

## The Descriptive Criterion and Models of God-Modeling: Response to Hustwit's "Can Models of God Compete?"

Samuel Ruhmkorff

Received: 31 May 2007 / Accepted: 11 June 2007 /  
Published online: 21 August 2007  
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2007

**Abstract** In "Can Models of God Compete?", J. R. Hustwit engages with fundamental questions regarding the epistemological foundations of modeling God. He argues that the approach of fallibilism best captures the criteria he employs to choose among different "models of God-modeling," including one criterion that I call the Descriptive Criterion. I argue that Hustwit's case for fallibilism should include both a stronger defense for the Descriptive Criterion and an explanation of the reasons that fallibilism does not run awry of this criterion in virtue of its apparent inability to make sense of debates among models of God extant in religious communities. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

**Keywords** Models of God · Religious epistemology

J. R. Hustwit's excellent paper, "Can Models of God Compete? Testing the Strength of Religion's Language-Reality Ties," is directed towards a number of essential questions concerning the intentions and capabilities of theistic discourse (Hustwit 2007). I think the issues he raises are crucial both to the aims of this conference and to theological inquiry in general. In this response, I raise two questions about his methodology of evaluating ways of thinking about our talk about God.

Hustwit operates on the assumption of the co-constitution thesis, which holds that humans' experience of the world is a product of both the world and our sensory, cognitive, and cultural natures. He is interested in discovering the best "Model of God-Modeling," or MGM, among four choices: mysteriosophy, theopoetics, critical realism, and fallibilism. Hustwit concludes that we should approach God-modeling from the standpoint of fallibilism, the view that our God-modeling is referential in intent and ability, but that we are in dire epistemic straits due to our limited understanding even of the proper criteria for model choice.

---

S. Ruhmkorff (✉)

Social Studies, Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Road, Great Barrington, MA 01230, USA  
e-mail: sruhmkorff@simons-rock.edu

I think that Hustwit is exactly right to be concerned with the epistemology of God-modeling. Just as some of the most fundamental questions in ethics have to do with what we are up to when we engage in ethical discourse, when we engage in theology and philosophy of religion, we must attend to the epistemological foundations of our practices. But just as the practice of modeling God carries with it an implicit or explicit model of modeling God, the practice of evaluating MGM's carries with it implicitly or explicitly a method of evaluating Models of God-Modeling. This paper begins with an attempt to clarify the criteria by which Hustwit evaluates the four MGM's that he considers – what we might call his Model of Modeling God-Modeling, or MMGM. As far as I can discern, Hustwit is committed to the following criteria:

- The Coherence Criterion: whether an MGM displays internal coherence;
- The Descriptive Criterion: whether an MGM is faithful descriptively to religious discourse outside of the academy; and
- The Subjectivity Criterion: whether an MGM is appropriately mindful of the co-constitution thesis.

Throughout his discussion, Hustwit is interested in establishing whether the MGM's allow models of God to compete, where competition means evaluation by a set of criteria intended to favor the model of God that is closest to being adequate to the independently existing reality about the divine.

Hustwit's methodology is nicely illustrated by his treatment of mysteriosophy. Mysteriosophy is the claim that our models of God can have at best a causal connection with the divine, with no hope of representation or reference. Hustwit critiques mysteriosophy on two grounds: first, that it inherits the incoherencies of Kantian epistemology, and second, that it is not descriptively accurate of the intentions of those in "living religious communities" who mean their religious language to be describing a mind-independent reality. Hustwit notes that on mysteriosophy, there is no foundation for competition among models of God.

I would like to raise two questions about the Descriptive Criterion. The first question arises from the fact that the Descriptive Criterion and the idea of competition among models of God are closely related. The Descriptive Criterion demands aptness to the discourse of religious communities. It seems to be part of the discourse of many religious communities to compare, evaluate, champion, and decry various models of God. If we should demand, as Hustwit thinks, that MGM's recognize that religious language "attempts to describe a non-linguistic reality," it seems we should also demand that they recognize that religious discourse is committed to the possibility of genuine competition among models of God. Thus if we grant that MGM's should be evaluated by their suitability for describing the practices of believers, then believers' focus on competition of models results in the following criterion for an MGM:

- The Competition Criterion: MGM's must make sense of the reasoned attempts at adjudicating debates among models of God extant in religious communities.

