

## God, Reality and the Realism/Antirealism Debate

Eberhard Herrmann

### The starting point

Roger Trigg has written a clear and informative overview of the debate concerning theological realism and antirealism. (Trigg 1997). He does not only give a survey, but also his article is itself one of the many contributions to the debate. When reading Trigg's contribution to the debate, as well as many others, I cannot but get the impression that something is wrong. In the first place, the participants in the debate often do not actually address each other. They do not always state explicitly the presuppositions on which they are building. Nevertheless, obviously they value some ideas very highly and therefore are afraid of losing them. It then becomes the question of a personal statement rather than of an argument. (O'Connor 1993). In my opinion, the debate goes wrong because most participants too quickly take realism and antirealism for totalities. In this encompassing sense, they treat them as limited wholes, incompatible with each other. They consider them as definite points of view, theories or isms, defend their own position and attack the opposite one. Furthermore, we have the Wittgensteinians who dismiss the very distinction between realism and antirealism as meaningless.

Although I will draw upon parts of this latter criticism, nevertheless, I will use the admittedly awkward terms "realism" and "antirealism". They occur in the different debates, sometimes being usefully illuminative, sometimes causing trouble.

I will propose that we conceive of different tensions between realism and antirealism lying on different axes and depending on different problems. This does not mean that realism and antirealism are two extremes on a scale with different degrees. Rather, there are many different issues in the realism/antirealism debate and one need not accept the whole realist or antirealist "package".

Let us, for instance, take the metaphysical question of whether divine reality has an independent existence. The realist claims that there is such an independent reality. Furthermore, the realist claims that it is meaningful to talk about it or its attributes irrespective of epistemological questions concerning our ability to have knowledge about it. The antirealist either denies that there is an unconceptualized independent reality or considers it meaningless to talk about such a reality because we cannot have knowledge about it.

In this article I will circle around the problem of how we can clarify the use of the word "reality" by taking account of that for us reality is always conceptualized reality. The aim is to display in what sense the current debate on religious realism and antirealism is a misleading debate, and to propose a change in the methodological approach for the continued debates on this topic.

For many people, it is almost self-evident that one has to be a realist in order to be religious. Both religious people and their critics share this assumption. No doubt, on the lived religious or secular level people do not apply terms like "realist" and "antirealist" to themselves. Those terms have come into use as part of a certain language of analysis. By means of this terminology philosophers have tried to indicate what religious people and people who are critical of religion presuppose. This paper does not aim at amending this language of analysis, but is mainly a critique of it.

Most believers are firmly convinced that their religious utterances in some way or other describe a transcendent reality. Several philosophers and theologians have drawn from this a specific semantic conclusion: Since some religious utterances are descriptions they, like all other descriptive utterances, get their semantic meaning through the conditions that make them true. Thus, it can be decided, at least in principle, which of our utterances about God are true, and which of them we ought to reject as false ones. When religious people declare themselves to believe in God, they presuppose that God exists and is not just a projection of some kind.

Even if this perhaps has been and still is the dominant position, there has nevertheless always been criticism of it not only for strictly philosophical but also for religiously motivated reasons. As for the latter ones, first, there has been the objection to the idea that religious utterances are descriptions of a transcendent reality. Religious utterances are rather the expressions of how people live their lives in faith. Second, there has been the objection to the idea that by pointing to truth conditions we could decide, at least in principle, which religious utterances are true. Rather they are expressions of experiences of being related to something, of being upheld or addressed by something about which one actually cannot say anything. In those situations religious utterances, nevertheless, might come up quite naturally.

These types of criticism against religious realism have become acute again as a result of the different debates on realism and antirealism, and also of the debates about these debates, that are now frequent in philosophy. We have one debate on scientific realism. It concerns the question whether scientific theories describe reality and are, thus, either true or false. The alternative is that theories function more or less properly as instruments to make predictions. Then we have a debate on semantic realism. It concerns the question whether we should define the meaning of statements exclusively by their truth conditions that exist irrespective of whether we know whether they obtain. The alternative is that we should understand meaning as based on our ability to create procedures for deciding the claimed truth of statements. Finally, we have the debate on moral realism concerning the question whether values exist as part of an independent reality or become created when we conceptualize attitudes.

Roughly speaking, the debate concerning religious realism shows the following pattern of argument. The realist maintains that the question of what reality consists of, and the question of how we conceive of reality, are two completely different questions. What is real is independent of our ideas of it. (Trigg 1997, 213). According to the realist, God's existence does not depend in any way on our conception of God. Even the realist atheist accepts this but then comes up with reasons why God does actually not exist. Whereas the religious realist believes that reality actually includes God, the atheist argues for the conclusion that reality actually does not include God. However, both have the idea in common that religious or secular life has no influence on the fact of whether God exists. (Trigg 1997, 214).

One main target for criticism from the antirealist side is the religious realist's separation of what we believe to be true from how we live and act. The critic cannot see how we could conceive of religious beliefs as referring to something "out there" beyond language and experience, i.e. to something unconceptualized and therefore something to which we actually have no access but which nevertheless is claimed to be represented by linguistic expressions. Thus, the critic denies what the realist insists upon, namely the unrelatedness of the questions of how our beliefs refer to reality and of how we apply our beliefs in our lives to each other.

