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Rejoinder to Ganssle's "Real Problems with Irrealism"

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I want to thank Gregory Ganssle for his helpful response to my papers on theistic irrealism.¹ There are several rejoinders, so I will be very brief. First, Ganssle suggests that I overlook the distinction between the content of a position and what it takes to defend a position. In fact, I do not. Perhaps the term "epistemizing," since it is a verb, is the culprit creating confusion here. But as I note, epistemizing is not the only kind of cognizing. Conceptualizing does not involve *showing* anything (and hence Ganssle's distinction does not apply). My position stands: To state the realist position conceptualizes (a state not an action) the world as real and hence is an irrealist position itself.

Second, I agree when Ganssle says that my formulation of the argument draws existential claims from propositionally structured premises. Yet I believe the spirit of my argument is correct. Ganssle's reply is helpful in showing why. He gives two valid versions of the argument. The first version of the argument (numbered (1)–(5*)) he thinks I will reject because it shows too much, namely, that anything goes and thus that the irrealist ends up in radical relativism. I think Ganssle is correct about this. This version, Ganssle goes on to claim, does not involve a realist interpretation of noncontradiction. I think it does. Here our intuitions are different, but what is important is the reasons they differ. The notion of a purely formal argument (one stripped of all interpretation) seems part and parcel with realism. The argument is assumed to be formal (without interpretation) because it is "just the (realist) facts." But the irrealist wants to know what "stripped of all interpretation" means. An argument stripped of all interpretation (conceptualizing, epistemizing, and so on) is merely ink marks on the page. So although Ganssle may be right that his first version of the argument for irrealism

1. Gregory E. Ganssle, "Real Problems with Irrealism: A Response to McLeod-Harrison," *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 451–6.

shows too much, he seems on shakier ground when he claims his argument lacks any realist interpretation.

The second version of the irrealist argument is numbered (6)–(13*). Ganssle thinks it valid but rejects it because of a version of the consistency objection to pluralism. The initial problem for the pluralist is that p and $\sim p$ are inconsistent with one another. The pluralist solves the problem by relativizing the two claims to different conceptual schemes or worlds. But then the problem is not inconsistency but consistency. Ganssle points out: “If two propositions have different entailments, they cannot be the same propositions.”² Thus, p and $\sim p$ turn out to be consistent with one another. Since the two propositions in question turn out to be consistent, the nonpluralist can simply say that there is no real contradiction and therefore no need for a pluralist ontology. Absolutism wins. The challenge for the pluralist is to show the two claims really are inconsistent across worlds or schemes. The response to this issue is fairly straightforward and, in fact, Ganssle hints at the solution in his own criticism, namely, “We might be able to say that *if* the propositions p and $\sim p$ were about or within the same world, then they would be contradictory and they could not both be true.”³ Unfortunately, Ganssle never returns to this possibility. Michael Lynch, however, develops this response in his work and it can be summarized thusly: The absolutist claims that insofar as two propositions are relative to more than one scheme, that there must be some absolute framework within which they can both be considered. If they are not relative to more than one scheme but only to their particular schemes, then they “talk past each other” and are not really inconsistent. But the propositions involved are not absolute propositions. The truth of the propositions being relative to more than one scheme does not entail that they are independent of all schemes. It turns out to be a necessary truth that in every possible world where these propositions (in this case, p and $\sim p$) are relative to the same scheme, only one is true. So it is a necessary truth that if p and $\sim p$ were claimed in the same possible world, they would be contradictory. But of course, in the irreal worlds of the pluralist, the two are not both claimed as true in the same world. That they are kept sealed off from each other in two different worlds does not show that p (or $\sim p$) relativized to two different worlds have different entailments. They would have the same entailments, if claimed in a singular world. But Ganssle overlooks this possibility and continues to assume a realist, absolutist account: There must be some singular world in which either p and $\sim p$ are contradictory or in which they are compatible. If contradictory, then only one can be true. If compatible, then we are talking about two different propositions. This is exactly what the irrealist rejects.

2. Ibid., 454.

3. Ibid.

Moving on to Ganssle's comments about irrealism and God (humans, moral and aesthetic realities), I agree that if God were independent of particular worlds, then the whole exercise in irrealism collapses. In the earlier essay I did speak that way. But more recently I have seen the error of my ways, and I have tried to be more careful. God is not independent of particular worlds but God (and humans, at least—morals and aesthetics I think are more complicated) is what Lynch calls a "virtual reality," that is a reality in each and every world. As to the difficulty for the irrealist in articulating "what it is about God and human beings and moral and aesthetic realities that is fixed across worlds and what is not,"⁴ I find myself in some sympathy for that is precisely what I am attempting in the much longer project of which these papers are a small part. It is no small task. But it is one worth taking on, I think, and Ganssle is exactly right to ask the questions he does.

4. Ibid., 455.