

A Case for Theological Realism

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If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

What sort of question is this? A merely semantic one that begs the meaning of the word “sound”? The falling tree would have caused a disturbance in the atmosphere. It may have made an impression in the soil where it fell. It may have crushed some of the undergrowth. Some of its branches may have separated from the main trunk of the tree. If the question is simply one that implicates the meaning of the word “sound,” then it seems rather trivial to me. If the point is simply that the disturbance in the physical environment caused by the falling tree must be heard or perceived in order to be called a “sound,” then one simply needs to be clear that the word “sound” is being defined in this particular way.

However, the question may be posed to raise a more philosophical issue: Is existence contingent on perception? Can it be said that “to be is to be perceived”? Does the phenomenon we ordinarily call “sound” occur only if someone is around to hear it? Could one just as well ask, must a falling tree be perceived – seen, heard, perhaps even felt – in order to be a falling tree?

Perhaps the philosophical question need not be quite so lacking nuance as it appears above. The word “perception” need not be understood to refer only to that which is mediated to us by our bodily sense organs. Indeed, there are metaphysical views in which God is understood to be in

some way integral to all events, such that divine perception is understood to be constitutive of these events. Process metaphysics is one example. Although it lies beyond the scope of my argument to take up this issue here, a case can be made that perception is integral to existence. That said, I do wish to deny that *human* perception, whether defined strictly in terms of sensate experience or understood more broadly, is in any way requisite to the existence of most real-world events. And I wish to urge a metaphysical worldview that is congenial to both common sense and a scientific frame of mind.

For the most part, scientists claim to study phenomena that they believe exist independently of their empirical research and sensory perceptions. To be sure, there are some phenomena, most notably in sub-atomic physics, that have been found to be affected by the very attempt to perceive them. Also, in the biological and psychological sciences it is widely understood that observational methods often may be found to exert influences on the individual organisms under study. I think we all realize, for example, that when people know they are being watched and studied, they are likely to alter their behaviors in various ways. A good scientist will acknowledge that certain findings regarding the behavior of sub-atomic particles, fauna, or human beings may have been affected by her research interventions, but the scientist's observations are judged to affect only the behavior, not the existence, of the study subjects. The existence of the subjects themselves is never thought to be contingent on the observations or perceptions of the scientist.¹

Philosophically speaking, most of us, and scientists in particular, are realists. The core conviction of the realist is that there is a real world that exists whether or not we happen to

perceive it. Our own planet Earth, for example, existed for over four billion years before human beings emerged and were able to perceive it. This is not to say that everything that exists is independent of human perception. Many human creations, such as social organizations, cultural practices, and works of art, are contingent to varying degrees on human perceptions of them. However, the real world at least includes (but is hardly limited to) everything that pre-dates human existence and everything that human beings have not created.

The Critical Realist Perspective

In philosophy and science there are various forms of realism. For the purposes of this essay, however, only one further specification is necessary. There is a form of realism called *critical* realism, common to science and critical thinking more generally, which acknowledges that human perceptions and knowledge of reality are fallible and incomplete. Thus, our knowledge of the world can never be said to correspond precisely and completely to things as they are. All experiences are necessarily interpretations. Our apprehension of the world is limited both by the limits of our perceptual abilities and by the conceptual frameworks we bring to all events. All our feelings, all our encounters, all our observations of events, result in interpreted experiences that are shaped by our conceptual frameworks.

The critical realist stance taken here combines a realist ontology (there is a real world not contingent on our human perceptions) with a fallibilist epistemology (our knowledge of this world is never altogether complete or infallible). This does not mean our knowledge claims

about the real world are misguided or wrong, but it does mean they are provisional and potentially open to revision. We may possess more certitude about some things than others, but we can never claim absolute certainty or truth. That which is truthful is that which, to the best of our knowledge and understanding—given the available evidence, all our experience, and the demands of human reason—must be judged to correspond to the way things really are.ⁱⁱ

The critical realist perspective is eminently suited to the natural sciences. The primary aim of the scientist is not invention or creation but discovery – discovery of what already exists and of the patterns of relationships that may provide causal explanations for what is discovered. The critical realist perspective is somewhat less suited to the social sciences inasmuch as all of our social reality is socially constructed. The social worlds we inhabit, while constrained by all the material conditions of life on planet Earth, are nonetheless human creations. As such, they are not entirely independent of our human perceptions. The U. S. economy, for example, fluctuates not only according to the ease or difficulty of obtaining economic resources (food, timber, coal, iron ore, water, oil, etc.), but also with respect to consumer confidence, changing lifestyles, governmental regulations or lack thereof, and many other human factors. Moreover, collectively we could change our economic system if we were so inclined. There is no objective, independently given economic order to which human beings must conform. To speak of the way things really are regarding our social existence is to speak of the way we have created and currently perceive things to be, not the way they necessarily are and will always be.

Critical Realism and Christianity

Is critical realism is a suitable perspective for Christian theology? The question is not simply whether God exists, but whether God is real in the sense that God is not a human artifact but rather a singular Presence, the One who perdures “though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Ps 46:2). Or is God a human construct, a product of the human imagination, a linguistic creation to denote some conception or idea or phenomenon that contributes to our self-understanding, perhaps, or to our understanding of the human condition? Would God really exist even if nobody perceived God? – if nobody believed in God?

