touch with the truth about things. But absent the accumulation of reliable belief, what other evidence could we have for interpreting science realistically? What other phenomenon would be best explained by the supposition that science, or any other discipline, is putting us in touch with truth? Apparently none. Thus, the only disciplines that we are entitled to interpret realistically are those that show the accumulation of reliable belief—which is just to say that premise (1) is true.

The trouble with this line of reasoning is just that, if it were sound, we would face the threat of global skepticism. Let D be the discipline of Detecting Reliable Beliefs (DRB). (If you prefer, you could treat it as the discipline for detecting success, and then fill in your favorite criterion for success. But since we're talking about Byrne, we'll focus on his.) Practitioners of DRB—all of us, I suppose, to some extent or another—are engaged in the enterprise of trying to find out which, if any, of their beliefs count as reliable. Moreover, if Byrne is correct about the criteria for interpreting a discipline realistically, realism about any other discipline is predicated in part on a realist interpretation of DRB. That is, unless we assume that the claims of DRB have objective truth values (and, indeed, that they tell us the objective truth about things), we will not be entitled to believe that any discipline has shown the accumulation of reliable belief.<sup>9</sup> And if we are not entitled to believe that any discipline has shown the accumulation of reliable belief, then (by Byrne's lights), we cannot interpret any discipline realistically.

So can we interpret the theories of DRB realistically? Well, following Byrne's reasoning, in order to assess this question we should ask: Has DRB itself shown the accumulation of reliable belief? There are two ways of trying to answer this question. Practitioners of DRB might assume from the outset (until given reason to do otherwise) that the methods they employ in practicing DRB are successfully aimed at truth; and, on the basis of this assumption, they will likely say 'yes, DRB has shown the accumulation of reliable belief'. Note, however, that these practitioners of DRB are interpreting DRB realistically, and they are doing so not *on the basis* of its success, but rather *in advance* of any awareness of its success. Indeed, their assessment of DRB's success *depends* on their realist interpretation of DRB. On the other hand, practitioners of DRB might refrain from interpreting DRB realistically until they have independent evidence that DRB has shown the accumulation of reliable belief. But this will be a long wait; for, after all, any mode of detecting whether DRB has shown the accumulation of reliable belief will itself fall under the scope of DRB.

The upshot, then, is this: If you can't interpret a discipline realistically until it has shown the accumulation of reliable belief, then you won't ever be able to interpret DRB realistically. And if you can't interpret DRB realistically, then you can't interpret any discipline realistically. But Byrne acknowledges that some disciplines can be interpreted realistically. Thus, he must concede that at least some disciplines can be interpreted realistically even if they haven't shown the accumulation of reliable belief. In the case of DRB, it seems, in fact, that there is a rational initial presumption that DRB is to be interpreted realistically, contrary to 1b above. And, for all we know, there might be other disciplines for which there is evidence, but of an entirely different sort, that supports a realist interpretation of the discipline—contrary to 1c. Absent 1b and 1c, however, there is no clear argument for (1). And so Byrne's argument fails—even ignoring worries about (2).

One might object that there is no such discipline as DRB; thus, my argument against Byrne—which apparently rests on the supposition that there is such a discipline—fails. I admit that it seems odd to characterize DRB as a discipline. After all, it is hard to imagine awarding university degrees in DRB, or applying for NEH or NSF funding to pursue DRB. But, really, the objection does not rest in any important way upon the supposition that the criteria for discipline-individuation allow us to treat DRB as a discipline. For whatever else DRB happens to be, it is, at the very least, a theory-building activity. And what the argument just presented shows is that at least some theory-building activities *must* be interpreted realistically in the absence of the accumulation of reliable belief. But if that is right, then the door is open for thinking that other theory-building activities—including, for all we know, full-blown disciplines (whatever exactly a ‘discipline’ amounts to in Byrne’s usage) can be interpreted realistically in the absence of the accumulation of reliable belief.

