

Realist Christian theology
in a postmodern age

SUE PATTERSON



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The task of theological realism

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Realism makes the commonsense claim that physical objects exist independently of being perceived. ‘On this perspective’, comments Hilary Putnam, ‘the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.’¹

The state of the art

In her essay ‘Theological Realism’ Janet Martin Soskice defines theological realists as ‘those who, while aware of the inability of any theological formulation to catch the divine realities, none the less accept that there *are* divine realities that theologians, however ham-fistedly, are trying to catch.’² And Thomas Torrance observes rather more uncompromisingly that ‘it belongs to the very essence of rational behaviour that we can distinguish ourselves as knowing subjects from the objects of our knowledge and distinguish our knowing from the content of our knowing. If we are unable to do that, something has gone wrong: our minds have somehow been “alienated” from reality.’³ It is hard to argue with this imperative; suggesting how we might do this distinguishing is another matter. Torrance’s view is that we can and must get past the deflecting,

1. H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* p. 49.

2. J. M. Soskice, ‘Theological Realism’, in W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer (eds.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 105–19, 108.

3. T. F. Torrance, ‘Theological Realism’, in B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (eds.), *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 169–96, 169.

distorting lenses of culture and language to ‘grasp the deep structure of reality’, a reality that has a structure independent of our cultural and linguistic structuring, a ‘graspable’ coherence independent of our various perspectives.⁴

While Soskice and Torrance both regard the relation of scientific or worldly truth to theological truth as a matter of analogy, they differ in the species of analogy posited. Soskice appears to favour a Thomist ‘analogy of being’ in which theologians using the metaphorical resources at hand must qualify any such use with a recognition of their qualitative remove from the reality they are attempting to ‘depict’. This depiction is accordingly of a blurred and refracted divinity and must be continually revised and extended as our discoveries of the natural world extend the range of metaphors whose analogous use is enabled by grace.⁵ Torrance, on the other hand, asserts a Barthian ‘analogy of faith’ in which our knowledge of empirical worldly reality is subsumed through revelation within a divinely determined meaning-structure, or intelligibility, so that we do not depict divine reality, rather divine reality depicts us. The radical contingency of worldly upon divine reality means, in effect, that all study of the former then constitutes the study of natural theology, a natural theology which can only be what it is in relation to the supernatural theology which reveals its ultimate meaning.

Where Soskice suggests that we cannot know whether what the theologians think and say about reality is really the way things are, Torrance accords our ability to ‘grasp the deep structure of reality’ the status of a necessary truth, for if we cannot do this, he asserts, then the whole basis of rationality is in jeopardy. The difference between the tentative pragmatism of Soskice and the unequivocality of Torrance is more than a difference in personality and theology; it exemplifies the difference between critical and postcritical realism. This is a difference which, while at heart a difference in analogies, also concerns the nature of rationality. Critical realism retains the direct-realist commonsense belief in independent physical things, but in the face of the verification problem inherent in correspondence theories of truth, admits that these are not directly and homogeneously presented to us in perceptual situations. It concedes to idealism that whenever something is perceived it is an object for a mind, but insists that it does not follow from this that a

4. See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, pp. 16–17; also *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 90, and *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 26–7.

5. J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 152.

given ‘something’ has no existence except in its being perceived. Critical realism has taken note of the Kantian ‘turn to the subject’ from which we gain the insight that the world is necessarily the world under a certain description, while noting that although the world may be conceptually mediated, this does not mean that our concepts (or apperceptions) constitute reality.

Postcritical realism moves back a step from the tentative subject-riddness of critical realism in maintaining that rationality is not a possession of the human intellect alone but is also present as an inherent intelligibility in the object which ‘gives itself to be known’. Hence Torrance’s insistence on a universal rationality; knowledge is not to be centred on the knowing subject. Instead we indwell that which we perceive and in so doing are absorbed into and participate in its reality. Knowledge and reality, therefore, are personal, but in a way that turns the tables on subjectivity in that the subject becomes recipient and channel of a transcendent rationality. Our images and concepts are tools of discovery rather than tools of creation, for they are true images and concepts only when they truly correlate with reality.⁶

For Torrance, contingent worldly rationality necessarily reveals and is revealed by transcendent divine rationality. This is the nature of the relation between the transcendence of Creator and the contingency of creation and is the given upon which the analogy of faith rests. We may be critical realists within this relation in recognition of the fact that our grasp of reality is incomplete, but only in the knowledge granted by faith that the inherent intelligibility of that reality will continue to revise and complete our graspings. On a Torrancean view, therefore, there can be no distinction between ‘ordinary’ or worldly realism and theological realism. They must be one and the same. As mentioned, the radical contingency of worldly upon divine reality means, in effect, that all study of the former including the study of its rationality according to philosophical theories of truth constitutes the study of natural theology within the framework of revealed theology.

Torrance employs a theory of Michael Polanyi’s in working out the nature of this theological realism. On a Polanyian model of perception, we displace meaning away from ourselves in a bipolar semantic relation. This displacement renders the mediating sign transparent.⁷ For ‘when

6. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 27.

