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Can Models of God Compete?

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Abstract Though the very task of modeling God implies that the reality of God is to some degree unknowable, there are a variety of positions one may take concerning the degree to which one has epistemic access to God. If our models of God are too influenced by subjectivity, it makes no sense to test them against each other in rational competition. In this essay, I define four possible positions that may underlie the task of God-modeling: mysteriosophy, theopoetics, critical realism, and fallibilism. Of these four, I propose that fallibilism is the most appropriate method for constructing models of God. Fallibilism simultaneously assumes that our models are able to refer to a divine reality, and yet always with a tentative stance, as absolute confirmation or universal consensus concerning them will almost certainly never be obtained. Models of God *can* engage in rational competition, but a final decision will probably be delayed indefinitely. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

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Models, or hypothetical constructs, are necessary in situations in which certainty is unavailable. The phrase "models of God" implies that, to some degree, the reality of God is beyond our ken. One might attribute this "beyondness" to a number of factors—God's metaphysical difference from humanity, or perhaps the interpretive structure of human minds. I would like to explore the implications of the latter supposition upon God-modeling.

If we explore the hermeneutic turn in theology, we find that it puts forward, as one of its basic claims, that human experience is influenced pervasively by the structures of subjectivity. If one grants the plausibility of this insight (and I think there are excellent reasons for doing so), she is committed to what I will call a "co-constitution thesis of

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meaning." The co-constitution thesis asserts that our experience of the world is not simply a corresponding impression of the external world, but rather co-constituted by the self and the world together. Subjectivity and objectivity combine to produce the content of our experience. The co-constitution thesis raises the question, "Which element contributes more to the content of experience: subjectivity or objectivity; self or world?" One possibility is that our experience is so mediated by our own cultural and historical pre-understanding that models of God reveal more about our own subjectivity than the reality of God. For competition between hypothetical models of God to make sense, the models must in some way be informed by data from the reality of God.

I would like to distinguish between several methodological positions available to those who would model God in accordance with a co-constitution thesis. Insofar as each of these positions hypothesizes about the potential accuracy, origin, and referential capacity of proposed models of God, each can be described as a "Model of God-Modeling" (MGM). Four major MGMs should be considered: "mysteriosophy," "theopoetics," "critical realism," and "fallibilism." Of these four, I propose that fallibilism is the most appropriate method for constructing models of God. Fallibilism is realist—our models are able to refer to a divine reality, and yet always with a tentative stance, as confirmation and consensus concerning them will almost certainly never be obtained. Models of God *can* engage in rational competition. There are better and worse models, but a final decision to that competition will most likely never be reached.

Because the scope of this inquiry concerns the modeling of God, I will exclude from my survey of methodologies those that would deem modeling inappropriate or unethical. I have in mind the strong ineffability of negative theology and mysticism, post-structural or post-colonial methodologies that argue that any theological hypothesis is an attempt to impose a master narrative upon a heterogeneous multiplicity, and also those constructivist pragmatisms that deny that human experience can make *any* meaningful contact with the world at all. Even so, between the extremes of theological foundationalism and robust constructivism, the philosopher of religion has several options.

Mysteriosophy

It is perhaps best to begin with the most skeptical of MGMs. In this first position, which I will label "mysteriosophy," our subjectivity makes a maximal contribution to the data of our religious experience—and ultimately the model of God—while the world (i.e. the reality of the divine) makes a minimal contribution. This MGM flirts heavily with negative theology and mysticism, and thus is named in an overly obvious manner to compensate for its penchant for obscurity.

A striking example of this MGM is John Hick's "hyper-Kantian" hypothesis that the categories of the understanding are culture-relative, and "transform" the information transmitted from a transcendent source into religious experience.[1] Hick thus divides the cosmos into the noumenal *Real an sich* and the constructed objects of religious experience. Hick's Kantian position offers a "clean break" between the noumenal reality of the divine and our various cultural perspectives on it. This dualism can be useful in explaining divergent explanations of a supposedly shared reality.

[1]John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 244.