In closing this section, I would like to note a connection between my argument here and some conclusions that I have defended elsewhere. In *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism*,<sup>10</sup> I argued that, assuming we want to form beliefs on the basis of evidence, we cannot avoid treating at least some sources of evidence as basic sources, where a source is treated as basic just in case it is trusted as reliable *in the absence of evidence for its reliability*. The reason is simple: in order to acquire or appreciate evidence for the claim that a source S is reliable, one must either invoke evidence from some distinct source S\*, or one must invoke evidence from S itself. Since we do not have infinitely many sources of evidence, it follows that at least one of our sources is such that some, if not all, of the evidence we have in support of its reliability comes from the source itself. But in such a case, our disposition to trust the source *precedes* our having evidence for its reliability. Thus, our trust in the source does not depend on the evidence—even if, in the end, our *belief* that the source is reliable does depend (circularly) on the evidence. So,

assuming it is rational for us to trust any of our sources of evidence as reliable, it must be rational to treat at least one of them as basic.

But if all that is right, then (*ceteris paribus*) it will be rational to interpret realistically any discipline that can be practiced just by relying on basic sources, and furthermore, it will be rational to do so in advance of any evidence of success. Suppose, for example, we (rationally) treat source S as basic. Then, from our point of view, source S is a *reliable* source of evidence. Other things being equal, then, it will be rational for us to form beliefs on the basis of evidence garnered from source S. In other words, propositions supported by evidence from S will be fitting objects of belief for us. But then, of course, it follows that (*ceteris paribus*—i.e., absent counterevidence from other sources, strange circumstances, and so on ) the conclusions of any discipline that can be practiced just by relying on S will be fitting objects for belief. In other words, it will be rational for us to believe those conclusions as expressions of the literal, objective truth about the world. Thus, by definition, it will be rational for us to interpret the discipline realistically.

Of course, one might try to oppose realism in theology or metaphysics by arguing that these disciplines inevitably rely on evidence from sources that are not rationally treated as basic, or by arguing that they are in some other way defective; but those would be very different arguments, and ones that have yet to appear in the literature in any sort of developed form.

## **2. VAN FRAASSEN**

I now want to turn to a different sort of challenge: an objection to the very enterprise of metaphysics that, if sound, carries over to theology as well. The objection is raised by Bas van Fraassen in the opening chapter of *The Empirical Stance*.

According to van Fraassen, analytic ontology—which, for purposes here, I am taking to be identical to the discipline of metaphysics—aims to answer questions that science doesn't ask, and to do so in the same way that science answers its questions. What does this mean exactly? Primarily, it means that metaphysicians *posit* things to do explanatory work, and then they try to justify the acceptance of their explanatory posits by appeal to the sorts of virtues that justify the acceptance of scientific explanations—not virtues like predictive success and increased ability to control nature, however; rather, virtues like explanatory power, simplicity, elegance, conservatism, and the like. (For convenience, I shall refer to the latter sorts of virtues as 'explanatory virtues'. In doing so, however, I do not mean to make any presuppositions about whether or to what extent the virtues that I am calling 'explanatory' can be distinguished from putatively non-explanatory virtues like empirical adequacy; nor do I mean to make any presuppositions about whether the allegedly different explanatory virtues can be distinguished from one another.)

Thus construed, analytic ontology is open to two objections.

The first objection is that relevant differences between science and ontology cast doubt on the justification for accepting the ontologist's explanatory posits. Van Fraassen lays out the objection as follows:

You will have understood me correctly if you now see science and analytic ontology caught in a Pascalian wager.... If the wager is on a choice of theories or hypotheses, then from a God's-eye view, success consists in selecting the true and failure in choosing the false....As in all success and failure, however, although there is value in winning as such, there are also collateral value and damage that win and loss bring along with them. ... In science, the stakes are great for all of us: safety, food, shelter, communication, all the preconditions for life in peace and justice that a successful science can enhance. The risk of

acquiring some false beliefs matters little in comparison. *Most important for us, here, the acquisition of false beliefs by itself, apart from their practical empirical consequences, is no great matter in its contrast class of practical risk and gain.*

That is very far from how it is in metaphysics. There the gains to be contemplated are those of having true beliefs...and of being in a position to explain.... The risk is precisely that of acquiring false beliefs. ... Where is the metaphysician who shows us how likely it is that inference to the best explanation in ontology will lead to true conclusions? Why is he or she missing? Where is the metaphysician who makes the case that the gain of explanatory power outweighs the risk of ending up with a tissue of falsehoods? (15 – 16; emphasis mine)

The argument, in sum, seems just to be this: False belief, as such, is to be avoided; and there is no *evidence* that explanatory virtues lead us to true belief. Thus, we are justified (*if at all*, one might add) in forming beliefs on the basis of best-explanation arguments only if the gain from doing so outweighs the risk. In science, we might have a case for the conclusion that gain outweighs risk; but not in metaphysics.<sup>11</sup> Thus, absent some argument for the conclusion that inference to the best explanation in metaphysics is likely to lead us to the truth (and given that there is something rather absurd about constructing metaphysical theories while at the same time withholding belief in them and suspending judgment about their explanatory status), one ought not to engage in metaphysics at all.

