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Singing and Dancing with God: A Reply to Fratt and Beach

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First, I'd like to thank Professors Steven Fratt and Bradley Beach for their replies to "Making God Dance." I find their responses helpful and stimulating—just the kind of reactions from faculty at the Christian colleges that I hoped for when writing the original essay. Let me begin with Fratt's comments, since I find that he and I are mostly in agreement, and then move on to Beach's comments and criticisms. I find myself, naturally, having more things to say to Beach, since his paper is more critical of Christian Multi-world Realism.

Fratt brings his creative insight to bear on Multi-world Realism from the point of view of an intellectual historian. He begins his response, as historians should, one supposes, by placing Multi-world Realism into the context of their particular fields. For Fratt, this is the history of recent philosophy of science and the broader historical setting of scientific methodology. But the core of his article describes "a few of the practical reasons why Multi-world Realism may prove a beneficial vantage point from which the Christian historian can understand the mission of history at the Christian liberal arts college."

First, Fratt notes that Multi-world Realism is compatible with Idealist philosophies of history. One of my examples in "Making God Dance" comes from Mark Noll's work on philosophy of history. I suggested that his philosophical view was, indeed, influenced by post-modern thinking. His view, nevertheless, attempts to be consistent with Common Sense Realism. I am pleased to see another Christian historian take a position in contrast to Noll's. Naturally, I believe Fratt is right in much of what he says in this section. Fratt writes that "the tradeoff between the historical certainty of positivistic histories and the resulting dehumanization of historical agents should be reason enough for Christians to reconsider their 'common sense' acceptance of Positivism." This way of stating what is at stake in Idealist vs. Common Sense Realist or Positivist views of history captures, in a helpful way, at least part of what "Making God Dance" addresses.

In his second reason, Fratt suggests that Multi-world Realism provides a useful model for facing the problems of the Western vs. non-Western cultural
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controversy. Again, I think Fratt is helpful here. In fact, when the issue of Christian Scholar's Review containing "Making God Dance" came out, it included two essays discussing multi-culturalism and a review essay evaluating a book on ethnic minorities and Christian colleges. I began immediately to think of the connections between Multi-world Realism and problems in the curriculum with regard to other cultures. There is, of course, much to be said on this topic, and what Fratt mentions only begins the discussion. Teaching more "histories" is certainly a valuable result of Multi-world Realism. But the story could continue with "literatures," "theologies," "arts," and (dare I say it?) "sciences." I'd like to see more discussion of these issues.

Two notes of caution I'd add. The first is that many people in the Christian colleges run together two separate, although perhaps related, problems. One is what might truly be called "multi-culturalism" dealing with non-Western civilizations and cultures. The other concerns seeking justice for American minority groups. The two issues are not the same, and, it seems, they should not be treated in the same way. A second note goes beyond curricular concerns to recruitment of faculty and students from underrepresented groups. Multi-world Realism might help us understand not just the histories, cultures, and subcultures of minorities but also their present fears and concerns. In other words, the difficulties facing American blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians on predominately white campuses often are not the same as those faced by non-American students on the same campuses.

Fratt's third point calls attention to a connection between Multi-world Realism and our human condition. While I think that Common Sense Realists can treat their theorizing humbly, Fratt's point about how Common Sense Realism can lead to a fascination with apologetic proofs and the promise of certainty or certitude is again, I think, close to the mark. Such a fascination is often found among evangelical students and scholars. If I may add an autobiographical note, my search for certainty in my faith very nearly killed my faith. Such was also the case for many of my philosophical classmates. One of the most freeing things about Multi-world Realism for me has been the removal of the need for certainty. God's breadth reaches far beyond the apparent bounds of Common Sense Realism.

I turn now to Beach's clear and concise comments. First, let me note an agreement with Beach on the issue of eschatology. If there is one thing that seems right about the results of Multi-world Realism, it is that none of us academics will ever be out of a job in the kingdom! More seriously, I do believe that Multi-world Realism is more faithful to a biblical picture of human creativity and the role of humans in the kingdom. Adam did, after all, name the animals. And he and Eve were gardeners. Both were creative tasks.