Mysteriosophical models of God, though they may somehow be causally linked to the divine reality, cannot be said to literally describe the divine reality. The language of concrete religious traditions, and the models they propose, has the status of "mythology"—i.e. not literally true, but only *practically* true insofar as they evoke "an appropriate dispositional attitude."[2] Chances are slim that our models have any resemblance to the divine reality, and we have no possible way of ever verifying a resemblance anyway. The Real *an sich* is beyond the limits of the understanding. Those MGMs that describe God as ineffable in some qualified sense, or pursue weaker forms of negative theology would also fit into mysteriosophy. Mysteriosophical models of God, while possibly intending their predications to extend to an object beyond the structures of their own understanding, in fact would only be describing the constructions of their own socio-cultural perspectives, which give content to a featureless "transmission of information" or "causal process" from an unknowable transcendent entity.

One of the most common critiques of Kantian epistemology applies here. If there is a complete disconnect between the constructions of our own understanding and noumenal reality, how can we assert that there is a causal relation that extends from human religious experience to the Real *an sich*? The Real cannot be said to cause anything, as that would be attributing the property of causality to a noumenal entity, which is supposed to be beyond the capacities of human understanding.

Mysteriosophy's fragile connection between human models of God and the actual Reality that inspires them represents the *minimal* condition for inclusion into MGMs that propose some version of a co-constitution thesis. If one pushes mysteriosophy into a slightly more skeptical light, and the causal relation between noumena and phenomena cannot be maintained, then there is little to differentiate a mysteriosophical position from a Feuerbachian theory of religion in which all religious language is pure projection of subjective concerns, and has little to no relation to an external reality. For this reason, models of God within a mysteriosophical paradigm cannot compete, as they are self-contained within their own cultural-linguistic spheres, with no meaningful common ground in a shared non-linguistic world.

Theopoetics

The sharp Kantian dualism between noumenon and phenomenon is not the only option available to God-modelers. One might take a slightly more optimistic approach, and grant that the world-in-itself has some constitutive role in determining the content of religious experience. But perhaps this contribution can never be disentangled or distilled from its mediation by language. It is only by the exploration of and creation of novel linguistic formulations that one is able to disclose various aspects of divine reality. This position, which includes the project of theopoetics, values Aristotle's notion of *poiesis* or knowledge by means of creation, over against *theoria* or *praxis*.

This MGM can be found in the school of phenomenological hermeneutics, specifically Heidegger, Gadamer and their followers. Gadamer, for example, argues that language is a culturally-contingent system shaped by tradition, and a necessary condition of human thought and understanding. The ineradicability of language in human experience entails

[2]Ibid., 248.

Gadamer's famous aphorism: "Being that can be understood is language."[3] This is not to say that language is all there is, but rather when the world appears to consciousness, it must do so clothed in language. Heidegger provides a similar aphorism: "Language is the house of the truth of Being."[4] For these thinkers, there is never cognitive access to the naked thing-in-itself. Yet unlike the Kantian paradigm, the clothing of language can sometimes reveal shapely contours of reality-imprecise hints and suggestions of the world, which are made manifest in and through the disclosive power of language.

In the theopoetical MGM, the disclosure of being is always masked by language. This is due to the nature of language—linguistic units derive their significance from their opposition to and interaction with other linguistic units. All linguistic concepts or utterances are only able to highlight an aspect of the world at the expense of throwing the rest into darkness. So, any truth that emerges into language is incomplete and distorted to begin with, and is then further particularized and potentially distorted by subsequent interpretive formulations. Language in this MGM conceals as much as—if not more than—it discloses So, when specific claims about God's attributes arise within a shared cultural-linguistic context, language is able to evoke a fleeting and necessarily incomplete intimation of reality. Precise descriptions of God cannot be literally true in a scientific sense, but can only hint at the divine reality in an oblique manner. Paul Ricoeur captures this notion in his argument that it is only when the unconventional and surprising juxtaposition of two terms in a metaphor disrupts the operations of literal and scientific discourse that the true nature of Being is able to seep through the fractures into consciousness.[5]