7. See T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) and M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge, 1966). But see S. W. Need, *Human*

we adopt something, sensible or intelligible, as a sign for something else our attention does not rest upon the sign but on what it indicates or points to: it is, so to speak, a transparent medium through which we operate. That is to say, the natural orientation of the human mind is, in this sense at least, quite “realist”.⁸ Accordingly, a sign, if it is to do its job properly, must be to some extent arbitrary, detached from the signified, incomplete or discrepant, or it will be confused with the thing it is supposed to be representing. On the other hand, a complete arbitrariness in which the sign has ‘no natural bearing on the reality for which it is said to stand’ renders it ‘semantically useless’.⁹ In other words, it is necessary to be able to distinguish between sign and signified, but not to the extent that the connection is purely arbitrary (except presumably in the case of catachrestic first-uses). A middle way must be trodden between nominalism and the idealist consequence of the total substitution of concept for object, which is the logical conclusion of correspondence.¹⁰ That we take the sign as transparent is a necessary part of our making sense of the world. That it is *not* transparent – that it is contaminated by its previous uses so that the map gets mixed up with the world – is a fact of the inseparability of the world as it is to us from its accretion of interacting descriptions. Torrance concedes the context-and-language-boundedness of the situations in which sign and signified occur:

while what we know and how we know, subject-matter and method, cannot be finally separated from one another, no true knowledge can be explained by beginning from the knower himself. We do not really know anything unless we can distinguish in some measure how our knowing is determined by the nature of what we know, as we are all conditioned by the activity of the knowing subject. On the other hand, it is also evident that we cannot think of, speak of what we know cut off from our knowing of it. In some sense, therefore, our knowing of a thing constitutes an ingredient in our knowledge of it, or at least in the articulation of our knowledge of it. The recognition of this fact can have the salutary effect of preventing us from making inordinate claims about the objectivity of our knowledge, but it also helps to remind us that what we know has a reality apart from our knowing of it.¹¹

Language and Knowledge in the Light of Chalcedon (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996) for a different interpretation of Polanyian epistemology to be examined in chapter 5.

8. Torrance, ‘Theological Realism’, p. 169. 9. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 172. Torrance observes that if such an idealism leans towards objective reality it can become a form of realism. 11. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 1.

It is in a particular context of language use that the sign appears transparent. Critical realists towards the postmodern end of the realist spectrum, such as Putnam, would maintain that what something means, or what a term represents, depends in large part on the context in which it occurs. It may even be said, as Torrance says, that the separation of object and interpreting subject and the impression given of language's 'transparency' between the two are themselves concepts which find their home in the modern Western philosophical tradition.¹² We are immersed in a rationality that is transparent to us but is nevertheless a particular form of rationality.¹³ The point to be made is that the whole discussion of sign and signified and their necessary distinctness is not somehow universally objective and value free, but takes place within a situation in which all the time we are referring to *this-thing-plus-its-previous-description-in-this-context*. As noted, Torrance does not deny this yet frequently states his belief that we can, through patient and rigorous successive revisions, eliminate the pre-conceptions, illusions and linguistic habits that obscure our knowledge of reality and thereby progressively 'grasp' things as they are in themselves.

The conception of inherent intelligibility means that, whether we are concerned with things visible or invisible, knowledge is to be attained only as we are able to penetrate into the inner connections and reasons of things in virtue of which they are what they are, that is, into their ontic structures and necessities. Only as we let our minds fall under the power of those structures and necessities to signify what they are in themselves do we think of them truly, that is, in accordance with what they really are in their natures and must be in our conceiving of them. On the other hand, the inner relation between *logos* and being, or the concept of the truth of being, does not reduce to a vanishing point the place or function of the human knower, but on the contrary provides the ground upon which the inseparable relation of knower and known in human understanding can be upheld. This was already made clear by St Augustine.¹⁴

On this understanding the concept may be part of the thing ('the inner relation between *logos* and being'), but only to the extent that it is not overreached and pulled out of shape by human hubris. For 'as the history of thought has shown again and again in later eras, no sooner has full

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–19. 13. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 203.

14. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 7–8. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.12.18: *ab utroque enim notitia paritur a cognoscente et cognito*.

place been accorded to the agency of the human subject in knowledge than it tends to arrogate to itself far more than its share'.¹⁵

Torrance is convinced that 'the universe as we know it is one in which being and knowing are mutually related and conditioned, intelligible reality and intelligent inquiry belong together'. Nevertheless he poses a dichotomy. As he puts it,

the great question still confronts us. Granted that the universe as we know it constitutes an intelligible whole, and granted that the universe exists, as we say, not only *in intellectu* but also *in re*, is the universe comprehensible to us because somehow it is *intrinsically* intelligible, because it is endowed with an immanent rationality quite independent of us which is the ground of its comprehensibility to us, or is the intelligibility with which the universe is clothed in our knowledge of it something *extrinsic* to it, which we construct out of our own mental operations and impose upon the being of the universe?¹⁶

He concludes that we should be guided by the 'most persistent answer to that question throughout the centuries', that 'our mental operations are steadily coordinated' with "'natural" patterns and structures in the universe which are what they are independent of us'.¹⁷ The true concept is not something constructed by us but rather discovered as the noetic component of the thing that makes its inherent intelligibility accessible to us. Human construction is not a part of the deal; true conceptions of reality are discovered, not invented.

