



## THEOLOGY, RELIGIOUS STUDIES, AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS HUMANISTIC DISCIPLINES: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON REALISM

**Sami Pihlström**

*Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Finland*  
*Correspondence email address: sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi*

**ABSTRACT:** This metaphilosophical paper discusses the nature of the philosophy of religion as an academic discipline. It may seem self-evident that the philosophy of religion is one of the humanities – along with neighboring fields of research within theology and religious studies – but it may also be argued that this is not obvious at all, as philosophical investigation can study the way the world is at the fundamental metaphysical level. Philosophers of religion, in particular, may claim to “directly” discuss the question of God’s existence vs. non-existence. The paper argues that settling the metaphilosophical question about the nature of the philosophy of religion presupposes considering the underlying issue of realism. From a transcendental-pragmatist perspective, the philosophy of religion is a humanistic discipline, but this cannot be non-circularly demonstrated to those presupposing metaphysical realism.

**KEYWORDS:** realism, humanities, the philosophy of the humanities, pragmatism, transcendental philosophy

### Introduction

This metaphilosophical article does not develop detailed arguments about topics standardly discussed in the philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I will explore what we may call the philosophy of theology and religious studies, which can be characterized as a field within “the philosophy of the humanities” that in turn belongs to general philosophy of science and theory of inquiry (Pihlström, 2022). I will consider in what sense exactly theology and the study of religion, including the philosophy of religion as a branch of philosophy closely intertwined with them, represent *humanistic*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Francis Jonbäck for the invitation to submit this essay and to two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. My views on the issues discussed in this paper have significantly developed through conversations with Timo Koistinen over the years.

research. I will thereby examine what kind of conceptually prior philosophical discussions need to take place in order for us to be able to hold informed views on the status of theology, religious studies, and the philosophy of religion as humanistic disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

I will begin with observations that are more or less self-evident (both in the academia and wider society today), emphasizing the non-ideological and non-confessional status of theology and religious studies. My reflections toward the end of the essay, especially on realism and transcendental philosophy, are presumably more controversial. Of course, I am not claiming to settle this complex set of issues here, but I hope to enhance our self-understanding as philosophers of religion and philosophers of theology and religious studies, concluding that we cannot non-circularly argue against conceptions of the status of our discipline(s) that presuppose views on the issue of realism dramatically diverging from our own.

### **Academic Theology as Non-Confessional**

For most academic theologians it is self-evident that their “research objects” do not include God, deities, or any other religious entities. (In a broad sense, “religious entities” may denote objects, relations, and processes postulated within the framework of – at least realistically<sup>3</sup> understood – religious language-use, such as God, divine beings generally, angels, immortal souls or spirits, resurrection bodies, grace or atonement, and analogous spiritual entities in various religious traditions, including non-Western ones.) While religious practitioners in some sense seek connections with such entities, theology, as a secular academic discipline, examines those (attempted) “connections” themselves, that is, human religious activity and thinking, rather than any superhuman or supernatural realities.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The boundaries between these disciplines are, admittedly, fuzzy. One might suggest that the philosophy of religious studies lies in a broad sense within the philosophy of religion. Roughly, we may, however, say that the philosophy of religion focuses on religion, while the philosophy of (theology and) religious studies focuses on the academic discipline(s) of (theology and) religious studies, just like the philosophy of science focuses on science. These are interrelated but in principle distinguishable pursuits.

<sup>3</sup> As will become clear later, the problem of realism is central for this entire investigation. For a concise introduction to realism in the philosophy of religion, see Byrne (2003); cf. Pihlström (2020).

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “religious entity” is problematic, but I believe some concept of this kind is needed to cover the multitude of objects, properties, relations, phenomena, states of affairs, events, and processes to which religious language-use and thinking are typically committed. This vocabulary remains heuristic here and is not intended to identify any unambiguous class of religious entities. I will also have to leave open the question of whether the discourse on religious entities presupposes defining the concept of “the supernatural.” What is considered supernatural must inevitably be seen as relative to “the natural” – and thus to the current stage of science, on the basis of which the boundary between the natural and the supernatural is drawn and redrawn. Here it suffices to note that theology and religious studies (unlike religion itself) do not appeal to religious or supernatural explanations for the phenomena investigated and thus do not postulate “religious entities.” It is, however, important to understand that

Accordingly, theology is a humanistic or, more broadly, humanistic and social-scientific discipline.<sup>5</sup> Academics at theological faculties and research institutions all over the world study and teach a wide range of topics that could easily be studied and taught in other academic contexts, especially at faculties of the humanities and social sciences. For example, church historians investigate the “same” history as other historians, though focusing on religions and churches, just as economic history examines the past developments in economy. Biblical studies, in turn, analyzes sacred writings and their historical contexts; their work does not differ in any principled way from critical research on other ancient texts and their historical contexts. Sociologists of religion, furthermore, practice empirical social science when examining the social nature of religious phenomena. Moreover, the disciplines of systematic theology are often indistinguishable from the history of ideas and philosophy: for example, dogmatics studies religious doctrines and their development from an analytic or historical perspective presupposing no commitment to the truth (or falsity) of any doctrine. Although some – presumably many – theologians are religious believers, their academic research and teaching in no way binds them to any religious denomination. Any branch of theology can be studied and taught by an atheist as well as by a believer.<sup>6</sup>

Contingent worldview backgrounds may have an influence on how researchers understand the deeper significance of their activities, including their potential societal impact, but such backgrounds arguably (in principle) play a role in all disciplines. It seems natural to expect that, independently of the researchers’ own religious or non-religious worldviews, their shared goal is to advance our understanding of religions and religiosity as well as the preconditions enabling critical discussion of religion. Analogously, economists, as scholars, operate in a context of contingent economic-political ideas (or even “ideologies”), but their research need not be linked with any political views. Generally, it is hardly fruitful to classify fields of inquiry according to how close to or how far they are from “ideological” settings. Theology is not exceptional here. Like any other academic study, it is in principle independent of ideologies yet susceptible to their possible influence. An economist’s thinking can be

---

during the long history of theology very different views on this matter have been maintained. Traditionally, theologians have rather unproblematically spoken of God; it would be absurd for a philosopher (of religion or of theology) today to claim that, say, Thomas Aquinas did not actually practice “theology” because he made ontological commitments to God’s existence. On the other hand, even natural sciences have been taken to be capable of speaking of God and other things we now consider supernatural. I am here concerned with what *we* 21<sup>st</sup>-century academics should think about theology and religious studies as humanistic disciplines in a world thoroughly shaped by scientific rationality loosely based on *some* form of naturalism.

<sup>5</sup> Unless the context requires specificity, in this paper I often use “humanities” broadly, denoting “the social sciences and humanities,” or the SSH fields.