Of course, one might note that there *are* arguments in the literature for the conclusion that explanatory virtues are truth-indicative. But such arguments typically focus on the status of explanatory virtues as criteria for theory choice in *science* rather than metaphysics; and, more importantly, they typically reason from the premise that this or that feature of science is hard to *explain* apart from the assumption that choosing theories on the basis of certain

explanatory virtues is a reliable way of reaching the truth to the conclusion that, therefore, the assumption in question is true. But according to van Fraassen, the demand for explanations is precisely what good empiricists aim to resist.<sup>12</sup> In other words: If one is already committed to the metaphysical enterprise, one will take seriously the demand for explanation, and, in doing so, one may well be led to the conclusion that choosing theories on the basis of their explanatory power (among other virtues) is a reliable way of getting to the truth. But if the question is *why we should be committed to the metaphysical enterprise in the first place*, then arguments that presuppose a need for explaining things will be impotent. Thus, the empiricist will be completely unmoved by the usual arguments for the claim that explanatory virtues are truth-indicative.

But, one might wonder, why should metaphysicians care whether empiricists are moved by replies to their objections? As it turns out, I think that they should not care; and I think that, in the end, van Fraassen's objections against metaphysics are, at best, grumblings that *express* the empiricist distaste for metaphysics but that will not and should not convince the unconvinced that the distaste ought to be shared. Showing this, however, will take a bit of argument—argument that is best left until after van Fraassen's second objection has been presented.

The second objection is that the procedure of explanation via theoretical posit results in the creation of "simulacra" which then replace the real things that we aim to be theorizing about and thereby make our theoretical activity into an idle exercise in wordplay. So, for example, van Fraassen argues that when philosophers ask the question "Does the world exist," what they inevitably do is to make the question rigorous with technical definitions of 'world' and related terms that map on to some but not nearly all uses of the term 'world' and then stipulate that the world exists if, and only if, the world *as they have defined it* exists. He notes that one might just as well introduce a new technical term—'Sworld', for example—and

then ask whether the Sworld exists. The trouble, of course, is that we wouldn't really care about the answer—unless we had reason to think that “the world exists” means the same thing as “the Sworld exists”. But therein lies the rub; for, after all, it doesn't, exactly. As van Fraassen puts it:

“Sworld” is intelligibly related to “world,” taking over a carefully selected family of uses, regimenting them, and is then used to make new, logically contingent, fully intelligible assertions. If we are careful not to let other usages of “world” creep back into our professional discourse, then “the world exists” is a perfectly good way of saying “the Sworld exists.”

The unfortunate negative verdict forced on us by this...line of reasoning, which grants sufficiency to such lenient standards [of meaningfulness], is that it is very easy, all too easy, to make sense. We can sit in our closets and in a perfectly meaningful way, kneading and manipulating the language, create new theories of everything and thereby important contributions to ontology. In other words, to put it a little more bluntly, this “word play” we [are engaged in] is merely idle world play; although shown to be meaningful, it is merely idle world play nevertheless. (27)

In sum, then, ontologists who try to answer the question “Does the world exist?” in the way just described inevitably replace talk of the world with talk of a simulacrum—the Sworld. But the simulacrum isn't what we care about when we ask the question the ontologist is trying to answer; and so the ontologist is engaged in a project that is somewhat removed from our real interests and concerns.