According to the realist, this denial amounts to disregarding the distinction between the subject of knowledge and its object. (Trigg 1997, 217). Without such a differentiation, we could never test which of our knowledge claims are justified.

### The problem

The debate between religious realists and antirealists gives an impression of a battle between two distinct positions, which the combatants conceive of as mutually exclusive. Since just one of the positions can be the right one, so it is presupposed, the debate means mainly defending one position and attacking the other. More often than not the result is confusion, since the different philosophical presuppositions are not always made explicit.

As far as I can see, there is something justified in both religious realism and so-called religious antirealism. Actually, not all so-called antirealists accept this label. But I also cannot avoid seeing the difficulties connected with both sides. Let me therefore propose the following way to hopefully take us out of the locked situation.

In practice, the strategy of setting realism and antirealism against each other as two mutually exclusive positions means that one reckons with only one contradiction. If one chooses this strategy, there is a serious danger of missing the ambiguity in the use of such terms as "realism" and "antirealism". For example, the label "antirealist" is used both for persons denying the existence of an independent reality, and for persons only questioning certain realist claims, for instance, concerning epistemology. Therefore, I propose not to conceive of realism and antirealism as two opposing and clearly distinguishable positions, of which just one can be completely right. It is more promising to reckon with different combinations of realist and antirealist aspects depending on which problem one tries to come to grips with.

One problem in the actual debate on religious realism and antirealism concerns the question of what we mean by "reality". This is also the case in some debates on scientific realism to which I now want to refer. I think that this detour will shed some light on the actual debate on religious realism and antirealism.

### Ontic and empirical reality

In the debates on scientific realism, too, one uses the word "reality" in different senses. For instance, it can mean ontic reality, i.e. reality independent of us, or it can mean empirical reality, i.e. reality as we experience it. The ontic reality is external, independent of us humans and objective and consequently transcendent. It goes beyond how we conceive of it and experience it.

At this point philosophers of science go into different directions in their reasoning. Philosophers who start with the presupposition that experience is the only source of knowledge maintain usually that the so-called ontic reality does not have any importance when we have to decide what to reckon with as knowledge. The reasons for maintaining this, however, differ. One may presuppose that the ontic reality exists and claim that it is not directly accessible to us. Then one is a metaphysical realist and simultaneously an epistemological antirealist who denies that there is experience-transcendent knowledge. Other philosophers deny that there is any ontic reality at all in which case they are metaphysical antirealists. Still other philosophers neither state nor deny the existence of an ontic reality but

instead argue that the idea of such a reality, i.e. an independent, objective, not conceptualized reality, is meaningless. (Diongguo 1996, 307f).

The philosopher who is a metaphysical realist but simultaneously does maintain that the idea of an ontic reality has epistemological implications, goes against all the above positions. Even if the ontic reality is beyond what experience can grasp, according to this type of metaphysical realism, the ontic reality nevertheless is within the grasp of human reason. Based on intuition and insight we can propose scientific concepts and understand the ontic reality. Certainly, only those scientific concepts that are in correspondence with our experience are useful.

It seems to me that also this kind of metaphysical realism assumes from a kind of God's Eye point of view that there is only one ultimate true description of the ontic reality. Let me question this apparently plausible standpoint with the help of Hilary Putnam's criticism against metaphysical realism. As Putnam conceives it, the claim that there is one and only one true description presupposes the thesis: (1) Reality consists of a certain number of objects that are independent of our consciousness. This implies: (2) There is exactly one complete description of how reality is. What makes the complete description into a true description is reality as such, i.e. reality consisting of a certain number of objects. Therefore: (3) Truth involves some kind of correspondence between words and external things or sets of things. (Putnam 1981, 49). If the correspondence becomes better and better, the closer we have come to the truth.

In one sense it sounds plausible that reality consists of a certain number of objects irrespective of our knowledge about it. However, the problem is that in practice we cannot do anything with such an assumption. In his criticism against metaphysical realism Putnam asks us to undertake a thought experiment like this: How many objects are in this room? Shall we reckon with, for instance, only the books or also with every page in them? According to Putnam there is not just one answer, since we do not have one and only one given number of objects in a room. How we answer the question, depends on what the word "object" relates to. Certainly, there are many possibilities depending on what we are interested in and on which categorizations we therefore develop. (Putnam 1988, 110-114).

It is not that the word "object" is ambiguous but that, depending on occasion, it forms part of different individuating descriptions. (Hilpinen 1996, 3). Seen from our human perspective this means that depending on which individuating descriptions there are, we end up with different descriptions of how reality is. Within this perspective it is pointless to say that there is exactly one true description of reality. This implies in turn that it is also pointless to maintain that truth consists in correspondence between words and external unconceptualized things as such, i.e. between words and the ontic reality.