<sup>6</sup> I am here describing a European, and largely North-European, understanding of the place of theology within secular universities without claiming this description to be universally valid. I am fully aware of the fact that in many academic contexts – e.g., at the theological faculties of German universities – this basically secular conception of theology could be challenged.

influenced by whether they are inclined to support conservative or progressive policies; as a researcher, their job is to seek the truth regardless of such inclinations. Even in the sciences, for instance engineering or medicine, it can be asked to what extent research is vulnerable to, say, considerations emerging from industry or healthcare business. The fact that research is surrounded by diverging societal values is familiar to anyone with the barest understanding of science and scholarship in modern societies, and theology is in no way special in this regard. In all fields, researchers' values outside the academia may influence the choice of research topics, for instance.

Crucially, nurturing scientific objectivity in the sense of continuing to critically develop truth-directed methods and research practices – both in the humanities and in the sciences – is compatible with acknowledging the value-embeddedness of all research and does not require any imagined “value neutrality” (see, e.g., Raatikainen, 2006). Gods are not assumed to exist in theology any more than in any humanistic or scientific discipline, but a deeper understanding of why some people believe in God or gods is something we find academically and societally valuable.<sup>7</sup>

One apt, albeit limited, analogy for the practice of theology is provided by medicine (and of course medieval universities already had both medical and theological faculties). Clearly, the same biological, physiological, and chemical phenomena are explored in medicine as in the basic natural sciences (such as molecular biology). However, in medicine, inquiries into these phenomena take place in a context constituted by the aim of promoting health and the cure of illnesses. Likewise, theology and religious studies examine the same cultural and social phenomena, structures, and meanings as other humanistic and social-scientific disciplines do, placing them in a framework focusing on human beings as creatures practicing religion, using religious language, and living religious lives (or rejecting them). Of course, there are disanalogies, too: while medicine can be understood essentially as an applied science seeking to cure illnesses, theology is not primarily applied research, though there may be exceptions. The bulk of theological research is basic humanistic scholarship whose main aim is to explain and understand cultural, historical, and social phenomena related to religion and religiosity.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Value-dependencies are significant also in basic scientific research. For example, according to Kuhn's (1970 [1962]) classical theory of the structure of scientific revolutions, the overwhelming majority of the practice of science amounts to relatively dogmatic “normal science” based on scientists' unquestioned points of departure and basic principles defining the relevant field (viz., “paradigms” codifying the values and assumptions of the discipline). A Kuhnian paradigm switch is, then, comparable to a religious conversion. On the political significance of the dogmatic character of paradigms and normal science in the context of the development of both Kuhn's thinking and the cold war, see Reisch (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in sports research it is possible to explain and understand sports-related phenomena without practicing or advancing them. (A “sports scientist” may be very critical of the Olympics, for instance.) Of course, such a researcher is usually *somehow* interested in sports as a human practice and a form of culture. Few of us become theologians without being somehow interested in human religiosity. Whatever a researcher engages in, in whatever faculty context, their central duty as a member of the academic community is to maintain a cool critical distance from their research object (cf. Pihlström &

A theologian might, “outside the academia,” utilize the results of basic research in an “applied” project aimed at promoting religious life or church activities. However, this is in principle just as contingent from the perspective of academic theology as, for example, a case in which a medical scientist runs a clinic, or (to give a “humanistic” example) a historian employs the results of their research by organizing tourist excursions to military-historical sites. The truth or falsity of the historian’s claims about what happened at those sites does not depend on what would make their war tourism business flourish. Very simply, interests external to research may influence what researchers consider important but not the truth-value of their theories.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, it is not necessary to draw any philosophically significant division between theology and religious studies (or the “science of religions”). Both are humanistic and social-scientific fields belonging to the study of religion in a broad sense. Traditionally, the division of labor has been clear: theologians have studied their “own” religious tradition from the inside, while religious studies scholars, including scholars of “comparative religion,” have studied “other religions” and religiosity generally. However, this division is only historical and practical, not philosophically essential. Since the theologian need not be committed to any religious doctrine or tradition, nothing in their research needs to be “their own” – any more than cultural anthropologists should be able to share, “from within,” the ideas and practices of the way of life they study. Similar philosophical questions concerning the relationship between “internal” understanding and “external” (e.g., causal or functional) explanation apply equally to the “science of religion” and theology.<sup>10</sup>

Seeking truth about humanly created culture is not, of course, a search for “mind-independent” truth in the sense in which, say, physics pursues truth about mind-independent nature. Yet it is a search for objective truths independent of the search itself, targeting reality not constructed by the practices of inquiry. The ontology and

---

Kivistö, 2023). Such a critical distance is vital also when a researcher as a citizen and political agent turns into an activist employing the results of their research for activist purposes. This may be a central element of the overall project of, say, a political scientist, but it should never run into conflicts with their critical pursuit of truth.

<sup>9</sup> The independence of theology from religious and confessional contexts, briefly described here, is not a universal phenomenon. In many countries, denominational theological institutions continue to operate. See Vainio (2020) for a clarifying discussion – different from mine – of the role of objectivity in theology within secular universities. He proposes to interpret the results of “analytic theology” as “technical norms” (of the form, “if we want to achieve goal X, we must do Y”) potentially normatively employed even for apologetic purposes (outside research contexts), although apologetics is not a task of research itself maintaining academic objectivity. On technical norms in applied research, see, e.g., Niiniluoto (1993); Raatikainen (2006). The term “technical norm” is drawn from von Wright (1963).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, for example, Winch’s (1958) famous Wittgenstein-inspired criticism of “external” perspectives on social practices would be equally relevant or irrelevant in these fields. On these issues in the philosophy of the humanities and social-sciences, especially regarding the concepts of objectivity and value-ladenness, see, e.g., Raatikainen (2006); Koskinen (2022); Pihlström (2022). As Koskinen (among others) reminds us, the value- and interest-dependence in, for example, the choice of research questions is something that concerns all fields of inquiry, while it is as important (and equally possible) in the humanities as in other fields to avoid typical biases threatening our pursuit of objectivity. Importantly, researchers’ “participatory” roles may both threaten and enhance their pursuit of objectivity.

epistemology of theology and religious studies can, then, be further explored within a general philosophy of the humanities: What exactly does it mean for the objects of historical and cultural studies to exist? Specifically, what does it mean to say that these objects are, according to serious academic research, “natural” (not supernatural)? Instead of pursuing these questions, my characterization of the humanistic character of theology and religious studies here only serves the metaphilosophical issue to be raised about the status of the philosophy of religion in relation to these disciplines.