Just as the Descriptive Criterion is similar to demands in metaethics that accounts of moral language account for the *prima facie* realist nature of moral discourse, the Competition Criterion is analogous to the demand that metaethical theories make

sense of the *prima facie* reality of moral disagreement.<sup>1</sup> Although Hustwit's paper does not display unambiguous commitment to the Competition Criterion, I will assume it in what follows.

The fallibility of Hustwit's fallibilism is an active, robust disposition rather than a passive capacity for error:

There is no conceptual or logical contradiction in constructing a completely accurate model of God, only that the mediating structures of subjectivity make such a model highly improbable.

The proper criteria by which one judges the correspondence of a model to reality are elusive, and probably unavailable.

Fallibilism admits that models of God do measure up to a real God despite our ignorance, and that some criteria could be used to decide that competition, if only we knew which criteria were best (Hustwit 2007).

In these passages, Hustwit seeks to distinguish fallibilism from the naïve optimism of critical realism. However, it is not clear to me whether, in doing so, he has prevented fallibilism from satisfying the Competition Criterion. The idea that, short of significant and blind fortune, we are doomed to employ inadequate criteria in evaluating models of God seems to undermine fallibilism's claim to making sense of our theistic discourse. If we should be deeply skeptical about our ability to decipher the criteria for assessing competing models of God, should the discourse in living religious communities continue in anything like its current form?

I'd like to introduce a technical term: that of *true competition*. I do not have time for a full analysis, but at a minimum, in true competition there must be some consensus about what criteria are being used to evaluate the competitors. There are some clear examples on either side: Calvinball and fashion design do not constitute true competition; Formula One racing and curling do. A competition evaluated by some disputable and disputed criteria may be true competition – Olympic Figure Skating and United States Presidential Elections come to mind – but there must be some consensus and mutual trust in enough of the criteria to sustain the debate. If fallibilism is radically skeptical about the criteria for competition among models of God, then it isn't clear that this competition counts as true competition, and thus it isn't clear whether fallibilism satisfies the Competition Criterion.

It could be that Hustwit is more optimistic about the possibility of progressive discourse than I have supposed. I think there may be a tension here, however: the more that fallibilism allows for true competition, the more it resembles critical realism. The less it allows for true competition, the more it risks failing to satisfy the Competition Criterion. The reason for this tension is clear: taking a realistic attitude towards religious debates among models of God pushes us towards making the most sense of those debates that we can – that is to say, towards the idea that these debates are in principle capable of resolution and that we have a good chance of resolving them.

<sup>1</sup>Note that for ease of reference, I am presenting this as an independent criterion, but the Competition Criterion could be construed as a special case of the Descriptive Criterion.

The second question I have about the Descriptive Criterion concerns the motivations for it. One way to stop the push towards critical realism that I have just described is by admitting that there is significant religious discourse comparing models of God with realist intent, but denying that this discourse is compatible with the underlying truth about our epistemic capabilities. This would be to introduce a kind of error theory about debates among models of God. But this maneuver is also available to theopoetics. Theopoets can admit that religious discourse has realist purport, but either deny that it succeeds in having cognitive content, or deny that it refers. They may be “offending all religious persons equally” (Hustwit 2007) – but from their perspective, that’s because the truth hurts; once we accept our limitations, we should adopt a revisionary stance towards our religious discourse, embracing theopoetics as a solution to our epistemic predicament. To avoid this line of reasoning, Hustwit should provide explicit motivation for taking the referential aspirations of religious discourse at face value.

In conclusion, Hustwit is exactly right to be engaging with fundamental questions regarding the epistemological foundations of modeling God. An elaboration of his argument for fallibilism should include both a stronger argument for the Descriptive Criterion and an explanation of the reasons that fallibilism does not run awry of this criterion in virtue of its apparent inability to make sense of debates among models of God extant in religious communities.

## Reference

Hustwit, J. R. (2007). Can Models of God Compete? *Philosophia*, 35, doi:10.1007/s11406-007-9059-7.