Torrance's analysis seems limited by its relegation of the human role to passivity and consequent insistence on a dichotomy between construction and discovery. Must true concepts come to our merely receptive minds from an intrinsically intelligible reality so that, while images and concepts arise in our understanding in coordination with our experience, 'there *shows through* an objective rationality which is independent of our forms of thought and speech'? It seems that only to the extent that we are able to distinguish the content from its linguistic vehicle do 'we have a firm base from which to put our forms of thought and speech to the test, to see how far they are actually coordinated with the realities which they claim to indicate and so provide an intelligible medium in which our minds come under the compulsion of those realities and take shape under their ontic necessity and intrinsic intelligibility'.¹⁸ However, to talk of content and vehicle is to imply that our knowledge is divisible into

15. *Ibid.* 16. *Ibid.*, p. 2. 17. *Ibid.*, p. 3. 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8.

parts that we are then able to identify as factual and conventional.¹⁹ How are we to do this by the light of naked reason, that is, without recourse to a God's-eye view? As Richard Rorty puts it,

we can always enlarge the scope of 'us' by regarding other people, or cultures, as members of the same community of inquiry as ourselves – by treating them as part of the group among whom unforced agreement is to be sought. What we cannot do is to rise above all human communities, actual and possible. We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence – mere agreement – to something like 'correspondence with reality as it is in itself'.²⁰

It seems that a 'skyhook' is precisely what theological realism requires, yet how is it to be found when, as Torrance argues, the conventional agreements that underlie our systems of thought far from being creative agents may merely muddy our perception of reality? To be consistent with the classical Christianity expressed in patristic theology is to maintain that knowledge, while admittedly linguistic in character, is creative only in creating the linguistic vehicles, the images and concepts, through which we are able to grasp in its depth the intrinsic intelligibility of the reality beyond language. Yet if the world is inherently rational as patristic thinking suggests, and if this world as inherently rational includes human rationality, then why is there any need to pose this dichotomy? Perhaps we may keep the premise but alter the conclusion.

If it is 'to patristic thought that we owe the conception of an ontology in which structure and movement, the noetic and the dynamic, are integrated in the real world', then why not include human rationality, as expressed in the active conceptual patterning, structuring of the world, *in* the world's inherent rationality, *in* this 'ontology in which structure and movement, the noetic and the dynamic, are integrated in the real world'? This interpretation would seem equally consistent with the patristic insight into 'the profound integration of *logos* and being which it discerned, in a transcendent way, in the living and active God, and in a creaturely and contingent way in created reality'.²¹

As Paul Ricoeur has said of metaphor, what it creates it discovers and what it discovers it invents.²² If we are to 'penetrate into the inner

19. H. Putnam, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 178.

20. R. Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 38.

21. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 6–7. Again, see Need, *Human Language and Knowledge*, for an argument that supports this interpretation.

22. P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 124.

connections and reasons of things in virtue of which they are what they are', this 'penetrating into' will necessarily involve describing and conceiving, as Torrance would agree. However, it may also involve not only 'minds falling under the power of these structures and necessities to signify what they are in themselves' but also minds supplying the noetic component to 'things in virtue of which they are what they are'. For why is it necessary to state that the rationality of the universe is a function of "natural" patterns and structures in the universe which are what they are independent of us but with which our mental operations are steadily coordinated'?²³ Can it not be that it is as human knowledge participates in that knowledge that it is completed and fulfilled?²⁴ Putnam would say that things cannot be this way for Torrance simply because the realist definition of world excludes it (Putnam does not classify himself as a realist in the usual sense), for under this definition 'the world is . . . being claimed to contain Self-Identifying Objects, for this is just what it means to say the world, and not thinkers, sorts things into kinds'.²⁵

Non-dualistic alternatives

The danger of separating construction from discovery is that in doing so we discount the inevitable local human linguistic input into what we then take to be a universal rationality. As Stephen Toulmin suggests, this mistake tends to further the assumption that a generic rationality (on which science is constructed) which claims to be independent of any metaphysical or theological baggage may apply in any context and determine the rationality of any arguments. What this means is that we think we can infer from our own situation to all others and be 'objectively correct'.²⁶ Yet, we subsist in a goldfish-bowl in which we already assume reasonableness in deciding what is reasonable!²⁷ At best, we access a universal component to rationality through various local components that constitute our template for understanding what is rational in the first place, and are therefore inextricable from what they access. What constitutes a fact about reality always depends to some extent on the community of knowledge and belief from which one is operating. An

23. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 3.

24. This may also be consistent with how Torrance reads Origen (see *ibid.*, p. 5) and is also consistent with Need's reading of Polanyi in relation to patristic thought (see Need, *Human Language and Knowledge*).

25. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, pp. 53–4.

26. S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 21.

27. Putnam, *Realism and Reason*, p. 234.

object's inherent intelligibility is all mixed up with commitment to that communal reality-description, so that conventional considerations play a part in what we take to be facts, a point not missed by Soskice, who proposes a pragmatic variety of critical realism.