### Philosophy of Religion and Humanistic Research

As theology and religious studies investigate human culture and history (like any other humanistic disciplines), questions about God and other religious (“supernatural”) entities are not among their research questions, at least not “directly.” In this sense, they are broadly naturalistic fields of study presupposing a general scientific worldview; at least they are compatible with such a worldview and do not postulate any supernatural reality any more than other sciences do.<sup>11</sup> Theology and religious studies do not seek to resolve the question of God’s existence in one direction or another, but aim at explaining and understanding how beliefs about the existence or non-existence of God have developed and influenced culture and society, acknowledging that all these processes are fully natural and historically contingent.<sup>12</sup>

While this humanist and (at the same time) broadly naturalist character of theology and religious studies may today be taken for granted, there is one important exception: the philosophy of religion. More precisely, it must be investigated *whether* philosophy of religion is an exception. Our key question therefore concerns the status of this discipline, and hence philosophy generally, in relation to humanistic research.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> A philosophical atheist may admit that science (or academic research generally) does not deal with God’s existence, and this concerns theology as much as any other field of inquiry. Therefore, scientific and religious worldviews are in principle compatible with each other, but there is nevertheless a profound *weltanschaulich* conflict between them (as we might put it), because the scientific thinker cannot endorse the epistemology grounding religious worldviews (e.g., justifying religious beliefs in terms of sacred writings or subjective religious experiences) but emphasizes the primacy of the scientific method (cf. Niiniluoto, 1999). (In this vocabulary, a “worldview” is simply one’s system of beliefs about the world, while at a more inclusive *weltanschaulichen* level epistemological as well as ethical and more generally axiological views on how the worldview is justified need to be considered.)

<sup>12</sup> It is possible to defend a variety of naturalisms (of varying strength) within this overall position. It can hardly be presupposed that researchers’ (including philosophers’) personal *weltanschaulichen* attitudes would have no influence on what kind of naturalism they embrace. As has been emphasized above, science and scholarship are not value-neutral but practices engaged in by real people in their historical and social circumstances. Recall also that the distinction between the natural and the supernatural can only be grounded in our current scientific worldview and its ways of blocking out supernatural elements. Indeed, Quine (1992, pp. 20–21) observed that if science itself indisputably demonstrated that, for example, telepathy – as something our current science finds supernatural – is real, then we would have to follow science and accept even telepathy as “natural.”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Williams’s (2006) and Putnam’s (2016, chapter 2) debate on “philosophy as a humanistic discipline” in the early 2000s. It is hardly a coincidence that this debate circled around the question of

This is, in a sense, a question about the relations of theology and philosophy. Few contemporary theologians see philosophy as a servant of theology (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*) – and some may even view it, in the spirit of W.V. Quine’s (e.g., 1992) radical naturalism, as a servant of science (*philosophia ancilla scientiae*) – but the philosophy of religion lies in the somewhat fuzzy borderlands of philosophy and theology. At many European universities, the philosophy of religion is found within a theological faculty (and often at a department of systematic theology), while in the Anglo-American world, it is common for philosophy of religion to be taught at philosophy departments, and nothing prevents – anywhere – those working in philosophy from specializing in the philosophy of religion. Trivially, philosophy of religion is, regardless of its institutional context, just philosophy. Again, as church history is just history focusing on churches and religions (and not “theological” historiography), philosophy of religion is philosophy asking questions about religion, including semantic questions about religious language and epistemological ones about the relations between faith and reason or religion and science. At the core of these issues there are questions about how the meanings of religious expressions should be understood and in what sense (if any) religious beliefs can be rationally acceptable and/or compatible with the scientific worldview. By asking its typical questions, the philosophy of religion examines, among other things, the referentiality of the concept of God – or different concepts of the divinity – and the arguments for and against beliefs in God’s existence.<sup>14</sup>

It is again self-evident that philosophy of religion in this sense can be practiced independently of religious commitments. Philosophers of religion can be expected to examine the preconditions of the intelligibility of religious language and the criteria for the epistemological scrutiny of religious beliefs. This examination takes place one step removed from religious thinking itself and also from a perspective diverging from theology proper. The fact that numerous philosophers of religion have *de facto* been ideologically positioned – some conservative Christians, others militant atheists – is again contingent, not essential with regard to the main aspirations and methods of the research field itself.<sup>15</sup>

---

metaphysical realism, a paradigmatic version of which was, according to the earlier Putnam (e.g., 1990), manifest in Williams’s notion of the “absolute conception of the world.” See, e.g., Pihlström (2023, chapter 2).

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, one of the most central areas of the philosophy of religion is of course the assessment of the rationality (in a narrower epistemic or intellectual sense as well as in a broader practical and ethical sense) of various religious and theological conceptions of God’s existence and/or non-existence. These issues are inseparable from the realism debate I am focusing on in this paper, but I will mostly bracket the rationality discussion concerning religion here.

<sup>15</sup> I do find it problematic for the critical exercise of the philosophy of religion that there are many prominent religiously active scholars in the field defending varieties of “Christian philosophy” according to which a Christian philosopher can start from Christian premises needing no justification in critical debate with those rejecting them. See, e.g., Koistinen (2000; 2021) for critical evaluations of this methodological state-of-the-art in the philosophy of religion, specifically regarding reformed epistemology. While Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Peter van Inwagen are considered leading epistemologists and metaphysicians independently of their religious commitments, it is not obvious that their work promotes the *critical* pursuit of the philosophy of religion. In my view,

However, one may claim that philosophy – and thus, a fortiori, the philosophy of religion – is *not* unequivocally a humanistic discipline, because the “research object” of philosophical inquiry is, in principle, the whole of reality or the world in general, whatever there is or may be. Therefore, philosophy arguably differs from all other fields of research by not being identifiable according to its research object(s).<sup>16</sup> Like theology and religious studies, philosophy is, indisputably, a humanistic discipline (rather than a “laboratory science”) in a “practical” sense, that is, with regard to how the field is institutionally organized: its conferences, publications, and research projects resemble those of the other humanities. But it is *not* a humanistic discipline in the more fundamental sense that only human culture would be suitable as its research object.<sup>17</sup>

In philosophy (of religion), it is therefore possible – in contrast to theology and religious studies, or other humanistic disciplines – to explore metaphysical questions about what exists and what fundamental reality independent of culture is like. In the philosophy of religion, these questions traditionally concern the existence and attributes of God (and possibly other “religious entities”), as well as, at the meta-level, what is meant by the existence of such beings, although such meta-level questions more naturally (again) also fall within the scope of humanistic research. Metaphysical theorization on God’s attributes is intertwined with questions standardly posed in systematic theology concerning, for example, interpretations of the trinity or atonement and their history, but in the philosophy of religion these topics can, in principle, be studied – and, according to many philosophers of religion, should be studied – “directly” as questions about the world itself (as distinguished from our practices of speaking about or conceptualizing the world). While the theologian investigates, say, how interpretations of these and other doctrines have historically developed in diverging theological contexts and which interpretive possibilities may remain implicit in them, or how these interpretations have been or might be justified

---

philosophy of religion not only can but should be practiced as a religiously neutral academic discussion, while recognizing that philosophical debates presuppose value-laden and *weltanschaulichen* premises. Here I cannot deal with this issue further, but I do believe that interesting philosophy of religion stays very far from any apologetic projects.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps philosophy is identifiable in terms of its method, but the nature of the philosophical method, as is well known, is itself a philosophical question; the task of this paper is not to decide which methods philosophers should use, although I will (below) myself (loosely) employ what is known as the transcendental method.