So go van Fraassen's objections against metaphysics. I'll consider responses in a moment; but first I want to comment briefly on how these objections might carry over to theology. It is clear that van Fraassen thinks that they do—or, at any rate, that they carry



over to some kinds of theology—for some of the examples he uses are examples drawn from the philosophy of religion. I take it that, as applied to theology, the objections are just these: (a) there are no empirically detectable payoffs for the procedure of explanation by theoretical posit in theology, and (b) the God that is talked about in that part of theology that resembles or overlaps with analytic philosophy of religion is a simulacrum—either different from the real God, or else simply stipulated to be identical to the real God. Obviously not all of theology is indicted by these objections. But at least two kinds probably will be: so-called *perfect being theology*, an approach adopted by many medieval and contemporary analytic philosophers that attributes properties to God (such as simplicity and changelessness) on the basis of intuitions about perfection; and systematic and philosophical theology, at least insofar as these activities involve a certain amount of explanatory postulation in the effort to build detailed theories out of the data provided by divine revelation and religious experience. And, again, the objection will be that perfect being theology results in the creation of a simulacrum (one which privileges for theological purposes the characterization of God as *perfect* over characterizations of God as our parent, our employer, our shepherd, and so on), and that the explanations offered by systematic theology have no payoffs that outweigh the risks associated with treating explanatory power as a theoretical virtue.

But now what shall we think of these objections? Let us begin with the “simulacrum” objection. And here, I think, it will be helpful to begin by considering a rather simpleminded response to van Fraassen. The objection, again, is that metaphysicians aren’t talking about things that we care about: they talk about the Sworld rather than the world; they talk about the God of the philosophers rather than about God; and so on. But, one might wonder, how do we *know* that the Sworld isn’t the world? How do we know that the God of the philosophers isn’t God? How, in other words, do we know that these things are just simulacra? It seems, in fact, that we can’t know unless we already have a metaphysical story

to tell about the nature of the world or about the nature of God. But, of course, to have a metaphysical story to tell, we'd have to do some metaphysics.

But the response isn't quite right. It's *not* true that the *only* way to know that you've constructed a simulacrum is by comparing the object of your discourse with the *real* thing. The other way to know that you've constructed a simulacrum is by knowing that constructing simulacra is pretty much *all* you can do. And here, I think, we start to get at the real objection in van Fraassen's text. As I see it, the concern is just this: Metaphysicians are in the business of offering explanations by postulate. We postulate definitions, entities, properties, and the like; and we use our postulates to build theories that explain the world to us. Our postulates are by their very nature props and models—"simulacra", if you will, that may or may not manage to represent the things they are about in a full and accurate way. And—this is the concern—precisely because we have no evidence that explanation by postulate is a reliable way of reaching the truth, we have no way of knowing the extent to which simulacra represent the things that they are about. To the extent, then, that we try to force our talk about (say) God or the world to conform to our idea of the God of the philosophers or of the Sworld, we change the subject from something we know and recognize to something that, for all we know, may be (and probably is) at best a shadow of the thing we actually care about.

### **3. TWO STANCES**

Suppose we grant that the, or a, defining characteristic of analytic metaphysics (and of certain theological enterprises as well) is a willingness to engage in explanation by theoretical postulate. How shall we address the skeptical worry raised at the end of the previous section—the worry, in short, that we have no evidence that the methods of metaphysics are reliable and therefore we have no reason to think that the simulacra we construct bear any

important relation to the things we care about? The answer, so I shall argue, just depends on which of two “stances” we adopt: the empirical stance or the metaphysical stance.

According to van Fraassen, empiricism is a philosophical position that involves, in addition to a familiar sort of respect for science, empirical investigation, un-dogmatic theorizing, and the like, the following two values, tendencies, or attitudes:

- a) a rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and
- b) a strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) that proceed by postulation.

It is (a) and (b), he thinks, that separates empiricists from metaphysicians. Moreover, empiricism, on his view, is not a belief or a philosophical thesis. Rather, it is a stance: an “attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such—possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well.” (48 – 9) To adopt empiricism, or the *empirical stance*, then, is to adopt the characteristic attitudes, commitments, and so on of the empiricist tradition—including (a) and (b). And we might go on to say that, in contrast with the empirical stance there is also a *metaphysical stance*—a stance characterized in part by a willingness to embrace demands for explanation and to be satisfied with explanations that proceed by postulation.

So far as I can tell, those who adopt the empirical stance can have no answer to van Fraassen's objections against metaphysics. We have already conceded for the sake of argument that metaphysics involves offering explanations by postulation; and, so far as I can tell, apart from the sorts of explanatory arguments already in the literature, there is no argument forthcoming for the conclusion that selecting theories on the basis of explanatory virtues is, in general, a reliable way of reaching the truth. And, of course, *explanatory* arguments will be of no use in persuading an empiricist to take metaphysics seriously; for those are precisely the sorts of arguments of which empiricists are most suspicious. From

within the empirical stance, then, it is hard to find any resources for answering van Fraassen's objections.