Soskice addresses the problem of how metaphorical terms can be claimed to be descriptive or fact-stating when they cannot be known to be: 'To meet instrumentalism, the realist must attempt to say how religious language can claim to be *about* God at all, given that naive realism in these matters is unthinkable.'²⁸ Soskice goes on to suggest that this may be done through an account of how metaphor functions in religious language. While her concern is with God-language, the question is equally relevant to terms about the world-at-hand. How do we know that a fact is indeed a fact? In other words, the problem concerns realism itself. Our inability to verify that our facts are indeed facts means that the entity to which the term refers does not have to be world-transcending in order to be inaccessible to 'definitive knowledge'.²⁹ Suggesting that the problem is one that scientific and theological realism have in common, Soskice advocates a move away from definite descriptions towards a more pragmatic solution along Saul Kripke's lines.

[Kripke] argues that reference can take place independently of the possession of a definite description which somehow 'qualitatively uniquely' picks out the individual in question and can even be successful where the identifying description associated with the name fails to be true of the individual in question . . . the relevant linguistic competence does not involve unequivocal knowledge but rather depends on the fact that the speaker is a member of a linguistic community who have passed the name [e.g. Columbus] from link to link, going back to the man, Columbus, himself.³⁰

In other words, accuracy, or certified truth, is not a necessary condition of reference. Rather, *reliability* is. 'The point here is that reference depends, in normal speech, as much on context as on content and that reference is an utterance-dependent notion.'³¹ Kripke and Putnam argue further (although, as Soskice points out, not uncontroversially) that reference may be fixed by 'dubbing' in the case of natural-kind terms. In this pragmatic theory what matters is that the reference be

28. Soskice, 'Theological Realism', p. 109.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

30. *Ibid.*, citing S. Kripke, 'Naming and Necessity', in D. Davidson and G. Harman (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 295, 301.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

successful, that it achieve its purpose of identification. Here the suggestion is that correctness is not so important as reliability, consistency or continuity with how a reference has been made in and by a community – or rather that correctness is a function of reliability.

The realism under discussion emphasizes rather than conceals contextuality by emphasizing that descriptive language, while dealing with immediate experience, will be language embedded in certain traditions of investigation and conviction . . . The descriptive language . . . is forged in a particular tradition of investigation and a context of agreement on what constitutes evidence and what is a genuine argument. While theories may be reality-depicting they are not free from contextuality, both historical and cultural.³²

Therefore a fact is what its societal context says it is, or lays down, even to the extent of laying down what is to constitute a fact in addition to the content of facts. That is, logic as well as observation and description may vary with context, as Wittgenstein observed.

One may be accordingly agnostic about whether one's models describe reality and pragmatically point to the success of science or social institutions as proof that they must do so to some extent. But is reliability as measured by success able to function as a sufficient as well as a necessary condition of truth in this situation, or does it still need to be supplemented by some correspondence measure of truth? And if so, how is this to be done? Arguably, the problem with the realist insistence on separating language and world does not lie in our belief in the existence of a physical world or in our ability to predict what goes on there, but in the very idea of the 'thing as it is in itself' independently of our knowledge of it. With this premise securely anchored in our thinking, we take things designated and described by us in their 'thingness' to enjoy an existence apart from the concepts we have of them and the terms we employ to express those concepts – an existence that somehow, at least to some extent, corresponds to those terms and those concepts. The objection is then raised to the guaranteed knowability of the thing 'as it is in itself' apart from that specification.³³

Therein lies the difficulty with the notion of correspondence as traditionally employed at least. It proves impossible to 'get behind' the linguistic mirror to check on how its image reflects the non-linguistic

32. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

33. H. Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 5. This is not to discount the distorting and false aspects of description. Obviously illusions and deception are factors to be taken into account. See chapters 6 and 7.

reality because the very getting-behind is itself conceptually framed and hence not a real getting-behind at all.

What is wrong with the notion of objects existing ‘independently’ of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices . . . To talk of ‘facts’ without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word ‘fact’ no more has its use fixed by Reality Itself than does the word ‘exist’ or the word ‘object’ . . . Internal realism says that the notion of a ‘thing in itself’ makes no sense; and *not* because ‘we cannot know the things in themselves’. This was Kant’s reason, but Kant, although admitting that the notion of a thing in itself *might* be empty, still allowed it to possess a formal kind of sense. Internal realism says that we don’t know what we are talking about when we talk about ‘things in themselves’. And that means that the dichotomy between ‘intrinsic’ properties and properties which are not intrinsic also collapses – collapses because the ‘intrinsic’ properties were supposed to be just the properties things have ‘in themselves’. The thing in itself and the property the thing has ‘in itself’ belong to the same circle of ideas, and it is time to admit that what the circle encloses is worthless territory.³⁴

What this means is that once the premise of ‘in-itself-ness’ has been taken on board (and we have all taken it on board with the infrastructure of modernity), the difficulties with realism cannot be solved by agnosticism as to the extent of correspondence because it is obvious that any claim of partial correspondence is equally unjustifiable. While it seems reasonable to conclude so, we do not *know* that our concepts *in part* correspond to reality. (Which parts correspond?)