<sup>17</sup> Trivially, however, *all* humanistic research needs to refer to non-cultural (“natural”) entities, or to “quantify over them.” For example, a war historian presumably needs to presuppose a variety of biological and geographical facts when discussing events on the battlefield that might explain the outcome of a war, as well as facts about human biology explaining combatants’ and civilians’ deaths. Conversely, a natural scientist must presuppose “humanistic” facts about, e.g., the social circumstances of the testing of a hypothesis, in order to be able to conceive of their own hypotheses as critically testable ones. These examples do not change the fact that the research objects of the sciences and the humanities differ considerably from each other. There is no need to presuppose any metaphysical dualism between “nature” and “culture”, but we must take seriously the significant differences in the research practices in different fields.



from different confessional viewpoints, the philosopher can (at least in principle try to) ask whether those conceptions of God are true and/or justified with regard to what reality itself is like independently of our conceptual schemes. The philosopher can also more cautiously ask what would follow from a certain doctrine's being true.

The question of whether God exists is therefore philosophical, not theological. While theology does not deal with the existence of God, philosophy can examine this existence question along with everything else. Accordingly, it is plausible to construe atheism as a philosophical position (albeit usually based on the results of science), although radical atheists (e.g., Tuomela, 1985) may suggest, in the spirit of "scientific atheism," that God's non-existence could be a result of science, as the "best-explaining" theories determine what ultimately exists.<sup>18</sup>

Philosophers can investigate the attributes traditionally attached to the Christian God, for example, by asking "truth-directed" questions not reducible to analyzing our conceptual scheme. Is the concept of omnipotence meaningful at all? Can any individual in the world fall under that concept? If God exists, are omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute goodness, as divine attributes, compatible with the fact that there seems to be gratuitous evil and suffering in the world (summarizing the basic formulation of the problem of evil, or the theodicy problem)?<sup>19</sup> Is, furthermore, the doctrine of "divine simplicity" – roughly, the idea that God, having no proper parts, is identical with his attributes and thus the simplest possible being – true, or even intelligible? How, furthermore, should we approach the classical proofs of God's existence?<sup>20</sup> And how should these questions be evaluated regarding the conflict between science and religion?

In short, in the philosophy of religion, as in philosophy generally, one may ask questions about reality itself, including its fundamental ontological nature – not merely about our "conceptual schemes" but about how they "mirror" the transcendent "ready-made" world outside them, to employ metaphors popular in late analytic philosophy (cf., e.g., Rorty, 1979; Putnam, 1990). Neither theology nor religious studies, nor any other field of humanistic research, explicitly takes a stand on such metaphysical issues or epistemological ones dependent on them. As these questions concern the world as it is independently of us, especially the relationship between human concepts, language, thought, and practices and the cosmos outside them (or "culture" and "nature"), they are not restricted to culture or history, as "humanistic"

---

<sup>18</sup> Tuomela (1985) relies on Sellars's (1963) scientific realism and the *scientia mensura* thesis according to which science is "the measure of what there is". The multiplicity of different versions of atheism is thoroughly discussed in Martin (1990).

<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, I have emphasized the thoroughly ethical character of the (anti)theodicy discussion, arguing that it concerns human beings' way of viewing the world (and each other), not any transcendent God (Pihlström 2020; 2021, chapter 6; 2023, chapter 5).

<sup>20</sup> As central as these proofs are in the history of philosophy and theology, I find it impossible to take them seriously today in debates on the rationality vs. irrationality of religious belief. This, of course, is a controversial position. Analyzing the theistic proofs can presumably (still) have an effect on how philosophically inclined believers conceptualize their religious and theological framework (or, possibly, their choosing to abandon such a framework).

research questions are. Analogously, general metaphysics (*metaphysica generalis*) examines, for example, the existence of universals and modalities (“in the world,” not merely within our schemes), and the relationships between basic ontological categories, not merely the history or different interpretations of such notions. The philosophy of religion (in its metaphysical dimensions) has sometimes been classified under “rational theology,” and thus as part of special metaphysics (*metaphysica specialis*), which hopes to theorize about “religious entities” and for which it is relevant to address questions about ontological categories belonging to general metaphysics.

Moreover, at the intersection of the philosophy of religion and general metaphysics, we find a range of fundamental philosophical problems, such as the freedom of the will and the mind-body problem, which are of considerable importance for understanding and evaluating religious beliefs. As far as such problems are, again, taken to concern reality itself, studying them is not a purely humanistic project but an inquiry into the ontological structure of the world.<sup>21</sup> The nature of such philosophical issues and their relations to explicitly theological questions is understood in (approximately) this way in, for example, “analytic theology,” which applies the concepts and methods of analytic philosophy to (e.g., Christian) theological concepts, doctrines, and problems (see, e.g., Vainio, 2020).<sup>22</sup>

### **The Problem of Realism in Research on Religion**

Insofar as the philosophy of religion (within general philosophy) and especially metaphysics examine questions about reality, including God’s existence, they are not strictly speaking humanistic disciplines but directed at “reality in general” and thus not limited by their objects of research. While theology, among the humanities, explores our “conceptual order,” philosophy (at least metaphysics) hopes to delineate the “order of being.”<sup>23</sup> However, taking such inquiry into a mind-independent reality to be so much as possible presupposes a non-trivial philosophical account of the relations our language-use, thought, and conceptualization bear to the world. What is presupposed is, roughly, *metaphysical realism*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the above-discussed division of

---

<sup>21</sup> Such issues also belong to “special metaphysics,” more precisely “rational cosmology” and “rational psychology” (as, for example, Kant classified these fields in the First Critique).

<sup>22</sup> As noted above, analytic theology might be considered “applied” research in the sense that its results – though worldview-neutral in themselves – can serve apologetics. Just as in, say, medicine the effectiveness of a therapy regarding the main aim, health, can be investigated by focusing on microbiological facts obtaining independently of human interests (viz., promoting health), in analytic theology one can rely on the results of non-confessional research (arguments, conceptual analyses, etc.) that may have religious relevance for a believer.

<sup>23</sup> On this distinction, see again, e.g., Tuomela (1985).