Theopoetics as a MGM, in fact, takes delight in the multiplicity of linguistic formulations that may disclose the divine. It does not aim at referential knowledge that points beyond its own theopoetical discourse. Process theologian Roland Faber argues that theopoetics is distinctive precisely because it interrupts cognitivist theories of religious language, and instead pursues "theoplicity" and "polyphilia."[6] Of these two neologisms, theoplicity is the notion that the divine is, as the etymology suggests, "folded"—mysterious but not entirely unknowable, infinitely complicated, alternatingly revealed and concealed, but never exhaustively known. Theoplicity, as Faber explains, is the notion that the reality of the divine can never be reduced to a simple unity or identity.[7] Instead, our language must simultaneously affirm identity and differentiation. This tensive and paradoxical predication is the basis for metaphorical modeling. Theoplicity requires polyphilia, which is a normative pursuit of multiplicity and plurality that does not seek correspondence with a trans-discursive reality, but instead seeks a proliferation of theological language and models of God for proliferation's own sake. The impossibility of capturing the divine reality in any single linguistic formulation entails that multiple models will be necessary. Together, these two notions set the stage for a MGM that prohibits claims to certainty, exhaustive description, or absolute correspondence, and pursues novelty and creativity instead.

[3]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 474.

[4]Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 223.

[5]Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning and Language*, tr. Robert Czerny, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 247–256.

[6]Roland Faber, "Process Theology as Theopoetics" (paper presented at the Center for Process Studies Seminar on "Process Theology as Theopoetics," Claremont, California, Feb. 7, 2006), copy supplied by Prof. Faber. The paper will be published in Faber's forthcoming book, *Toward a Theology of Multiplicity*.

[7]Ibid.

Theoplicity also implies that although models may produce rationally contestable truth claims of the most general nature, more specific claims are not tenable. That is, by comparing theopoetic constructions, one may be able to make a case for the vague contours of being that emerge into language, e.g. "There is some sort of divine presence rather than none," but specific theological claims—about God's ethical preferences or the scope of salvation, for instance—must remain undecided, because these religious propositions are abstracted from and parasitic upon the religious experience of culturally co-constituted individuals. Here, the clothing of language, the concrete content given to consciousness by subjectivity is too mediated by the interpreter's previous commitments and the influence of culture to reliably disclose specific divine attributes.

The primary criterion for a theopoetical model of God is not its correspondence to the reality of God, but the degree to which it is personally compelling. Thus, we should not be surprised if the theopoetical MGM finds the notion of competition misguided for three reasons. First, the relation of language to being is allegedly too unstable to admit of any stable criteria by which models of God might be judged. Second, the goal of theopoetic discourse is not to eliminate competing interpretations, but to multiply the ways we model God and invent new metaphors for the divine that are able to disclose novel aspects that are existentially compelling. Here, creativity is valued above descriptive accuracy. Third, though there may be competition among theopoetic models of God, the criteria for judging a model's adequacy are subjective. The best theopoetic constructions resonate with the existential concerns and situation of the interpreter, who is one individual in a community. The lack of consensus concerning evaluative criteria in theopoetics will also promote a plurality of models rather than an eliminative competition.

Critical Realism

Though God-modeling has tended to imply that religious language is non-referential, there are those who understand models of God to be related somehow to a mind-independent reality. The term "critical realism" has been used in a wide variety of philosophical contexts over the years, and here I have no specific school of thought in mind, but mean to indicate a position in which a certain degree of subjective bias is attributed to human knowledge that causes dissensus, but can, in the end, be overcome.

Perhaps one of the most exemplary thinkers in this MGM is Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead's own model of God arises from the conviction that "the things experienced and the cognizant subject enter into the common world on equal terms."[8] There is an optimism here that the contribution of divine reality to experience is not buried very deeply beneath the mediation of subjectivity. In fact, many interpreters of Whitehead argue that the world is objectively present at the beginning of every moment of experience, and is only later mediated by the subjective immediacy. So the world anchors experience, and tethers subjectivity to the "brute facts" of the actual world. John B. Cobb, Jr. has used Whiteheadian metaphysics to argue that, because our experience is as influenced by the world as it is by culture, any theological model that has persisted for a considerable length of time must be revealing some structures of reality.[9] For this reason, dialogue among and between competing communities is desirable as it leads to more comprehensive models of God.

[8]Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925), 89.

[9]John B. Cobb, Jr. *Transforming Christianity and the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 105.

Models of God in the critical realist paradigm are admittedly influenced by subjectivity and thus have distorted the reality of God to some degree. By comparing these models, however, one may hope to find commonalities within the models, or at least family resemblance traits among them. In this MGM, there is an optimism that the fractured subjectivity that infects God-modeling can be corrected by intersubjective communication and the application of universal standards of rationality to these models. Here, consensus among models of God is indicative of truth. In critical realism, models of God not only compete, but one expects a winner to emerge. This winner of such a competition is not necessarily the corresponding and true model of God (modeling God would lose its point if such certainty were attainable), but the winner would be the most adequate.