For that reason, some critics of metaphysical realism maintain, that it is more fruitful in a scientific context not to talk about something like ontic reality. It is sufficient to talk about the empirical reality that cannot be conceived separately from human experience. Let us call this position empirical realism. According to empirical realism, it is the task of the sciences to describe and explain observable phenomena as well as to predict new phenomena that, when they have occurred, will be incorporated into the empirical reality.

One might think that empirical realism is identical with instrumentalism or operationalism. According to the advocates of empirical realism this is not so. Empirical realism is considered to lie between metaphysical realism and instrumentalism in that empirical realism adds the idea of the empirical reality as - just - reality. The focus is both on intersubjective experience as the ground of empirical science and on the role of the ontic

reality as potentially framing our activities and experiences and by that also the development of the sciences. Even if the ontic reality is hidden, we can nevertheless grasp it - through the empirical reality. (Dingguo 1996, 308).

No doubt, this is quite a common way of reasoning in the philosophy of science. The intention is to take the so-called antirealist's challenge seriously while sticking to some metaphysical realism. The main argument for metaphysical realism, nevertheless, involves the controversial assumption: Ontic reality is the presupposition that makes it possible to decide what is true and what is false. I will explain later why this assumption is problematic. Before this, I want to point to a similarity between this assumption and an assumption in religious realism.

### Characterization of religious realism

Religious or theological realism is the idea that there is a transcendent divine reality. This reality is the main target of religious belief, it is what religious language is mainly about, and its existence is independent of our thoughts, actions and attitudes. Without such an assumption religious belief would not have the meaning that it is traditionally considered to possess. The religious antirealists object that religious belief and religious language are possible without the additional assumption of such a reality existing independently of thought and language. (Scott and Moore 1997, 402).

Let us return to Trigg's presentation of the debate on religious realism and antirealism. In a realist manner he starts by distinguishing between the two questions: What is reality? How can we conceive of it? (Trigg 1997, 213). The realist does not necessarily need to maintain that something thought of actually exists. It is sufficient to maintain that this object could exist. As for the question of the existence of God, the atheistic realist, too, accepts that if God exists, then God exists independently of our conception of God. (Trigg 1997, 214).

Both the religious and the atheistic realist distinguish sharply between beliefs and the objects the beliefs are beliefs about. Some so-called antirealists also accept that we cannot bring something into existence just by conceiving of it. However, the procedures that we use to decide whether a certain entity exists, relate to our conceptions of reality to such an extent that we cannot make utterances about the existence or nonexistence of entities unless we understand them within the frame of those procedures. With the emphasis on this connection, Dewi Phillips - who, himself, wants to dismiss the very distinction between realism and antirealism - among others, insists that what beliefs are about cannot be separated from the situations in which the beliefs get their meaning. (Phillips 1993, 89). According to him, the religious realist's way of reasoning assumes that one first believes something to be true, and after having done so accepts it and acts according to it. This Phillips argues, is a mistake since what we believe to be true presupposes a relation to the actions and the practice in which our beliefs are involved. (Phillips 1993, 92).

Phillips' reasoning builds on Ludwig Wittgenstein's rejection of the idea of correspondence as representation between words and reality, for instance, in his remarks on the word "pain". I choose to follow Catherine Elgin's elaboration of these remarks since it helps me to clarify Phillips' point.

According to Elgin, Wittgenstein contends that we could not identify pain, if we did not have a proper categorization provided by language. We could not stop, so to speak,

the flux of our experience. Without categorization there would be no way to differentiate between one's own mental states.

Regularities in publicly observable behaviour enable us to talk about mental states by providing us with criteria of a correct application of mental terms. These regularities are subtle, complex and partly intertwined with each other. Ascribing pain based on behaviour does not follow a formula such as "x is in pain = x displays behaviour y". Nevertheless, we identify when people have pain from their behaviour. If there would be no regularity in people's pain behaviour we could not have developed the concept of pain and could not learn the meaning of the word "pain".

Competence in using a term coincides with knowledge of what we talk about. In a certain sense both linguistic competence and knowledge of what we talk about are the product of socialization. Knowledge does not consist in correspondence with a mind-independent reality but in conformity to the norms of the community in which we live and work.

According to Elgin, there are three objections to the idea of correspondence. First, one points out that we do not have criteria that would enable us to identify the relation of correspondence that connects knowledge with its object. Second, correspondence as such is not enough. Certainly, knowing that p is the case entitles us to believe that p is the case. However, despite that, correspondence between thought and object is not sufficient for knowledge. From the fact that there is such a correspondence, it does not follow that we know that p is the case. We need, furthermore, a cognitive norm that entitles us to - by referring to the correspondence - believe that p is the case. But then, if we still reason exclusively in terms of correspondence, both the cognitive norm and the conditions of satisfying it, in turn, are objects of knowledge so that there should be another correspondence, now between these new objects and thought. An infinite regress starts. Third, the idea of correspondence disregards the process of learning. We learn to think as our teachers do. We say that a student has learned geography if his or her views are in accordance with what established experts say. Knowledge considered as consisting in such an accordance is a direct product of learning. If now we would still cling to the idea of knowledge as correspondence, we would have to explain the relation between the learning process achieving accordance with the cognitive norms of the community in which we live and work and knowledge considered as correspondence. But here we are back at the two before mentioned objections again.