Yet total agnosticism is not only pointless; it is also Christianly unacceptable, for how can truth *not* be a consideration in Christian theology? We need to ask along with Putnam: ‘*can* one be any sort of a realist without the dichotomies?’³⁵ For if realism must always founder on the premise of correspondence, or perhaps more broadly on its implicit theory of language, perhaps we should conclude that realism has had its day and that we should agree with Derrida that everything, including Christianity, must be considered ‘under erasure’, afloat on a sea of linguistic relativity.

Realists of a pragmatic inclination, however, do not see this as reason

34. H. Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), pp. 35–6.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

to lose hope. Nancy Murphy suggests that theology needs to do more than use the failure of belief in objectivity in science post-Hanson and Heisenberg as a *tu quoque* argument to bring science down to its own less-than-objective level. Murphy also advocates the Kripkean/ Putnamian pragmatic notion of reliability as a measure of Christian truth in proposing discernment as a *replicable* (communal) way of seeking 'data' in Scripture and experience and establishing new facts in theology.³⁶ Reliability, of course, is a matter of degree, probabilistic and relativistic. In theology it takes the form of the reliability of Christian tradition and communal judgment as to what constitutes true Christianity. Murphy maintains that the use of Scripture as 'data' for theology must be governed by such replicable, hence reliable, judgments governed by fact-establishing auxiliary hypotheses.

Bruce Marshall proposes a theory of 'world-absorbing', or assimilative, capacity as a measure of Christianity's efficacy or worth as another pragmatic option.³⁷ But, as Marshall himself recognizes, this basis of comparison is akin to subjecting theology to an external coherence-comprehensiveness theory of truth, for on this basis it is always coherence relative to something else. Does Christianity provide a better way of living and explanation of human reality than, say, Zen Buddhism or Dialectical Materialism? How can this be judged, asks Marshall, except on pragmatic grounds? Yet how, then, can we be sure that certain fruits are good and others not so – what is the criterion of goodness? And if judged to offer better fruits by some humanly derived criterion, does this make Christianity more attuned to ultimate reality? When it all boils down, world-absorbing capacity simply amounts to another version of reliabilism and we are no better off than before, for of course these questions cannot be answered without having recourse to the internal criteria which define this ultimate reality. On these grounds Marshall adjudges 'assimilative power' to be a necessary but insufficient condition and suggests that it needs to be used in conjunction with a realist propositional model, such as Jesus as *veritas Patri*, to provide the baseline of Christian reality.

Torrance sees the adoption of a pragmatic theory of truth 'as an attempt to break out of . . . the oscillating dialectic between coherence

36. N. Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 165–6.

37. B. D. Marshall, 'Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths', in B. D. Marshall (ed.), *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 69ff., 85.

and correspondence' yielded by dualist modern thought, but considers that this pragmatic 'solution' only substitutes a form of operationalism for truth. It must be conceded that this is so. Pragmatism will not stand alone. The question is where to go from here. A way out may be suggested by the evidence that propositional truth is older than the modern dualist theories of correspondence. As Putnam observes, medieval thinking had no difficulty with realism because it held that human beings were created with a special capacity for 'rational intuition' of the nature of things in themselves.³⁸ Torrance inclines to this way of thinking:

Now of course we do not proceed in this way unless we could have some initial glimpse, and some initial grasp, however tenuous, of reality, and unless reality were comprehensible in itself apart from our perceiving or knowing of it, that is, unless it had its own intrinsic relations and structure, for it is only as we are able to hook our thought on to those that we can advance in our inquiry or climb up into fuller knowledge of the reality under investigation. In so doing we presume that a correlation is possible between our human conceiving and the inner structure of reality itself, and we carry out all our operations in that belief. However, that very presumption makes us direct our critical questioning back upon ourselves to make sure that we are not moulding reality in terms of our own constructions or imposing artificial structures of our own upon it.³⁹

Torrance talks of the way 'the inner relation between *logos* and being, or the concept of the truth of being, does not reduce to a vanishing point the place or function of the human knower, but on the contrary provides the ground upon which the inseparable relation of knower and known in human understanding can be upheld'.⁴⁰ Yet he also refers to the subjective element in knowledge as 'the conceptual lens through which we apprehend the rationality inherent in nature or through which the rationality in nature discloses itself to us'.⁴¹ In other words, while he proposes an intimate interplay of subjectivities, it is nevertheless the 'inner' or 'deep' structure of the object that is the source of our conceptions of it as the sole source of its own intelligibility. It plays its tune on our linguistic keys, but the tune is its own. If our keyboard is out of tune (or if we are bad performers) we will distort reality's melody. A less lyrical analogy is the premodern view of procreation in which the male is the

38. Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 52.

39. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 27.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

sole producer of the seed of new life and the female merely the receptacle. Both of these analogies enjoy some affinity with Torrance's own images.