Voltaire is remembered for saying, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” That may be true, but it settles nothing. It only hints at an explanation of why some thinkers who reject theological realism continue to want to talk about God. In effect, they argue for an invented God, a God who presumably fills some human need. Theological realism is the view that God does exist, and that God is real, not merely a useful way of thinking that addresses some human need such as our need for order and meaning or our need for a conceptual icon that warrants and motivates us to aspire to our highest human ideals.

In my view, a critical realist perspective is not only eminently suitable to Christian theology, it is utterly necessary. The *critical* perspective is needed because we need to grasp that when we attempt to speak of God, we are attempting to speak of a reality that far surpasses our capacities for thought and understanding. We are attempting to speak of what is ultimate and infinite. As the Old Testament prophet, speaking on behalf of the Almighty, put it, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isa 55:8). There is an abundance of warrant in

scripture and Christian theology for humility when it comes to knowledge claims about God. We can hardly fully grasp what it means to say “God.” That alone should not lead us to question God’s existence. Rather, it should confirm that we are not merely constructing God in our own image.

The *realist* perspective is needed in Christian theology because the God of Christian theology is, first of all and above all else, the Creator of the world, the “Maker of heaven and earth.”ⁱⁱⁱ The very terms we use to speak of the world, as *universe* or *cosmos*, reveal the implicit conviction that the world possesses some sort of unity and order. Without unity and order, there could be no science, because there would be no consistent patterns, no discernible laws, no constant relationships. Many scientists today who deny any divine intelligence or purposive presence in the world must resort to non-sequiturs: they speak of self-organizing processes, or self-organizing systems. They thereby disclose that they find an order to those phenomena they study that they cannot fully explain.

It is abundantly clear that many people have little or no need to explain the ordered existence of the world. Or they simply accept the view of astrophysics that it all began some fourteen billion years ago with a Big Bang, from which quickly proceeded the governing patterns of relationships, or natural laws, that generated the ordered universe. If you stop and think about it, it is an utterly fantastic notion, which may or may not be true. Personally, I do not find the idea of God any more fantastic.

But more to the point, I do not see how Christian theology can be maintained in any meaningful way without the affirmation that there is a Creator God. There are various doctrines and teachings within Christianity that I find dispensable, or even objectionable. I would never commend a slavish orthodoxy. However, the idea of God as Creator, pre-existing humankind, co-existent with the world (described as chaos in Genesis 1), bringing order and life into being, strikes me as non-negotiable within the Christian faith and tradition. A non-realist theology, that is, a theology that regards God as in some way or other a human construct, is oxymoronic within a Christian context. It denies that God is real, yet still claims to be a “word about God” (*theologia*). You cannot have your theological cake and eat it too.

A realist perspective is also critical to Christian theology as an expression of integrity of thought and speech within the community of faith. As a parish minister for over twenty-five years, I am confident that the overwhelming majority of my parishioners understood the word “God” to refer to some purposive reality beyond themselves, a reality that pre-existed humankind and will not end regardless of what happens to the human species. The stance of theological realism is the implicit if not always articulated view of most religious believers.

To be sure, religious language may function in a variety of ways. It is frequently expressive of deep feelings such as awe, joy, fear, dread, love, and wonder. The word “God” may even be used as imprecation or curse. Nonetheless, most religious believers also use religious language as referential language, language that says something to them about the way things really and ultimately are. This seems to be true whether religious people understand their referential

language to be literal, analogical, or metaphorical. It is in any case language about things that are taken to be real. It is language about which it makes sense to say that it may be true, or false, or mostly true or mostly false.

In short, while religious believers may conceive of God in various ways, whether they know it or not, they are theological realists, holding realistic conceptions of God, and in many cases claiming to have had experiences that they regard as experiences of God. Even if they have significant doubts about the existence of God, it matters to them whether God exists and whether God is real. I cannot escape the conviction that to speak about God to them without belief in God's existence or reality would constitute a kind of deception and betrayal.

The Christian God is for Real

It should go without saying that nothing I have said here constitutes a proof for the existence of God. Although various arguments can be made to support the conviction that God exists, none rises to the level of proof in my estimation. My aim here is more modest: I simply wish to establish that a realistic conception of God is not just congruent with, but essential to, the Christian faith in any form that would be recognizable as such. Every variety or permutation of Christian theology must be a form of theological realism. The God of Jesus of Nazareth and his followers was and remains the Creator of the world.^{iv}

i. Perhaps this statement should be qualified to the extent that particle physicists have discovered sub-atomic particles with extremely short lives that apparently come into existence as a result of

extraordinary technologically sophisticated experiments designed to precipitate their appearance. Even so, most scientists regard themselves as observers and discoverers, not creators, of these particles.

ii. For a more extended treatment of critical realism as defined here, see my book, *Consenting to God and Nature: Toward a Theocentric, Naturalistic, Theological Ethics* (Pickwick Publications, 2006), pp. 15–20

iii. The first tenet of the Apostle's Creed.

iv. As all biblical scholars know, there was a movement within early Christianity, associated with the figure of Marcion, that rejected the view that the God of Jesus was the Creator God. The fact that the Old Testament is an integral part of Christian scripture confirms that Marcion's views were repudiated by the early Church. Even if Marcion had prevailed, however, it would not have meant a rejection of theological realism.