So, if the idea of correspondence is not related to the cognitive standards of the community in which we live and work, it is epistemically impotent. The cognitive standards structure our search for knowledge by determining such concepts as evidence, relevance and reason. Then, it manifests itself when we have reached a consensus or still disagree.

Certainly, this could mean a trivialization of knowledge. However, we should not forget that the cognitive standards are many, different and difficult to satisfy. Wittgenstein's position is holistic. We do not achieve knowledge by accumulating truth to truth but by learning to handle complex networks of cognitive commitments. It is characteristic of these networks that they consist of both practical and theoretical nodes. (Elgin 1996, 81f).

Let us return to Phillips' argument: The religious realist separates religious belief from the commitment and the practice that makes up religious life. Seen from this realist perspective, religious practice is not only a consequence of religious belief. In addition, religious practice is mainly justified by those religious beliefs. Phillips counters that religious belief gets its meaning and its justification only within the context of religious life. Therefore are there no meaningful religious beliefs, as the realist thinks there are, that so to speak come before religious life. By separating belief from its consequences, the realist misses the

evidence by means of which one can find out what belief means. (Scott and Moore 1997, 402f).

According to the realist, Phillips in his turn misses a crucial point. In one sense some believers may accept the same belief, for instance, "My saviour is living". This common belief, nevertheless, can result in different sorts of practice. It can lead to different sorts of life and consequently to different actions. Exactly this possibility is the reason the realist introduces the distinction between belief and its consequences. (Scott and Moore 1997, 410).

Furthermore, put into the realist's terminology, Phillips can also not accept that the realist distinguishes between belief and what the belief is a belief about. For the realist, this distinction is important if one wants to safeguard that, what we have beliefs about, is not dependent on those very beliefs.

Phillips, too, denies that our beliefs cause what is true, but argues against the realist assumption that beliefs are representations of or projections onto unconceptualized reality. Our beliefs do not work as any projections at all but are part of our practice to such an extent that there cannot be any successful projection onto something outside our practice. As soon as we talk about the putative target of the projection, we do this within the limiting frame of language.

The realist, instead emphasizes that the anchorage of the beliefs in action and practice has nothing to do with the truth question. Whether a belief is true, we decide by how reality is. According to the realist, this presupposes a concept of reality which does not include logical and epistemological relations to human subjects. (Trigg 1997, 217).

Phillips does not accept this presupposition and claims instead that such a belief as that God exists has no meaning outside religious life. Therefore he cannot consider a realist explanation of the meaning of the utterance "God exists" as possible. Let us pick up one such realist explanation, namely the idea that the belief that God exists could be considered as a kind of scientific hypothesis. (Scott and Moore, 403). However, I will criticize this idea in a different manner than Phillips probably would have done.

One who conceives of the meaning of the belief that God exists in terms of a scientific hypothesis is Richard Swinburne. What follows is a very concise presentation of his idea, just in order to grasp its controversial presuppositions. Swinburne points to the order of the universe whereby all the events in it follow fundamental laws of nature. (Swinburne 1979, 136). He declares that we cannot explain this order scientifically, since science cannot explain why the most general laws of nature work as they actually do. If we still want to answer this question, as far as he can see, the only alternative to scientific explanations is some person-related model of explanation.

Thus, there are two possibilities. The one is that the orderliness of nature is the place where all explanation ends. According to the other we postulate a person with enormous power and knowledge. Through continuous acting this person makes it, that physical entities follow just the order, which the most general laws of nature express. In this sense, Swinburne claims that in relation to the given evidence the theistic hypothesis is more probable than the atheistic one. (Swinburne 1979, 140f).

The kind of probabilistic argument which Swinburne elaborates by referring to the orderliness of the universe, does not make it more probable that God exists than not. Rather, whereas the orderliness of the universe does not become intelligible from a naturalistic perspective at all, it becomes so, at least to some extent, from a theistic perspective. This is what increases the probability of the theistic point of view.

Of course, Swinburne's argument is much more sophisticated than I have the space to present it here. However, in spite of the high degree of sophistication, I am not convinced that this could be a successful way of explaining the meaning of religious beliefs. I will do no more than point to John Hick and John Leslie Mackie, who have criticized Swinburne's argument.

Hick opposes every attempt to compare the probability of theism with the probability of naturalism. Such a comparison presupposes that theism and naturalism are kinds of hypotheses which are supposed to explain all knowledge and experience. But how could there be any way of assessing standpoints such as theism or naturalism which claim to account for everything? There is no set of statements in relation to which we could judge such standpoints as probable. Such a set, too, would be part of the theistic respectively the naturalistic totality. Thus, there is no evidence that could support the one or the other total view. (Hick 1970, 29).