But on to the disagreements. The first of these is fairly minor, but I think important. The question, "What sorts of theories delight God and why do they cause God to dance?" is not, I think, "tantamount to the question, 'What is it that displeases God?'" This is like thinking that knowing what displeases one's spouse is tantamount to knowing what pleases one's spouse. So, the answer to
Beach's second question will not necessarily suffice to answer his first. Unfortunately, the issues are more complicated than Beach proposes. In fact, it may be very difficult to say why God is pleased by one theory more than another.

On to the heart of the matter. In "Making God Dance," I suggested, as an example, that a theory that would not delight God is one that denies God's existence. Beach suggests that the seemingly plausible reason for God's disapproval of such a theory is that "such theories fail to correspond with what is actually the case." I believe that this isn't right, but before I say why, let me put it more fully into the context of Beach's argument.

Beach suggests that the reason God doesn't dance to theories that deny God's existence is that the statement "God does not exist" doesn't correspond to the facts. Because of this, Beach writes, "objectivity vanishes if it is theory bound." Beach then attempts to press the following dilemma on Multi-world Realism. The notion of "corresponding to the facts" is either theory-bound or it is not. If it is theory-bound, then in some theories, God doesn't exist. The source of the objectivity disappears and we are left with mere relativism and no theory-independent God. On the other hand, if the existence of God is not theory-bound, then there is a noumenal world, and objectivity rests in Truth rather than something else, such as God's interests.

But this does, contrary to Beach's claims in his last paragraph, misconstrue Multi-world Realism. It is not that "the assumption of God's pleasure is theory-bound," as Beach suggests. It is truth (lower case) that is theory-bound. And there are other ways of talking about God. Which brings me back to the main point. The reason that God is not delighted with theories denying that he exists may be something other than "lack of correspondence." God's existence could be the best explanatory hypothesis of everything else we humans experience, and hence it shows up in the most interesting theories. God is thus disappointed by theories that miss this explanation. Or perhaps God's disappointment, or lack of enthusiasm, or even anger, is an issue of worship. God is displeased because we owe him worship or because it is good for us to trust him. Other possibilities are beauty or overall coherence, and so forth. God's disapproval need not be based on our believing something false.

Beach also raises the question, "Why should God value and be interested in one theory over another?" And he replies that "it cannot be caprice which determines God's pleasure, yet without factually based values such choices are merely divine whims."

Again, why does God need factually based values that are, apparently, independent of God? This sounds a lot like the ancient Euthyphro dilemma, a contemporary version of which says the following. Either God commands moral rules without a reason, in which case morality is arbitrary, or he commands moral rules on the basis of some independent standard, in which case God is not the basis of morality. But a solution to this dilemma may be God's own nature, which is neither arbitrary nor independent of him. Of course, to talk of God's nature in the context of Multi-world Realism may be odd, since it sounds like
some sort of noumenal essence. But we needn't talk that way in the context of
discussing theorizing. Instead, it is plausible to suggest that God's concern is,
again, with explanations, worship, coherence, beauty, and perhaps a host
of other things as well. (This open-endedness here is one of the reasons the initial
two questions are not tantamount to the same thing.)

Beach may press the objectivity question again, viz., Why does God value
any of these things? Isn't it because of some Truth underlying them? But as I
suggested in the original essay, truth isn't the only important human construct. I
might add now that Truth need not be the basis for value. Isn't God himself the
basis for value? Values are metaphysically rooted in God himself and his creative,
fertile mind (as opposed to some static nature). At least some values are. (Others
may be rooted in us—moral values, for example.) God's way of valuing things
and theories is the right way, simply in virtue of God's own creativity. And it
was God's creativity that, according to Multi-world Realism, made us. God is the
one who sings with, and dances to, giggles at, and brings toasts to, the theories
of his creatures.

Finally, Beach brings the issue of value down to the level of us theorizers
when he says that "there is no reason for valuing what interests God unless
what interests God has some meta-theoretical basis." The reply to this claim is
not far to seek, for the Multi-world Realist. Our theories are right when they
delight God. And theories, including theories of value, delight God, when he
finds them interesting. But God doesn't need reasons to find theories interesting.
He is the very criterion of the interesting. So our reason for valuing God's inter-
est is just that they are God's interests. Does that sound circular? That should
be no surprise. The circularity of Multi-world Realism was never hidden. But
although Multi-world Realism dances in circles, it doesn't dance with the devil
of relativism.