<sup>24</sup> Realism (in religious/theological contexts) should be carefully distinguished from the claim that God exists mind-independently; atheists are realists, too. Metaphysical realists can either affirm or deny the reality of the transcendent. This is why I find Devitt’s (1991) influential characterization of realism as a conjunction of an existence claim and a mind-independence claim misleading. Instead of simply

labor between theology and religious studies (conceived as humanistic disciplines), on the one hand, and philosophy of religion (conceived as “not simply a humanistic discipline,” because it pursues truth about independent reality), on the other hand, presupposes a metaphysically realist conception of reality and truth.<sup>25</sup>

Analogously to the “levels” of scientific realism distinguished by philosophers of science (e.g., Niiniluoto, 1999; cf. Pihlström, 2020; 2022), the problem of realism arises (at least) at the levels of theology, religious studies, and the philosophy of religion. First, *religious realism* (or realism about religion) addresses the relationship between religious language itself and the reality it purportedly refers to: the question of realism here is whether there is such a “religious reality” and whether religious discourse is “truth-apt.” According to the realist, there *is* an independent reality of “religious entities” out there – or if there are no such entities, their non-existence is independent of our schemes and practices. God either exists or does not exist, and our using the concept of God does not settle this ontological question. A religious antirealist, in contrast, denies the ontological independence of religious reality, defending, for example, some form of constructivism or relativism according to which the existence or non-existence of religious entities depends on our language-use, practices, schemes, perspectives, or traditions.<sup>26</sup>

The *theological* (as distinguished from religious) *realism* discussion takes a step onto a critical meta-level and no longer directly considers the way religious discourse relates to reality, any more than the mind-independence or language-independence of God’s existence (or non-existence). This, of course, is because theology, as noted, does not study the existence or non-existence of God. The issue of theological realism is

---

maintaining that God exists mind-independently, the religious realist holds that the answer to the question whether God exists is determined mind-independently (and independently of concepts, languages, beliefs, etc.), only depending on the way the world is (at the level of “religious entities”). Otherwise, realism would entail theism. Similarly, the scientific realist need not claim any *specific* theoretical entities postulated by scientific theories to exist independently of those theories; rather, s/he maintains that the world itself “determines” which (if any) theoretical entities exist – though, admittedly, it would be strange to subscribe to *scientific* realism without believing *any* such entities to exist (even those postulated in the best-explaining theories of the “mature” sciences, whatever exactly that means). The key idea here in any event is that it is the world itself – not science, nor religion, nor anything merely human – that “decides” what exists. See again Niiniluoto (1999); for distinctions between religious, theological, and other forms of realism, see Pihlström (2020, chapter 1).

<sup>25</sup> Metaphysical realism may here be simply characterized in terms of Putnam’s (e.g., 1990) distinction between metaphysical and internal realism. It claims that the world consists of a definite set of mind-independent objects and properties, in principle describable by an absolute true theory (from a “God’s-Eye View”) corresponding to the way the world is. My main inspiration in this discussion (only implicit here) comes from pragmatist critique of metaphysical realism (see, e.g., Herrmann, 2003 for applications of Putnamian arguments to the philosophy of religion).

<sup>26</sup> Antirealist interpretations of religious discourse are common in “Continental” and postmodern philosophy of religion distancing itself from “onto-theological” approaches (cf., e.g., Kearney, 2010), and analogies may be found in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, whose advocates deny that religious language refers to anything “real” independently of that language-use. It would, however, be misleading to reduce Wittgensteinian ideas to any simple antirealism (see Koistinen, 2019; Burley, 2012; Schönbaumsfeld, 2023).

therefore similar to questions about the ontological status of research objects of other secular humanistic disciplines and about the truth-aptness of humanistic discourses. For example, historical theological research can be analyzed in relation to this realism discussion, considering in what sense historical reality “exists” independently of historians’ interpretations based on their value-laden “selections” of historical facts.<sup>27</sup> The problem of theological realism does not, then, differ from the problem of realism regarding religious studies.<sup>28</sup> *If* theology were understood as confessional, then the relevant question of realism should be distinguished from the realism issues concerning both religious studies and religious discourse, though.

Now, it is natural to view the problem of realism about “first-order” religious discourse and its purported referentiality as primarily a problem in the philosophy of religion. In contrast, “second-order” questions about the referentiality and truth-aptness of theories in theology and religious studies (*viz.*, their purportedly designating “real” cultural and historical “objects”) belong to the philosophy of the humanities. However, *philosophical* discourse on religion seeking to refer to God – *i.e.*, the existence or non-existence of God or, respectively, other “religious entities” – in non-religious contexts (*i.e.*, within academic philosophy of religion, instead of either “first-order” use of religious language or “second-order” theological interpretations of such language-use) still remains beyond the analysis provided here. According to realist philosophers of religion, referentiality and truth-aptness apply to philosophical discourse on God, and it is meaningful (and, according to some, necessary) to strive for real-world reference in philosophizing about religion, whereas critics of (metaphysical) realism challenge this view.

Here the problem of realism can be seen as a meta-level problem about which some position must be taken insofar as we hope to settle in what sense the philosophy of religion can study “reality itself” (as distinguished from studying our conceptual schemes). When considering this problem, we specifically need to ask in what sense “God” and other expressions belonging to religious (and possibly theological) language can be used neutrally within the philosophy of religion, in which language is *not* used religiously. Wittgensteinian criticism, according to which, say, the proofs of God’s existence or theodicy arguments fail to speak of God in a religiously meaningful sense, misconstruing the “grammar” of religious language, also immediately emerges here.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> On realism regarding the ontology of historical facts, see, *e.g.*, several essays in Tucker (2011; cf. Pihlström, 2022, chapter 3).

<sup>28</sup> In these humanistic fields, realism again needs to be qualified regarding the notion of mind-independence, as culture depends on minds and languages. Yet, something analogous to “scientific realism” could still prevail as long as the relevant kind of independence is understood as independence from the minds and beliefs of the researcher(s) themselves. Yet another twist to the discussion emerges from the well-known fact that the social sciences (in particular) tend to influence society and thus their own research objects, but this, again, does not as such result in antirealism. (This essay cannot comprehensively elaborate on scientific realism and its analogies in the humanities and social sciences; see again Pihlström, 2022.)

<sup>29</sup> See again, *e.g.*, Burley (2012); Schönbaumsfeld (2023).

Crucially, realism cannot be simply accepted as “given” any more in the study of religion than elsewhere. On the contrary, as we know, it is one of the key philosophical problems concerning such study. If the nature of the philosophy of religion itself is – instead of assuming metaphysical realism – characterized in terms of, for example, Kantian critical philosophy or pragmatism (cf. Pihlström, 2021; 2023), it is not at all obvious that philosophers of religion, any more than scholars in theology and religious studies, can unproblematically deal with “reality itself” (independent of our conceptualizations), including God. Understood along “Kantian” lines (in a broad sense), the philosophy of religion primarily studies human language and thought, after all. It should not and *cannot* make claims about the existence or non-existence of God (interpreted as a metaphysical issue concerning “ready-made” transcendent reality), although many of its practitioners constantly try to do so, but only about the meanings such questions take in our schemes, discourses, and practices. The philosophy of religion therefore investigates our thoughts and descriptions of the existence or non-existence of God, not the existence of God itself. As Kant himself emphasized, we cannot know anything about God’s existence (or non-existence); the question cannot be resolved by the speculative use of reason. It is not a scientific or even a theoretical philosophical question, although for Kant it can be approached by the practical use of reason, through ethics. If the nature of the philosophy of religion (and philosophy generally) is accounted for in a broadly Kantian way, investigating the fundamental metaphysical nature of reality independent of the categorial structure of our thought is not a meaningful project.