This type of criticism applies to Swinburne for the following reason: According to him, it is the theistic perspective that makes the orderliness of the universe into a credible one. However, this claim already presupposes a theistic view. Otherwise, he could not say that it is the theistic perspective that makes the orderliness of the universe intelligible. The theistic view has this explanatory function only for those who have already accepted it.

Mackie, among other things, aims at the limits of Swinburne's probabilistic reasoning. Swinburne has succeeded in placing only a contingently existing being but not a necessarily existing being behind the natural universe. So, the search for an ultimate explanation has only been moved one step further back. The existence of a being that only contingently exists still needs explanation. At this point, it turns into a question of preference. In their metaphysical picture of reality some people prefer just one unexplained element, i.e. God. Other people advocating another metaphysical picture prefer several unexplained elements, for instance, the most elementary particles. (Mackie 1982, 133-149).

Why not agree to the atheist's realism? Previously I described an important part of the criticism against metaphysical realism, including the atheist's realism. It is the criticism of the idea of only one true description of reality. This idea is not tenable, since we can conceive of different individuating descriptions depending on different circumstances. The so-called antirealists have a point in their mentioning that different individuating descriptions get their meaning in the context in which they are presented. However, some developments of this idea are seriously flawed.

### Criticism of religious antirealism

A common objection to antirealism is that it leads to relativism. Antirealism emphasizes strongly that for our concepts and beliefs we are dependent on a certain context and that we cannot talk about unconceptualized reality. However, Trigg suspects the antirealist of wanting to say much more than that. This is the case if the antirealist also denies that there is something beyond the tradition that grounds or justifies our beliefs about reality. No doubt, the antirealist can critically discuss what is correct, for instance, within Catholicism or within Christianity. However, the antirealist cannot critically discuss the truth of Catholicism as such or of Christianity as such. Taking away the possibility of this discussion is for Trigg the same as denying the very idea of objectivity.

As Trigg sees it, the antirealist goes further than just pointing out that different communities and societies construct different worlds. The antirealist denies the very idea of

discovering reality and conceives of reality only as a social construction. However, exactly this idea of social construction is presented as if it were a fact about the world. Let us apply the idea of social construction to antirealism itself. Then, the antirealist cannot claim without strong reasons that one should listen to the antirealist construction instead of to another one. (Trigg 1997, 216).

Like so many others, Trigg relates the question about religious realism to debates about scientific realism. There, among other questions, it is discussed how we can characterize the nature of reality and how reality relates to our understanding of it. In his criticism of religious antirealism, Trigg wants to make the following points by critically scrutinizing the antirealist verificationist's position. As Trigg sees it, both the realist and the antirealist are involved in the most fundamental of all philosophical discussions: How can we characterize the nature of reality? What is its relation to our understanding of it?

It is typical for verificationists to connect these fundamental questions with a scientific world view: We cannot consider to be real, what we cannot scientifically verify. According to Trigg, to agree to this means three things. First, one ignores the very need for a metaphysical base for science. Second, one does not consider it necessary to justify the practice which science actually is. Third, one categorically rejects every possibility to reach something that is beyond our direct ability of observation, i.e. that is transcendent. But then one runs into problems, for instance, with physics. There, it is accepted to deal with all these non-observable microentities that in principle are not accessible to us. As Trigg understands it, the presupposition of entities beyond our experience is a necessary assumption in contemporary science. Thus, the very circumstance that one in religion, too, wants to refer to something beyond our ability of observation, i.e. something transcendent, can scarcely be an objection to religion. (Trigg 1997, 213).

Let us clarify what this argument has to do with Trigg's criticism against what he labels religious antirealism. Certainly, the so-called religious antirealist is not against religion as many verificationists actually are. Common to both the religious antirealist and the antirealist verificationist is that they do not reckon with any metaphysical ground for knowledge of any kind. Therefore, one also cannot state anything about a reality existing beyond language, practice, verification or theory. According to Trigg, however, the assumption of a metaphysical reality is necessary to avoid relativism.

### Reality as reality out there

I agree with the realist that it is important to distinguish between what a belief means in a certain practice and what it means to say that a certain belief is true. I maintain, too, that there is a difference between the questions of which actions presuppose which beliefs and of how we decide the truth of them. However, I do not understand that this should presuppose a concept of what is real as something that is, so to speak, out there. (Trigg 1997, 217). One can make all the mentioned distinctions requested by the realist without being a metaphysical realist in Trigg's sense if one refrains from denying that there is anything beyond language and practice. Not all the critics of metaphysical realism, religious realism included, deny this. Instead, some of them refrain from either maintaining or denying something about an unconceptualized reality as such. The reason for this is that they consider such an idea as meaningless. The kind of antirealist who expressively denies that there is anything beyond language and practice, seems in his or her denial to be just as misled as the realist. Both seem

to take the spatial terminology that can be found in expressions like "the reality outside us" too literally.

If one uses such spatial terminology, sometimes this depends on that one does not always observe different senses of the word "exist". There is, for instance, a difference between independent existence, external existence and objective existence. I will follow Uskali Mäki's terminology (Mäki 1996, 432f) which, although I do not find it quite satisfying, nevertheless is sufficiently illustrative for my aims.