Properly regarded and pursued, scientific activity is not a tormenting of nature but rather the way in which nature pregnant with new forms of being comes to be in travail and to give birth to structured realities out of itself. Man is here the midwife, as it were, and yet rather more than that, for his own rational nature is profoundly geared into the intrinsic rationalities of nature in such a way that he is the appointed instrument under God through which the intelligible universe reveals itself and unfolds out of its crystal, so to speak, in rational, orderly and beautiful patterns of being. Hence there is disclosed through scientific activity and intelligibility in the created universe beyond man's artifice and control, something absolutely given and transcendent, to which as man he is and must be rationally and responsibly open. That openness and responsibility are part of his human nature as rational agent. Man acts rationally only under the compulsion of reality and its intrinsic order, but it is man's function to bring nature to word, to articulate its dumb rationality in all its latent wonder and beauty and thus to lead the creation in its praise and glorification of God the Creator.⁴²

Yet, are human beings in their creativity not directly (if also enablingly) part of 'the way in which nature pregnant with new forms of being comes to be in travail and to give birth to structured realities out of itself'? And as midwives-cum-piano-players, how do we know whether our piano is in tune or not – or, even if we have perfect pitch, whether it is not playing itself, pianola-style, at least some of the time? Even if our 'own rational nature is profoundly geared into the intrinsic rationalities of nature in such a way that [we are] the appointed instrument under God through which the intelligible universe reveals itself', what Torrance still appears to be proposing is that human concept-vehicles progressively, if partially and revisably, 'grasp' a non-linguistic reality 'in its depths' – which amounts to shifting the correspondence verification back a step. For if the ultimate incoherence of an ordinary correspondence theory of truth is to be avoided, we must anchor our partial and distorted human grasp of reality to 'an Archimedean point beyond it by which it can be steadily levered out of its own self-incarceration, and . . .

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9.

coordinated with the openness of all created being to the unlimited reality of God'.⁴³

What we need is such a shift in the focus of our vision that, instead of looking at the universe in the flat, as it were, we look at it in a multidimensional way in which the universe as a whole, and everything within it, are found to have meaning through an immanent intelligibility that ranges far beyond the universe to an ultimate ground in the transcendent and uncreated Rationality of God.⁴⁴

It follows then that Jesus Christ as God's *logos*, or intelligibility, subsumes the self-disclosure of the object's deep inner coherence, so that 'objectivity' as reality-given is only so as specifically God-given. Yet then may not the *logos* as the meeting place of divine transcendence and human contingency subsume a creaturely reality of which its description knowledge is an integral part? Arguably, this is quite consistent with the patristic line that Torrance is taking. And, to pick up the procreation analogy again, this is akin to what all but possibly extreme biblical fundamentalists living an entirely premodern existence in isolation from the rest of the world have allowed modern science to put in place of the premodern theory: that the procreative function is both male and female, yet as such is still a function of the creativity of God. This issue will be returned to in later chapters.

The theistic-realist option

In the light of the preceding discussion, it is unclear how it can make sense to say that any object is able to be accessible to us 'as it is in itself' and therefore represent in itself an 'ultimate judge of the truth or falsity of our conceptions and statements about it', or how 'in the last resort scientific theories are justified by the grace of reality alone'.⁴⁵ Putnam contends that correspondence between words and objects is something that goes on within a particular conception of reality, that objects 'do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what'.⁴⁶ Yet we can take an 'internal-realist' line without this being inconsistent with a revealed model in

43. *Ibid.*, p. 23. 44. *Ibid.*, p. 44. 45. See Torrance, 'Theological Realism', p. 172.

46. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 52.

which God is the source of all the human ‘schemes of description’ within which such propositions as ‘objectivity’ and ‘correspondence’ have their play. Torrance appears to be suggesting something similar when he states that

we cannot have any knowledge of God or even faith without a conceptual relation to him . . . There is no conceptual gap between God’s revealing of himself and our knowing of him, for God reveals himself to us on the ground of his own inner intelligibility which is the creative ground of all rationality in the universe and as such enables us to conceive and speak of him truly in ways that are ultimately grounded in God’s supreme being.⁴⁷

As Putnam points out, we may not be able to operate from an eye-of-God perspective because we are bound up in language and context; nevertheless, ‘the rightness and wrongness of what we say is not *just* for a time and a place’.⁴⁸

Michael Dummett and Fergus Kerr have suggested that realism’s coherence might be salvaged by claiming a verification transcendent of human possibility.⁴⁹ If some notion of correspondence stubbornly lingers on in realism and is seen to be immanent in local forms of human thought and practice then, logically, any correlation of these correspondences with a transcendent reality cannot be verified within those local forms themselves. Accordingly, because ‘one cannot talk about the transcendent or even deny its existence without paradox, one’s attitude to it must, perhaps, be the concern of religion rather than of rational philosophy’.⁵⁰ We cannot avoid correspondence in the realism required by Christianity, but it is not the correspondence we thought it was. We are talking, rather, of a correspondence between God’s world-under-God’s-description and a regenerated, redeemed world-under-human-description. The name and the means of the correspondence is incarnation, where this is taken to embrace the whole of human history and rationality, including its eschatological judgment and fulfilment.⁵¹ Its method of verification is revelation.