In earlier work (e.g., Pihlström, 2020; 2023), I have interpreted the pragmatist tradition – in the philosophy of religion and more inclusively – as an essentially Kantian critical undertaking in its effort to understand our human structuring of reality taking place through practice-embedded conceptual categorization. Likewise, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion can be redescribed (*pace* many of its representatives) as a quasi-Kantian project elucidating the meanings of religious language, instead of studying the metaphysical nature of reality. The unifying feature of these different yet analogous approaches is that for them the philosophy of religion is, at least partly, (in Kantian terms) *transcendental*. Its core is the analysis of the necessary (practice- and form-of-life-embedded) preconditions for the possibility of thought and meaning. The philosophy of religion – or philosophy generally – cannot have any transcendent object beyond the boundaries of our language, residing in an allegedly “supernatural” realm. To engage in transcendental investigation is to analyze the conditions and limits of *human* reality.

As a transcendental study, the philosophy of religion can still significantly contribute to clarifying the epistemic status of theology and religious studies in yielding empirical knowledge about religiosity. It can also present critical views on how (or whether) we can, in our scientific, scholarly, or philosophical discussions of religion, meaningfully use expressions apparently belonging to religious language, that is, whether we may, when speaking about God non-religiously, nevertheless

maintain a critical vocabulary relevant to religious language-use.<sup>30</sup> Nor is transcendental philosophy in this extended meta-level sense restricted to the aprioristic methodology of orthodox Kantianism.

Thus, *qua* transcendental inquirers, philosophers of religion avoiding metaphysical realism and speculations about transcendent reality do engage in humanistic research, after all. Their project is not directly “about” the world itself (*viz.*, not about any metaphysical structure of reality independent of us) but “about” the structure of our thinking about and inquiring into the world, and thus about the structure of our conceptual categorizations and their preconditions, including not only contextually necessary categorial structures of the world “for us” but also their context-bound historical variability and relativity. Transcendental philosophy in this sense – especially when rearticulated through pragmatism or Wittgensteinianism – is historically relativized and pragmatically “naturalized.”<sup>31</sup> Philosophy of religion developed along these quasi-Kantian lines can even draw from the lessons of Quinean naturalized epistemology – albeit non-reductively interpreted, without simply reducing philosophical (conceptual, transcendental) “second-order” questions to empirical theological (or “first-order” religious) ones. Moreover, there is no reason why pragmatic transcendental philosophy of religion could not take seriously interdisciplinary empirical inquiries into real-life religious phenomena and their historical development.

From this critical transcendental perspective, mainstream analytic philosophy of religion (and analytic theology) remains largely based on metaphysical realism, engaging in an ultimately illusory endeavor, nurturing (in Kantian terms) the *transcendental illusion* of the conceptual and epistemic availability of ontologically independent *transcendent* reality.<sup>32</sup> In metaphysically realist, especially evidentialist, philosophy of religion it is typically assumed that philosophical arguments may target the question of God’s existence, evaluating the epistemological credentials of theism and atheism, speaking of the same real world whose physical structure is studied by the sciences. For Kantians, such philosophy reaching out for transcendent reality and claiming to assess the justification of our beliefs about it remains uncritical. What is

---

<sup>30</sup> Such critique remains unavailable to those non-Kantian philosophers of religion (e.g., evidentialists and reformed epistemologists) who believe Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy to have been mostly detrimental to theology and the philosophy of religion (cf., e.g., Wolterstorff, 1998). This could be considered an indirect line of argument in favor of a Kantian approach. From a Kantian (or, similarly, pragmatist or Wittgensteinian) standpoint, we may reflect on how and in what sense a critical philosophical investigation is relevant to religious believers’ thinking, while non-Kantian philosophers of religion uncritically assume that shared meanings are unproblematically available to both believers and non-believers.

<sup>31</sup> This, obviously, is a controversial idea, discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g., Pihlström, 2021, chapter 3).

<sup>32</sup> It is of course extremely simplifying to speak of the “mainstream” of analytic philosophy of religion (let alone philosophy generally). However, especially Anglo-American philosophy of religion has over the past decades been relatively strongly dominated by apologetic conflicts between theism and atheism presupposing metaphysical realism, too straightforwardly dismissing challenges emerging from Kantian critical philosophy and its relatives, including pragmatism and Wittgensteinianism (cf. Koistinen, 2021).

needed is a critique of reason: philosophical reflection on religion must “first” critically analyze the necessary conditions for the possibility (*Möglichkeitsbedingungen*) of religious thought and language-use, instead of (illusorily) presupposing that the transcendent objects of such thought and language-use could be “directly” discussed without analyzing those conditions.<sup>33</sup>

Kantian philosophy of religion admits that in humanist research on religion – theology and religious studies – empirical realism prevails: we are aiming at objective knowledge about reality, just as in other disciplines studying culture, history, and society. This realism only needs to be placed in the context of transcendental idealism, or its pragmatist or Wittgensteinian variants. A transcendental philosopher may even interpret religious language itself according to empirical realism – as truth-apt and capable of referring to “religious entities” analogously to the way scientific language can refer (or fail to refer) to theoretical entities – while insisting that the transcendental framework within which such entities are among the potential objects of our linguistic, conceptual, and cognitive activities is humanly constructed.<sup>34</sup> One may thus maintain realism about both religious and scientific or scholarly (e.g., theological) discourses, interpreting them as purportedly referring to the world, but this requires honoring Kant’s signature idea of the entanglement of transcendental idealism and empirical realism. Questions arising only at a transcendental level have to be taken into account when considering the relations between the different levels of realism in the study of religion. If they are uncritically ignored, we cannot even begin to understand how religious, theological, and philosophical language-uses in diverging ways seek to hook onto the world.

### **Transcendental Philosophy and Humanism**

In order to justify the claim that philosophers of religion can legitimately speak about transcendence (in a metaphysically-realistic sense), one would have to *first* settle the issue concerning the relation between *any* human conceptual categorizations and the (allegedly) conceptualization-independent world. This is, arguably, a transcendental issue that cannot be resolved by *presupposing* (metaphysical) realism. Thus, transcendental reflection on the legitimacy of our commitment(s) to realism carries enormous critical potential applicable to the assessment of contemporary orthodoxies in the philosophy of religion. In particular, the key Kantian distinction between the

---

<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, one might practice analytic theology and philosophy of religion without any necessary commitment to realism. One could, for example, merely investigate what follows from certain assumptions about God’s attributes, without making claims about the realistic interpretability of statements about such attributes. Realism itself is debated within analytic theology, and theological concepts and arguments may be logically analyzed without presupposing any metaphysical views, even realism.