On the other hand, the objections are readily answerable from within the metaphysical stance. Indeed, those who adopt the metaphysical stance may simply adapt the reply I offered to Byrne. We know that some sources of evidence have to be taken as basic. Even the empiricist must acknowledge as much for, lest she fall into global skepticism, she will be forced to take at least sense perception and logical reasoning as basic sources. But then why not take the methods and sources of evidence employed by metaphysicians as basic sources as well? There are, to be sure, arguments in the literature for the conclusion that some of these sources—intuition, for example—are unreliable or unworthy of being treated as basic sources. But, notoriously, these arguments are not decisive—in no small part because (as is often pointed out) it seems impossible to *run* the arguments without presupposing the reliability of intuition. In any case, however, they are not the arguments that van Fraassen has offered; and to the extent that his objections depend on them, they are all the weaker for that dependency. My suggestion, then, is that van Fraassen's skepticism about metaphysics ought to be treated in precisely the way that Byrne's theological skepticism ought to be treated: both are rightly ignored.

Matters would be different, of course, if there could be some *argument* for the conclusion that it is more rational to adopt the empirical stance than to adopt the metaphysical stance. Is there such an argument? More pertinently, is there any such argument that those who have already adopted the metaphysical stance will be rationally bound to accept? It is hard to see how there could be. For, after all, the two stances are distinguished in part by different views about what constitutes good argument and rational theorizing; and, unless the standards and sources characteristic of the metaphysical stance are self-defeating, there is no reason to think that those adopting the metaphysical stance

ought to be persuaded by *empiricist arguments* for the conclusion that it is irrational to adopt the metaphysical stance. And so far as I am aware, there is no argument forthcoming for the conclusion that the standards and sources characteristic of the metaphysical stance are self-defeating. At any rate, no such argument has been offered by Byrne or van Fraassen.

Interestingly, van Fraassen does seem to have a *pragmatic* argument for adopting the empirical stance. The pragmatic argument is just his first objection against metaphysics: namely, that the payoff we gain from believing the theories we choose on the basis of explanatory virtues is too small to offset the risk of false belief. In fact, however, the pragmatic argument seems unsound. Granted, food, shelter, and safety are not at stake in metaphysics. But other things are.<sup>13</sup> Metaphysics impinges on morality; it also impinges on our very conception of ourselves. Are we free? If not, does it follow that we are not morally responsible? Can a person existing now be the same person as one existing a thousand years from now? If not, as Derek Parfit seems to suppose, is there any point in taking steps—as both scientists and religious believers do in various different ways—to try to significantly prolong our lives? The list of questions might well go on; and to the extent that our metaphysical views do impinge upon our moral lives and upon our self-conception, they will impact our intellectual and emotional lives, our social interactions, and a variety of other aspects of life. Indeed, many religious believers have thought that one's metaphysical beliefs—particularly one's theological beliefs—make the difference between eternity in heaven and eternity in hell. For those who think this, the risk of false belief and reward of true belief rise exponentially. So, contrary to what van Fraassen argues, false belief in metaphysics can be a serious risk; true belief can be an important reward. And the reward of getting it right might well justify taking the risk.

Van Fraassen will almost certainly be unmoved by the response just offered on behalf of metaphysics. But really that doesn't matter. For plenty of people *will* be moved. That is ,

plenty of people will agree that the potential reward of true belief in metaphysics *does* outweigh the risk. And for those people, there will be ample pragmatic justification for adopting the metaphysical stance.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have examined two objections against realism in theology and metaphysics, and I have concluded that practitioners of metaphysics and theology ought simply to ignore these objections. In a very important sense, both objections are simply instances of “preaching to the choir”. Those who are already skeptical of theology or metaphysics or both will find in the objections plenty to agree with. But they should not convince the unconvinced.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘theology’ in the present context I have primarily in mind those sub-disciplines of theology that go by such labels as ‘systematic theology’, ‘dogmatic theology’, ‘philosophical theology’, and the like. The arguments of this paper do not (to my mind, anyway) have any obvious bearing on (say) historical and biblical theology or the various kinds of biblical criticism that are practiced in contemporary theology departments.