Consistent with this position, Torrance notes that ‘*contingent* creaturely

47. Torrance, ‘Theological Realism’, pp. 177–8.

48. Putnam, *Realism and Reason*, p. 247.

49. See Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, and M. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978). Also see chapter 5 for an extended discussion of this.

50. Putnam, *Realism and Reason*, p. 226.

51. As Torrance puts it, it is ‘the incarnation of God himself in Jesus Christ which constitutes the dynamic centre from which the whole pattern and history of created reality is to be discerned’: cf. T. F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 68.

being and *intelligibility* require a sufficient ground and reason beyond themselves in order to be what they actually are'.⁵²

Contingent being cannot explain itself, otherwise it should not be contingent. Nevertheless it does have something to 'say' to us, simply by being what it is, contingent *and* intelligible in its contingency, for that makes its lack of self-explanation inescapably problematic, and it is precisely through that problematic character that it points beyond itself with a mute cry for sufficient reason. What the intelligible being of the universe has to 'say' is thus something which by its very nature must break off in accordance with the utterly contingent existence of the universe. This may be expressed more positively: the fact that the universe is intrinsically rational means that it is capable of, or open to, rational explanation – from beyond itself.⁵³

In this, as suggested earlier, the world's inherent rationality (which is grounded in Christ) must include human rationality, for if not, another dualism is being proposed. If the universe is inherently intelligible, then humanity is a part of that intelligibility. As Torrance puts it, 'Since the universe includes man, it includes his knowing of it within the full process of its reality', so that the universe 'is the cosmos of created being in which the relation between knowing and being falls within being. Thus the knowing of being is to be acknowledged as an operation of being itself, for it is through being known that the structure of the universe manifests itself.'⁵⁴

As suggested, while Torrance restricts human involvement to the role of cosmic knower, interpreter and communicative vehicle, at the same time his endorsement of the patristic integration of knowing and being opens the way to a human role in creation. If knowing (and therefore conceiving) is a part of being, then knowledge not only discovers but also in part constitutes reality.⁵⁵ This seems inescapable logic. As Rorty puts it, while the notion of things 'as they are in themselves' and the distinction between 'as they are' and 'as we describe them' are both vacuous, nevertheless it is not 'mirrors all the way down', for there are 'objects which are *causally* independent of human beliefs and desires'.⁵⁶ Yet the theological-realist disinclination to engage with some of the implications of this logic of human involvement seems to stem from the conviction that these are quite antithetical to a theistic realism. This is not

52. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 44. 53. *Ibid.*, p. 52. 54. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

55. See Need, *Human Language and Knowledge*, pp. 185ff.

56. Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth*, p. 101.

necessarily so. Theological realists such as Torrance retain a correspondence view (even if it is described as ‘correlation’ or ‘coordination’) because it is inherent to realism and because, accordingly, they cannot see how an adequate theory of truth can be worked any other way. And yes, correspondence to and verification by an external reality are inherent in realism, but not according to *our* lights, and not, as shall be argued, in a way that relies on a fundamental dichotomy between linguistic and non-linguistic reality.

Critical realists have opted for a partial correspondence in recognition of the inevitable contamination by prior concepts any description of reality represents. Critical realism’s strength is that it incorporates aspects of both modernity and postmodernity. It is a strength that is expressed in its being still concerned with truth while grasping the nettle of reality’s ‘language-riddenness’. It loses this painful grip the moment it either adopts a postmodern nihilism or sidesteps the issue of language. Yet it also loses coherence if it does not seek a revelatory (incarnational) solution to and grounding of correspondence.⁵⁷ While such a revelatory verification of correspondence must ultimately be humanly external (although at the same time incarnationally internal) in being grounded in God, it may be humanly internal within that ultimacy which is its final judge. Correspondence does not have to be ‘windows all the way down’. It is arguably possible for a ‘by their fruits ye shall know them’ reliabilism coupled with a ‘things are what we agree they are’ conventionalism (if not a ‘things are what we make them’ constructivism) to set the local correspondence terms that underpin our propositional truths subject to a ‘higher’ ultimate correspondence to which all these systems must answer. It may be consistent with this theistic realism to maintain that our intuitions as to the nature and shape of reality in so far as they are correct are recognized as participatory in a divine creativity transcendent yet inclusive of our own. In later chapters this line of argument will be pushed further.

It follows that there is no need for a realist theology to ignore the evidence that revelation takes place in a context- and language-ridden world; that knowledge and rationality are all caught up with the way language is used in various contexts; that consequently meaning and

57. This is consistent with Torrance’s argument that ‘incarnation as a whole provides . . . the intersectioned vertical dimension which gives the horizontal coordinates of the universe the integrative factor providing them with consistent and ultimate meaning’: see *Divine and Contingent Order*, pp. 24–5.

logic may vary with context; that the theory-ladenness of observation does not pursue linear paths but makes holistic leaps in various directions. There are many theories, stories and language-games outside the rules of scientific practice and discourse so that, whereas in science one theory may be replaced by another in a given field because it is more comprehensive, more coherent and not yet falsified (although here there are also holistic leaps in which a whole paradigm replaces another),⁵⁸ this orderly linear progression is not necessarily typical of theories and observation in the world at large.