<sup>34</sup> Continuing the analogy to the philosophy of science, we may suggest that a naturalized, historically relativized version of such a framework could be, for instance, a Kuhnian paradigm.

transcendental and the transcendent must be duly drawn. If my considerations are on the right track, tackling the question of whether the philosophy of religion is a humanistic discipline or a study of the (largely non-human) world “in itself” thus presupposes examining the problem of realism.

If the Kantian perspective sketched above is plausible, then (but only then) the philosophy of religion can be considered an essentially humanistic endeavor, along with philosophy generally – and, of course, theology. If, however, metaphysical realism is correct, and if thus Kantianism, pragmatism, and Wittgensteinianism are all (in this respect) wrong, then the kind of metaphysics practiced within the philosophy of religion reaching out for transcendent reality remains possible.<sup>35</sup> Then, and only then, philosophers of religion can try to settle the question of God’s existence (or, epistemologically, specify the truth-directed criteria for rational beliefs about that question). In any event, whatever the fate of that question may be in this respect, it is not a theological question. The degree to which God’s existence can be the topic of any rational investigation is itself a question requiring a serious examination of the problem of realism, intertwining the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of theology and religious studies.

One of my main points in this paper is that this issue of realism itself is a transcendental question concerning the relationship of human language and concepts (thinking, meanings, categories, etc.) to the world. In a Kantian context, even examining this meta-level question is impossible unless we adopt the perspective of critical philosophy. What Kant called transcendental realism (metaphysical realism) is fundamentally illusory, also leading serious philosophy of religion astray.<sup>36</sup>

If our dialectical situation is interpreted along these lines, a realist analytic philosopher of religion defending, say, evidentialist theism or reformed epistemology and a pragmatist or a Wittgensteinian philosopher criticizing those views do not necessarily directly disagree on any “first-order” issue. They disagree in a profound way on what the philosophy of religion is really about and under what conditions a philosophical discussion of religion is genuinely possible. They may also disagree about how humanistic approaches to religion in the philosophy of religion and in theology or religious studies are related to each other. The question of whether the philosophy of religion should start from metaphysical realism or Kantian critical philosophy (including its pragmatist or Wittgensteinian variants) is not a neutral meta-level question that could be resolved independently of these philosophical premises themselves. Attempts to answer this meta-question already presuppose some considered position in the philosophical discussion itself; the realism issue can hardly

---

<sup>35</sup> It is another matter in what sense exactly we can meaningfully say that such complex overarching philosophical views are right or wrong (let alone true or false).

<sup>36</sup> No specific account of the relation between metaphysical and transcendental realism can be provided here. According to Kant, the transcendental realist (contrasted with the transcendental idealist) fails to make the “transcendental turn,” confusing things in themselves with appearances (cf. Allison, 2004 [1983]), while metaphysical realism was roughly characterized above as a commitment to the world possessing its own fundamental ontological structure. Putnam (e.g., 1990; 2016) spent decades arguing that metaphysical realism is incoherent rather than false.



be settled on a neutral argumentative area without already adopting a position on how it is, or was, settled.

My examination of theology, religious studies, and philosophy of religion in this article might, I hope, thus also shed light on the general nature of the realism debate and its place in philosophy. The resources of transcendental argumentation, for example, in criticizing realistic God-discourse remain to be – transcendently – debated; such discussions should be of relevance to non-Kantians, too. Analogously, the question of whether philosophy of religion is a humanistic discipline is itself a “humanistic” question about interpreting a specific cultural area. We cannot escape the humanities even when trying to step over their boundaries to talk about a world independent of human beings. Strictly speaking, “all sciences are human sciences,” as Joseph Margolis (e.g., 1995; 2012) repeatedly pointed out, because all research relies on human values and meanings structuring the world insofar as it is an object of inquiry.<sup>37</sup>

It may be argued against the transcendental approach that if a Kantian (in our broad sense) claims that we can only study the structure of human thought, conceptual schemes, or language (rather than reality’s “own” categorial structure), they already assume that such things as thought, schemes, and language are real. They will then already have presented metaphysical statements about what exists (see, e.g., Loux, 2002). However, this response merely restates metaphysical realism without offering an independent argument against its critic. A Kantian (or a pragmatist) can in turn respond that concepts and language themselves do depend on conceptualization and linguistic categorization. It makes little sense to reach beyond them trying to discover the sense in which language and concepts are “real.” Yet, from a metaphysically realist standpoint, this answer presupposes Kantianism, failing to show that the realist’s understanding of science, language, and metaphysics is incorrect. At an extreme, Kantianism can even lead to radical antirealism or linguistic idealism, according to which “it’s just language all the way down” and “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*.” Then the question arises whether a Kantian (or, again, pragmatist) approach can consistently offer, even with qualifications, an empirically realist interpretation of theological and humanistic research.

I am not pretending to resolve this dialectic. The problem remains open and the discussion must go on; this openness is, indeed, central to my argument. The transcendental question about the necessary (albeit practice-embedded) preconditions for the possibility of realist discourse on religion (or the world) simply cannot be ignored – not in philosophy generally, and especially not when exploring the relations between religious practices, theological research, and critical philosophy of religion

---

<sup>37</sup> Margolis was one of the leading pragmatists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century but never accepted the integration of pragmatism and Kantian transcendental philosophy that I have (implicitly) relied on here.

reflecting on those relations.<sup>38</sup> However, this metaphilosophical openness should not lead to skepticism denying that we can rationally discuss philosophical problems.

These reflections in the end lead to the necessity of embracing humanism (“transcendental humanism”) – which, of course, is not a necessity in the sense that human life, practices, or conceptual schemes would be claimed to be anything other than contingent. We are, rather, speaking of a contextual necessity (cf. Pihlström, 2020; 2021; 2023). In order to decide whether philosophy of religion – or theology – is thoroughly or essentially “humanistic,” we must engage in the realism debate critically investigating whether the world (in any sense meaningfully available to us) is necessarily a humanly conceptualized world “for us” or a world “in itself” independently of conceptualization. *This* engagement is a critical humanist inquiry into our practices of conceptualizing the world and *their* conditions of possibility (and an inquiry that, I am afraid, will never reach any consensus). It is a transcendental inquiry, not in Kant’s original sense, but in a pragmatically reinterpreted sense fully aware of the historical contingency of any such conditions, yet enabling a critical reflection on the role of disciplinary practices (in, e.g., theology or philosophy) as constitutive of scholarly endeavors in the discipline.