*Independent existence* of x means that x exists independently of human consciousness. I do not want to dive into the discussion on idealism and materialism. Therefore, I will content myself with saying that material objects are clear examples of entities with independent existence. *External existence* of x means that x exists outside the human consciousness. Material objects have external existence but also, for instance, social entities can have it. We live in societies that so to speak exist really although we have created them by our ideas of society. Finally, *objective existence* means that x exists objectively in relation to a certain description if and only if the very description has not produced the existence of x. Material entities, social entities as money and markets, and such entities as preferences, intentions and expectations, can all exist objectively. That the last mentioned entities, too, can exist objectively depends on the fact that when we describe them from a third person perspective, they are not produced by those descriptions. A consumer's preferences do not begin to exist by having been placed within a theory of economics. As something mental, the consumer's preferences already exist "in" the consumer. However, the theory of economics does not describe and explain this mental phenomenon but the consumer's preferences. In this sense the consumer's preferences exist objectively although they do not exist independently or externally.

We have the religious realist, who explicitly claims that God exists beyond language and practice. We have one kind of religious antirealist, who explicitly denies this. Both have in common that they are focusing upon the concept of independent existence. I support the religious realist's criticism against the antirealist who explicitly denies that there is anything beyond language, practice and consensus. This denial involves mixing up the questions of how we decide whether something is true and of what it means that something is true. However, I want to maintain against the religious realist's criticism that it does not need the concept of independent existence but rather the concept of objective existence.

Let us first consider some reasons why the concept of objective existence is necessary and after that some reasons why the concept of independent existence is not, by relating these concepts to the concept of truth.

One who actually throws out the concept of objective existence by defining truth as consensus, is the radical antirealist Don Cupitt. As he sees it, truth comes up only within language and this means within culture. We do not have any access to the independent objective reality that so to speak would come before language. Also we cannot refer to such a reality to check the correspondence between reality and its linguistic representations. (Cupitt 1991, 143-145). Cupitt conceives of reality as a battle field on which there is a struggle between competing stories about what is going on. Therefore, truth is a state of arguing. Truth is the story presently on the top of the list of stories. Truth is the continuously shifting consensus. (Cupitt 1991, 20).

Such a point of view is difficult to defend. Let us assume that now there is a consensus about what is true. Nevertheless it can be the case that one becomes puzzled and starts asking whether it is really true. Certainly, with regard to procedures of deciding

whether something is true, the consensus actually plays an important role. However, it is not the very consensus that causes what is true. It is also not we who create what is true when we cannot accept certain truth claims any longer and replace them by new ones. The relativist definition of truth as consensus makes the distinction between "being right" and "thinking one is right" impossible. In the end, we could not conceive of ourselves as critically thinking beings. (Putnam 1981, 122).

This point, I think, supports the realist's division between the subject of knowledge and its object concerning our search for truth. According to the realist there actually is something of which we can have knowledge. The reason skepticism becomes acute is that there are problems concerning how we can achieve knowledge of this something. To solve this problem, Trigg proposes that the way out should not be fundamentalism that builds uncritically on the own tradition. Instead, it should be a metaphysical thesis about the nature of reality. Epistemological questions of whether and how we can achieve knowledge of reality, are another matter. Trigg wonders, therefore, whether those who label themselves "critical realists", do not actually mix up metaphysical questions with epistemological ones. The epistemological questions refer to us and our ability to know. The metaphysical questions concern the status of the objective reality. What is real, is independent of whether and how we use our critical abilities. He points out that the notion of fallibility could not be even meaningful without the logically prior concept of objective reality.

I think Trigg is right about this latter point. However, what I want to criticize him for is immediately connecting this concept to the concept of independent existence. By doing this he excludes the possibility of talking about objectivity from the perspective of what I previously mentioned as the aspect of objective existence.

As far as religion is concerned, according to Trigg, metaphysical realism has the advantage of giving support to the idea that God is different. Trigg considers this idea important for every religious faith. Again, we have to distinguish between the metaphysical question and the epistemological one, in this field, of how knowledge of the divine reality is possible. As Trigg sees it, it is one most urgent task of every religion to answer this epistemological question. As for this task, the specific function of realism is to clarify that religion has nothing to do with construction of reality. Instead, it is about responding to something that is completely different from what we are and on which everything is dependent. In this way, by pointing to the transcendent God, metaphysical realism amounts to the effort of pointing out the basis and the guarantee of all our knowledge. (Trigg 1997, 219).

Even the critic of metaphysical realism can accept that there is something about which we can have knowledge, namely entities with objective existence, i.e. entities whose existence is not the result of the very description of them, irrespective of whether their independent and/or external existence is at issue. Here we are concerned with the ontological side of the discussion. The critic, too, can accept that we do not achieve knowledge by constructing the number of planets or that  $2+3=5$ . Nevertheless, it is thanks to our construction of concepts that we can achieve knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the reality of which we cannot talk without using concepts. I do not believe that this would be blending epistemological and ontological questions with each other. As far as I can see, it is a question of agreeing to our limitations in the sense that reality for us is always conceptualized reality. The critic of metaphysical realism need not be opposed to ontology. It is opposed to metaphysics in the sense that we could raise metaphysical theses about the nature of reality as such.