Daniel Hardy suggests that both the sciences and Christianity are now being judged for their adequacy by reference to a new situation. While presented as in many respects utterly new, the new situation combines many of the features of the scene which has been emerging for the past two hundred years. What is this new 'postmodern' situation? It defies generalization, and in actuality resists any synthetic picture. But even at the risk of generalizing, it is above all a picture of plenitude, consisting of an endless complexity and dynamism of meaning at every level. Imagine any connection that appears in the history of knowledge, and then imagine that connection being seen as a complexity of interrelations; the picture thus obtained would not be inappropriate. Hence, so-called 'correspondence' notions of knowledge and rational agency, in which a simple one-to-one relation is drawn between words or concepts and realities, are vastly oversimple; all such relations are multiple and complex. The same argument affects all supposed affinities, emphasizing their 'difference', 'deconstructing' the simplicities on which they are founded. The consequence is that all that gives a solid foundation for knowledge and rationality, particularly the 'ontology' of the Western tradition, and its 'logocentrism', are dissolved. And with them go conventional notions of knowledge and rationality.

A further indication of the immensity of the changes implicit in these suggestions can be given by referring to a problem in topology. If one cuts a hole in the inner tube of a bicycle tire where the valve is and begins to put the rest of the tube through the hole, what happens? The issue with modern understanding – though hardly appreciated yet – is that one can repeat the exercise at an infinite number of points on the tube, drawing the tube through *after* it has been drawn through at an infinite number of other points. That is a

58. See T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

fascinating prospect, not only a testimony to the amazing creativity of human understanding but an indication of the possibility of an endlessly multiplying complexity in knowledge. If such major endeavours as those which have to do with the factors of materiality . . . provide more and more holes through which other endeavours – and even their own – can be drawn, then knowledge becomes fuller and fuller, with no limit in sight. It is, as we said, an indefinite plenitude.⁵⁹

As Hardy comments, the things that self-destruct in Christianity under this postmodern analysis ‘are in fact not the Christian tradition at all but the product of various kinds of rationalism imposed on Christian faith . . . Christian faith at least has the means by which to rediscover the possibility of knowledge and rationality in the new situation.’⁶⁰ The general theory is the enemy, not only of a coherent realism, but of Christianity as well. Realist insistence that postmodern theologies come up with general theories of language and truth is done in ignorance of realism’s own problem with general theories – in particular the general version of the correspondence theory of truth – and in ignorance of general theories’ subjection of the particularity of Christianity to an illusory universal. Accordingly, the only *general* theory Christianity should adopt, and then adopt in terms of its own particularity, is its own fundamental claim of the ultimacy and universality of God’s reality and truth. In the service of this theory and not dictating to it, what is needed is a *theistic-realist* (and therefore incarnational) theory of both language and truth that takes account of the ‘plenitude’ and ‘plurality’ of human reality.

Conclusion

Christian theology’s internal logic is such that it is required to be realist, in that its self-consistency requires the upholding of certain central truth claims. However, while on a realist view physical reality has an existence independent of our cultural and linguistic structuring, this view must reckon with the postmodern insight that language (and the language-user) has for good or for bad the power to construct a reality which is also an integral component of the universe, and that both

59. D. W. Hardy, ‘Rationality, the Sciences and Theology’, in G. Wainwright (ed.), *Keeping the Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/Pickwick Publications, 1988), pp. 274–309, 304–5.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

construction *and* discovery are not only inevitable and inherent in human linguisticity, but also inevitably partial, flawed, perverse and idolatrous. As the coherence of reality is arguably dependent in part on its human linguistic component, we do more than reach through our images and concepts to grasp worldly reality; we also arguably help to shape that reality with our descriptions, for all that they are partial and distorted. Yet apart from these shortcomings in description – description, moreover, which is inextricably mixed up with that which it describes – reality eludes us. For who but God is able to comprehend the whole?

This requires the correspondence element inherent in realism, however critical or postcritical, to seek a theistic resolution if it is to make any claim to coherence. The world under human description seeks verification and redemption in terms of the world under God's description, that is, in the person of Jesus Christ who is the incarnate meeting place of divine and creaturely reality. While the strength of critical realism, is its emphasis on the ongoing partiality and revisability of our knowledge, postcritical realism also offers a personal as well as dynamic understanding of reality that is particularly compatible with a theistic realism, as will be explored further later. While the complexity and thoroughness of Torrance's thinking on this subject and the related one of rationality have only been touched on here, Kerr's programmatic suggestions for a Wittgensteinian theistic realism have also been behind this chapter and remain to be examined later.

The challenge facing this inquiry is that of retaining a critical/post-critical framework for theology while finding room within such a framework for a theology that is comprehensive enough to serve a Christian reality that necessarily subsumes all of created reality, material and otherwise, including the constructivist element in human language and thought which has kept surfacing in this discussion but which is seemingly ruled out by a correspondence model, even (or especially) a theistic one. How is such a theological realism able to take account of a continuing linguistic contribution to worldly reality? Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the postliberal and liberal revisionist contributions to this search.