### Concluding Remarks

My discussion might be summarized as a loose *transcendental argument*. Understanding theology, religious studies, and the philosophy of religion as humanistic disciplines primarily studying language, culture, concepts, and history is a necessary precondition for these fields to be able to engage in their constitutive tasks. If we assumed that philosophy or theology speaks directly about transcendent reality, a world in which God and other religious entities exist or fail to exist independently of us, the realism issue challenging this would remain unsettled (and unsettling). Philosophical attempts to make sense of religion, theology, and religious studies are constitutively committed to articulating and rearticulating what kind of realism is achievable, and needed, in these areas.

I have suggested that philosophy (of religion) is, irreducibly, a humanistic inquiry, because it must *first* (not chronologically but conceptually “first”) deal with “second-order” transcendental questions concerning our practices of world-categorization and their relation to the world they are (purportedly) about.<sup>39</sup> We may, at the meta-level,

---

<sup>38</sup> When emphasizing the “humanistic” character of the philosophy of religion, I am not denying the obvious fact that some individuals might be convinced about, e.g., God’s existence or non-existence (and thus about the way the world is) on the basis of arguments within the philosophy of religion. In such cases it is not entirely clear, however – at least not without further scrutiny – whether the God believed to be real is the entity purportedly referred to in the relevant philosophical arguments.

<sup>39</sup> This could also be cashed out in Wittgensteinian terms, suggesting that the philosophy of religion investigates religious language-use (“language-games”) in relation to reality that is not assumed to be independent of those language-games.

*disagree* about what needs to be done first: whether to start from Kantian critical questions concerning second-order legitimacy or whether to assume that our first-order inquiries can access a mind-independent world. The tension between these different starting points is so fundamental that it cannot be resolved on neutral ground (without presupposing either Kantian critical philosophy in a broad sense or something like metaphysical realism). Locating this tension is, I think, the main “result” of my metaphilosophical discussion. For the Kantian, the very disagreement itself demonstrates the irreducibly transcendental character of our investigation; this is why I am tempted to label my main argument “transcendental.”

Nothing I have said compromises the thoroughly *normative* character of the philosophy of religion. However, the normativity of philosophical inquiry can be conceptualized differently depending on whether it pertains to how we ought to think about the world (“itself”) or to how we ought to think about our thinking about the world. Either way, the normativity of philosophy differs from the possible normativity of theology and religious studies.<sup>40</sup> Even deep disagreements within (meta) philosophy between realism and its alternatives do not affect these differences.

Finally, although my reflections have largely, albeit implicitly, been based on pragmatism, I imagine that a critic inspired by Richard Rorty’s radical pragmatism would see my proposal as merely another effort of traditional philosophy to organize the areas of thought into a systematic whole, in contrast to which philosophy (in Rorty’s view) should become “edifying conversation.”<sup>41</sup> I have above analyzed the relations between different humanistic disciplines. This work is traditionally philosophical, especially when guided by transcendental reflection. Yet, Rorty’s criticism must be taken seriously – but so must the fact that even his criticism itself is only possible within something like transcendental humanism. An edifying cultural exchange on the nature of philosophy that Rorty hoped to develop (and which in his visions leaves traditional systematic philosophy behind) can be continued by means of pragmatic transcendental arguments, which, though fallible, do categorize and (re)structure the world and our practices of world-engagement.

## References

- Allison, H.E. (2004 [1983]). *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism – An Interpretation and Defense: Revised and Enlarged Edition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Burley, M. (2012). *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D.Z. Phillips*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Byrne, P. (2003). *Realism and God*. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Devitt, M. (1991 [1984]). *Realism and Truth*. Oxford: Blackwell.

---

<sup>40</sup> It remains debatable whether any normativity is appropriate in such humanistic fields or whether their business is merely to explain and interpret cultural reality.

<sup>41</sup> See Rorty (1979) and his subsequent pragmatist critiques of systematic philosophy.

- Herrmann, E. (2003). A Pragmatic Realist Philosophy of Religion. *Ars Disputandi*, 3(3), [www.arsdisputandi.org](http://www.arsdisputandi.org).
- Kearney, R. (2010). *Anatheism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Koistinen, T. (2000). *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy? A Study of Contemporary Anglo-American Approaches*. Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society.
- Koistinen, T. (2019). Contemplative Philosophy and the Problem of Relativism. In H. Rydenfelt, M. Bergman, & H.J. Koskinen (Eds.), *Limits of Pragmatism and Challenges of Theodicy*. Acta Philosophica Fennica 95. Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, pp. 163–173.
- Koistinen, T. (2021). Contemporary Philosophical Apologetics: Some Methodological Criticisms. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 11(2), pp. 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v11i02/27-39>
- Koskinen, I. (2022). Participation and Objectivity. *Philosophy of Science*, 90(2), pp. 413–432. doi:10.1017/psa.2022.77
- Kuhn, T.S. (1970 [1962]). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Loux, M.J. (2002). *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Margolis, J. (1995). *Historied Thought, Constructed World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Margolis, J. (2012). *Pragmatism Ascendent: A Yard of Narrative, a Touch of Prophecy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Martin, M. (1990). *Atheism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Niiniluoto, I. (1993). The Aim and Structure of Applied Research. *Erkenntnis*, 38, pp. 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01129020>
- Niiniluoto, I. (1999). *Critical Scientific Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pihlström, S. (2020). *Religious Truth, Pragmatic Realism, and Antitheodicy: On Viewing the World by Acknowledging the Other*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.
- Pihlström, S. (2021). *Pragmatist Truth in the Post-Truth Age: Sincerity, Normativity, and Humanism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pihlström, S. (2022). *Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Pihlström, S. (2023). *Humanism, Antitheodicism, and the Critique of Meaning in Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Putnam, H. (1990). *Realism with a Human Face*. (Ed.) J. Conant. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, H. (2016). *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity*. (Ed.) M. De Caro. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W.V. (1992). *Pursuit of Truth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Raatikainen, P. (2006). The Scope and Limits of Value-Freedom in Science. In H.J. Koskinen, S. Pihlström, & R. Vilkkö (Eds.), *Science – a Challenge to Philosophy?* Lausanne, Switzerland: Peter Lang, pp. 323–331.
- Reisch, G.A. (2018). *The Politics of Paradigms*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schönbaumsfeld, G. (2023). *Wittgenstein on Religious Belief*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sellars, W. (1963). *Science, Perception and Reality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tucker, A. (ed). (2011). *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tuomela, R. (1985). *Science, Action and Reality*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel.
- Vainio, O.P. (2020). On Theology and Objectivity: A Northern Point of View to Analytic Theology. *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 8(1), pp. 390–404. <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2020-8.1411-65210014>
- von Wright, G.H. (1963). *Norm and Action*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Williams, B. (2006). *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press.
- Winch, P. (1958). *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wolterstorff, N. (1998). Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant? *Modern Theology*, 14(1), pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00054>

### How To Cite This Article

Pihlström, Sami (2024). "Theology, Religious Studies, and Philosophy of Religion as Humanistic Disciplines: Critical Reflections on Realism," *AGATHEOS: European Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 116–136.

### Copyright Information

This is an open-access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.