<sup>2</sup> Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> *God and Realism*, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> On p. 159, Byrne offers what might appear as an outright definition of what it is to interpret a discipline of thought realistically. He says: “We have reached the conclusion that to interpret a discipline of thought realistically is to see its evolving conclusions as the outcome of real-world influences.” (159) But, of course, this offers us nothing by way of precision; for, after all, superstitions, prejudices, fears and ambitions, peer pressure and other sociological influences, and so on are all “real-world influences”. *Every* discipline—from biology and chemistry on the one hand to astrology and iridology on the other—is such that its “evolving conclusions” are the outcomes of “real-world influences”. But, of course, this can’t be what Byrne has in mind. To find out what he has in mind, however, we have to look elsewhere and then offer a gloss; and my own view is that if we do this, and if we do it in the most charitable way possible, we arrive at something like the gloss that I have just offered.

<sup>6</sup> Note, however, that this definition of reliable belief leaves open the possibility that reliable beliefs in one discipline might be contradicted by reliable beliefs in another discipline. If we were looking for *sufficient* conditions for the realistic interpretation of a discipline, we would want to rule this out. But since Byrne is concerned to show that theology fails to meet a *necessary* condition for being interpreted realistically, I doubt that this problem will cause much trouble for present purposes.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, even the revisionists in the Presbyterian camp will likely agree on permanence of conditional claims to the effect that, given an appropriately strong view of the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, the doctrines expressed in the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession, and various other doctrinal standards are true.

<sup>8</sup> Is it really fair, though, to treat *official Catholic* theology, or *traditional, orthodox Presbyterian* theology as disciplines in their own right, rather than as branches of a single discipline—theology? It is hard to see why not; but, in the end, nothing hinges on treating them as such. For surely Byrne would not countenance *this* sort of reply to his argument: “Granted, we cannot interpret theology realistically. But that doesn’t matter; for all I claim

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is that we *can* interpret the distinct theory-building enterprise of *Catholic* theology realistically.” But so far as I can tell, the only *argument* he has against this reply is an adapted version of the argument currently under discussion: i.e., a theory-building enterprise can be interpreted realistically only if it shows the accumulation of reliable belief; but in these various theory-building enterprises there has been no accumulation of reliable belief. If this *is* the argument he would use, then my reply is as above: these theory-building enterprises have shown the accumulation of reliable belief after all.

<sup>9</sup> Suppose you think that some claim of DRB has a truth value, but that the truth value is not objective. Thus, suppose you think something like this: “It is true, but only true-for-me, that *B1 – Bn are reliable beliefs in discipline D.*” Given our understanding of reliable belief, this would seem to be equivalent to the view that you, but not necessarily anyone else, can rationally expect that *B1 – Bn* will be permanently sanctioned parts of *D*’s theoretical apparatus. But isn’t this claim self-undermining? Note that the claim *isn’t* equivalent to the (perhaps perfectly sensible) claim that you have evidence *E* that (for all you know) nobody else has, and that given this, it is *objectively* rational for you (but not necessarily for anyone lacking *E*) to believe that *B1 – Bn* will be permanently sanctioned parts of *D*’s theoretical apparatus. Rather, if it is really *only* true-for-you that *B1 – Bn* are reliable beliefs in *D*, the idea is that *even people in your same epistemic position* might not rationally be able to expect that *B1 – Bn* will be permanently sanctioned by *D*. But this fact by itself counts as good reason to question whether practitioners of *D* will continue to sanction *B1 – Bn*. Thus, in affirming that it is only true for you that *B1 – Bn* can rationally be expected to be permanently sanctioned by *D*, you acquire a defeater for the belief that *B1 – Bn* will always be sanctioned by *D*; and so it becomes *irrational* for you to expect that *B1 – Bn* will be permanently sanctioned by *D*.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Here I take it that van Fraassen is suspending, for the sake of argument, his view—defended at length in *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980)—that explanation is not the aim of science, and that believing that scientific theories provide true explanations is to take an objectionably metaphysical view of science.

<sup>12</sup> On this, see (for example) van Fraassen’s reply to Richard Boyd in Paul Churchland & Clifford Hooker (eds.) *Images of Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Some of the points here, particularly the point about free will, are borrowed from Alicia Finch’s discussion of van Fraassen’s objection in her review of *The Empirical Stance* (ACPQ 77 2003)