The realist assumes that realism is a guarantee against skepticism by pointing out that the independent reality is the basis of knowledge. The realist does not exclude the possibility that we may be wrong. However, the realist claims that without the idea of an independently existing reality, not even the notion of fallibility would be meaningful.

Although the so-called antirealist has difficulties with the idea of an unconceptualized independently existing reality, he or she is not necessarily prevented from accepting the idea of objectivity. However, it does not relate to some unconceptualized reality or to statements about this unconceptualized reality. Instead, it relates to our different conceptualizations that help us to explain what we experience. They help us to understand and solve the different problems we meet in our lives, for instance, when we become confronted with perceptions that we have not expected at all. They force us to get our beliefs and activities into order again by explaining the unexpected perceptions, perhaps by means of modified or new conceptualizations.

The possibility of being wrong about reality presupposes experiences of reality but not the idea of an independent reality as such, as the metaphysical realist wants to maintain. Discovering mistakes builds upon the experience that most of the time in our different activities we know in practice how to successfully apply important distinctions. They are distinctions, for example, between true and false, right and wrong, good and bad. In situations in which the application causes difficulties, then, we need to amend existing conceptualizations or to create more adequate ones to succeed in applying those distinctions again. In spite of the difficulties that will always arise, the antirealist is content with this. The realist seems furthermore to claim a ground that at least in principle decides decisively what is really true, right and good. The realist seems to wish some absolute guarantee against arbitrariness in our conceptions of the reality.

According to Trigg, metaphysical realism in religion is a guarantee of God not becoming reduced to something immanent. Furthermore, by referring to the transcendent God, metaphysical realism points out the ground of all knowledge. According to Trigg, such a metaphysical thesis about the nature of reality, i.e. a metaphysical thesis about God's nature is needed if we want to avoid skepticism.

However, if God is totally different, how can we then assert something about God at all? We cannot. This is the answer of all those who under no circumstances want to be religious metaphysical realists. It does not matter whether they are religious antirealists, religious internal realists, religious nonrealists or whatever the labels are. As they consider it, it is meaningless to state anything about God as an unconceptualized entity with independent existence.

Belief in God does not need to become meaningless for that. In certain situations it is just a natural reaction. In this sense, applying Mäki's terminology, what belief in God is about, exists objectively. When, that is, we describe a person's belief in God from a third person perspective, it is not the very descriptions or theories that cause belief in God and what it is about. The person's belief in God is already there. Belief in God is there as something mental. However, we do not describe what is mental but the person's belief. Considered in this way, what belief in God is about, exists objectively although it exists neither independently nor externally.

The realist's expected objection, of course, is that then we will devalue God to be a human projection or fiction. If it is a devaluation, i.e. if the judgement is normatively negative, however, depends upon what we mean by fiction and what function we consider fictions to have in our lives.

## The role of fictions

Let me put forward the following idea. I will begin by considering what role fictions can play in science. Assume that we want to understand an observation we have made. As a first step, we propose an explaining theory, i.e. a structural conception of what reality could be like. On this level, the theory is fictitious or hypothetical in the sense that we have created or elaborated it but not proved yet whether there is something substantial in it. In a second step we apply the theory to a certain field of investigation and generate hypotheses about entities with independent, external or objective existence. We prove the hypotheses in that we examine the correspondence between statements of two groups. On the one hand, there are the statements about observations that we expect from the hypotheses. On the other hand, there are the statements about observations that actually occur. If there is correspondence, a certain hypothesis is at least not falsified but, in the best case, confirmed. Let us assume the latter case. Then, the theory is not considered any longer as fictitious.

Let us now take the case when new knowledge arises, so that the theory cannot be used to generate provable hypotheses any longer. Then, the theory will be considered as fictitious in the sense that we do not conceive it of relating to reality anymore.

This may sound as if a theory is either fictitious or not fictitious. However, let us be careful with this disjunction. A theory conceived of as a conception of what reality could be like, is a human product. We remember that correspondence is between statements of two groups. On the one hand, we have statements about observations that we expect from the proposed hypotheses. On the other hand, we have statements about observations that actually occur. Now, whether there is correspondence has to do with if and how reality so to speak offers resistance. Through our experience of resistance reality decides what we can tenably say about it. This does not mean that we therefore could say that theories are true or false. To accept a theory, according to this point of view, does not mean believing that the theory is true. It means believing that it is empirically adequate, i.e. that concerning what is observable, it enables us to generate hypotheses and through them, to say what is true. (van Fraassen 1980, 18). In relation to our observations it is the question of continuously adjusting our theories proposing what reality could be like. We do this by connecting the theories via hypotheses with concrete experiences we have of the empirical resistance that reality offers.