Fallibilism

Of the three MGMs described above, I find that the first two are unsuitable for accurate descriptions of how God-modeling functions in living religious communities, due to their non-realist view of language. Mysteriosophy, at least in its Kantian formulation, suffers from serious inconsistencies: the noumena somehow are unknowable and are simultaneously attributed with "causing" phenomenal descriptions. Furthermore, models of God, as they are employed outside of academic philosophy and theology departments, imply truth claims *about* God. When a religious person speaks of God as mother, divine poet, or ground of being, her language is directed beyond itself and attempts to describe a non-linguistic reality. For this reason, both mysteriosophy and theopoetics are unsatisfactory. As Cobb says, non-realist theories of religious language eliminate dogmatism by offending all religious persons equally.

On the other hand, critical realism seems to be slightly too optimistic. I argue that it does not take seriously the considerable power of ideology and cultural tradition to cover and conceal the structures of reality in religious experience. A middle position is needed—one that attributes models of God with the ability to refer to reality, but acknowledges the pervasive diversity of human knowing.

This middle position, between theopoetics and critical realism, I am calling fallibilism. It includes *something like* the theopoetical accounts of polyphilia and theoplicity, but pushes theopoetics further by making the bolder claim that religious language is capable of referring to a world beyond the discourse, and certain models or constructions can be said to be more or less adequate to the facts of reality. Theopoetics argues that the reality of the divine can never be reduced to a simple identity or unity. Falliblism argues that this is true, but only contingently so. That is, there is no conceptual or logical contradiction in constructing a completely accurate model of God, only that the mediating structures of subjectivity make confirmation or certainty of such a model highly improbable. Therefore a "practical polyphilia," or valuing the multiplicity of models is a part of fallibilism because human minds are finite and perspectival, but the competition between multiple models is also a tool that will eventually guide modelers closer to a single correspondingly true model.

Whereas theopoetics finds the linguistic constitution of human experience to be too radical to refer outside of its own discourse to a non-linguistic world, fallibilism posits an independent, non-linguistic world as a regulative idea that serves a heuristic purpose in the construction of models of God. Because human religious experience is not always a simple manifestation or repetition of one's tradition or culture, it is likely that there is a world independent of linguistic tradition influencing the character of these experiences. Similarly,

we assume that our modeling of God would have some satisfactory end: a point at which there was no gap between model and reality. For these reasons, it seems we posit that a model-independent reality exists as a precondition of inquiry. Fallibilism appropriates theopoetics' assertion that being is disclosed only in and through language, but suggests that this disclosure—this *aletheia*—requires the postulation of a non-linguistic world that has a determinate structure and exists in a causal relationship with our own interpretive activities.

Because of this postulation, it stands to reason that our own poetics, our models of God, stand in a particular relation to the non-linguistic world. In principle, our models of God can meaningfully refer (or fail to refer) to an independent divine reality. Fallibilism is so-named because it pushes God-modeling beyond the shelter of self-contained discourse that *intends* predicates of God, and subjects models to potential criticism by recognizing that models are able to *refer* outside of discourse to a divine reality.

Despite this venture over the Rubicon into realism, the fallibilist MGM is far from any sort of foundationalist project of God-modeling. Though models of God in fallibilism can compete with one another, the proper criteria by which one judges the correspondence of a model to reality are rarely agreed upon in the dialogue between communities of inquirers. Although models of God may compete, the doctrine that all experience is mediated by linguistic-cultural factors rules out the possibility of objective access to the standard for comparison, i.e. the reality of God. Furthermore, the sorts of indirect criteria that could be used for evaluation (e.g. internal coherence, predictability, explanatory scope, ethical consistency, etc.) currently admit of no universal consensus, and this does not seem likely to change any time in the near future.

In the end, a fallibilist MGM must settle for "local" competitions. The language of "better" and "worse" theological models still holds currency, but only relative to a community. Here we might invoke Peirce's notion of a "relevant community of experts" that in their consensus, whether present or projected infinitely into the future, indicate the truth of a model. Absent an ultimate decision concerning which model of God is most adequate, the divine reality must remain a regulative idea, or an eschatological hope. Nevertheless, 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.