Let me apply this reasoning to conceptions of God, i.e. let us consider the role fiction may play in religion. Assume that we meet a situation of crisis in which by reflection we want to come to grips with the existential experience caused by the situation. As a first step, part of the reflection on such a situation will involve a conception of what it means to be a human being. In the next step we elaborate applications of the proposed conception to our lives. We examine whether we can identify ourselves in the conception of what it means to be a human being. More precisely, we need expressions of what it means to live with suffering and death, love and happiness. They are concrete realities in our lives, however, we cannot completely explain and understand them. We also cannot explain or define them away. If we can identify ourselves in the expressions, we experience them as adequate. The conception backing up the expressions is a fiction in the sense that we have created it. Nevertheless, the conception can teach us about life, i.e. about what it means to be a human being.

Let us assume that new experiences arise so that we do not experience expressions of what it means to live with the conditions of life any longer as adequate ones. Usually, those expressions will fade away and we have to create new ones.

Is this not equal to devaluing religions and their secular analogues to being only fictions? The conceptions of views of life about what it means to be a human being, certainly, are human products. However, whether we can identify our lives in expressions linked to them is not only a psychological question. It has also to do with the kind of biological and social beings we are. In this regard even the conceptions of the views of life about what it means to be a human being, can meet resistance offered by the lived reality. Thus, we need to critically scrutinize them, too, and sometimes even to sort some of them out. Also here it is not a matter of deciding definitely which of our expressions are adequate or not. Here, too, it is rather the question of continuously adjusting different conceptions of what it means to be a human being. We do this by concretely experiencing the resistance of the lived reality.

The point, which the religious antirealist, the religious nonrealist and the religious internal realist want to make is the following: Our utterances are about the lived reality and not about an unconceptualized transcendent reality beyond language and practice. It is not the issue of fiction contra reality but about expressions continuously scrutinized by life.

## Consequences

My critical evaluation of religious realism has consequences for how the debate on religious realism perhaps might continue. Conceiving of religious realism and antirealism, or for that matter of any realism and antirealism, as contradictory is not very fruitful. My proposal is to clarify different aspects of the so-called realism and antirealism depending on which problem is at issue. Doing this, we can consider different axes on which realism and antirealism contradict each other. The axis that in this article I have mostly circled around, is the question of what we could mean by the term "reality". More precisely, the issue about what we could mean by this term relates to the question of how we can explain our experiences of reality.

In this article I have argued for an internal perspective, because the question of what reality consists of, only makes sense within a theory (Putnam 1981, 49), and I would like to add, the question of what reality as lived reality consists of, only makes sense within the conceptions of views of life. Earlier experiences, from which we create theories and views of life, shape the background for describing reality. However, it is always reality in which we live and of which we are part. I do not deny that there is more than we can grasp. I also join the realist when emphasizing that it is not by means of our conceptualizations that we bring about what is true. However, it is by means of conceptualizations that are adequate in relation to our observational and our existential experiences that we describe reality. I cannot see any reason to maintain that there is only one true description of reality. Therefore, I also see no reason to maintain that truth is correspondence between description and unconceptualized independently existing entities. Yet, it is exactly this idea that most of the debates on religious realism and antirealism focus upon. I think it would be more fruitful for the debates to move the focus to the internal perspective.

I want to thank Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, Anders Jeffner, Göran Möller, Michael Scott, Mark Sluys, Mikael Stenmark and the participants of the research seminar in philosophy of religion at Uppsala University for having critically discussed drafts of this article with me.

## Literature

Cupitt, Don

1991 *What is a Story?* London: SCM Press

Dingguo, Hong

1996 On the Neutral Status of QM in the Dispute of Realism vs. Anti-Realism. Cohen, Robert S, Hilpinen, Risto and Renzong, Qiu (eds), *Realism and Anti-Realism in the Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 307-316

Elgin, Catherine Z

1996 *Considered Judgment*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Fraassen, Bas van

1980 *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Hick, John

1970 *Arguments for the Existence of God*. London: Macmillan

Hilpinen, Risto

1996 On Some Formulations of Realism, or How Many Objects are there in the World? Cohen, Robert S, Hilpinen, Risto and Renzong, Qiu (eds), *Realism and Anti-Realism in the Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1-10

Mackie, John Leslie

1982 *The Miracle of Theism. Arguments for and against the Existence of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Mäki, Uskali

1996 Scientific Realism and Some Peculiarities of Economics. Cohen, Robert S, Hilpinen, Risto and Renzong, Qiu (eds), *Realism and Anti-Realism in the Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 427-447

O'Connor, June

1993 It's Time to Talk About Trust. Runzo, Joseph (ed), *Is God Real?* London: Macmillan, 176-181

Phillips, Dewi Z

1993 On Really Believing. Runzo, Joseph (ed), *Is God Real?* London: Macmillan, 85-108

Putnam, Hilary

1981 *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press1988 *Representation and Reality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press

Scott, Michael - Moore, Andrew

1997 Can Theological Realism Be Refuted? *Religious Studies* 33, 401-418

Swinburne, Richard

1979 *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Trigg, Roger

1997 Theological realism and antirealism. Quinn, Philip L and Charles Taliaferro (eds), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 213-220