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Realism and Irrealism: A Dialogue - in "Realism and Anti-realism"

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Realism and Irrealism: A Dialogue

MARK S. MCLEOD

IRREALIST: Why do you realists think there is a singular, real world?
REALIST: By “real” we mean that there exists a world and that it is what it is completely independent of how I (or we) think about it, cognize about it, believe about it, know about it, and so forth. The relationship between the world and our cognitive dealings with it, although not worked out in some final sense, is basically one of the world’s existing in some mind-independent manner and causing or influencing our thinking, believing, cognizing, and so forth about it.

IRREALIST: You’ve told me what you believe, but not why. The assumptions you make in what you just said are typically taken to be common sense, but what argument is there for them?
REALIST: I don’t need an argument to defend common sense since the other position, antirealism, is so counterintuitive and itself without any decent argument.

IRREALIST: Counterintuitive it is. I agree. But it’s not without argument. Consider this one, for example. Take any two apparently contradictory metaphysical claims. Suppose, for the moment, each claim is equally well epistemically justified (warranted, known, etc.). Add to those claims the additional premise that contradictions are impossible. What metaphysical conclusion should one reach? The most straightforward result is that there is more than one world and that truth is world-relative.

For example:
(1) Contradictions are impossible.
(2) Metaphysical freedom exists.
(3) Metaphysical freedom does not exist.
(4) Therefore, there are at least two worlds, one in which metaphysical freedom exists, one in which it does not.
(5) Therefore, truth is world-relative.

REALIST: Before I give you what I take to be the obvious solution to the problem, let me ask what you mean by “world.” How can there be two or more worlds? For example, is the action I’m now performing both free and not free?
Well, I guess you’d say not. But then how are there two worlds? Do they overlap in space and time? Do they somehow mysteriously coalesce? The notion of two or more worlds that are somehow coextensive seems to be just crazy.

IRREALIST: The term “worlds” is Nelson Goodman’s, and I must admit that he isn’t very clear about what it comes to. And I don’t want to get bogged down on this issue. Perhaps we can work on it some other day. But I will say that if you don’t prefer the multiple world talk, we could restate the argument in terms of Michael Lynch’s account of a singular world presenting itself to various “conceptualizers” in radically distinct and incompatible ways. He cashes out his view by giving an account of “world,” “object,” and “existence” as fluid. He says that just as we can apply terms such as “object” and “existence” in a fluid manner, so we can apply terms such as “world” fluidly. We haven’t switched concepts. We’ve just extended, implicitly, our shared notion of reality.¹ For simplicity’s sake, however, we can keep talking about worlds. The force of the argument can still be seen.

REALIST: Well, I’m not sure that Lynch’s position works either, but let’s pass over the issue of worlds. Your argument still fails because we all know that (2) and (3) cannot both be true. You ask us to suppose that (2) and (3) are equally epistemically justified. Why should we accept that, if it gives us an absurd conclusion? And even if we do accept it, it doesn’t follow that both are true. That our epistemic or cognitive abilities can’t help us decide between two claims doesn’t ever entail that both are true. Epistemology isn’t metaphysics. Indeed, the common error of a good many antirealists is to confuse our epistemic limits with the way the world really is.

IRREALIST: First of all, let me say that I’m neither fish nor foul. I think the best position might lie not in antirealism nor in realism but in irrealism, somewhere between antirealism and realism. I take antirealists to have taken things into their own hands, or minds, so to speak. I’m not willing to follow them there, for it leads one to a kind of radical relativism I can’t bring myself to hold. I’m not willing for just anything that a person happens to believe to be true. Nevertheless, I can’t see that the world is only “one way” without any kind of contribution from our epistemic activity. Somehow our rational activity influences the way the world is (or the ways they are).

In particular, the argument indicates that our epistemic activity, our “epistemizing,” if you will, contributes to the world—or worlds. Here I must say that I’m not prepared to say exactly how our epistemizing contributes to the world(s), simply that it does. But I will have to be cautious here and note that the argument is about epistemizing and not cognizing. I want to set aside the “mere cognizing” of the world for our discussion and talk just about how our evaluating claims vis-à-vis truth might “make worlds.” I set aside “mere cognizing” not because I think it doesn’t play a role but because the argument I’ve pre-

sented doesn't apply to mere cognizing in the neat way it applies to epistemizing. It may be helpful just to start with the neater argument before moving to the messier one.

So, as I've said, I'm not happy with the crazy position that simply believing \( p \) makes \( p \) true. But neither am I happy with the so-called commonsense position that the world is merely "lying around out there" for us to form beliefs about it, with us humans then hoping that there is some sort of accurate connection between the "way the world is" and our "justified" beliefs about it. So my position isn't as clearly developed as I'd like it to be. I will suggest, without spelling out in detail, the notion that truth is (in part, at least) an epistemic notion so that somehow the world's being the way it is (or the worlds' being the ways they are) is due to our epistemic contributions. I'm not willing to say with Rorty that truth is what our peers will let us get away with, nor would I finally want to say that some individual human's epistemizing is enough to "make a world," but neither am I willing to say that truth is completely independent of our epistemic activity, where by "epistemic" I mean the rational activity of forming and justifying (or warranting, etc.) beliefs. So I think the argument is instructive to help us get onto the right track about some of these matters.

For clarity's sake, what do I want to argue and how do I want to approach it? First, the approach. I want us to take your typical realist claim that epistemology and metaphysics are two different things seriously and not slip and slide between the two. At first blush, it certainly seems as if our epistemizing activities are distinct from the metaphysics of the world. So, prima facie, to say that \( p \) is true—a term most straightforwardly understood as metaphysical and not epistemic—is not the same as saying that \( p \) is believed, justified, known, taken to be true, thought to be true, accepted, and so forth. These latter terms are best understood as epistemic. We can say these terms are epistemizing terms, terms of epistemic evaluations or weightings. I take it that the realist wants to keep a stark line drawn between metaphysics (truth) and epistemology. The issue whether the epistemizing of humans influences the truth of a statement simply doesn't arise for the realist. So let's keep the issues separate. My question is, then, what happens when we strip (1), (2), and (3) of epistemic evaluations and weightings? The argument concludes that what follows logically, given the truth of (1), (2), and (3), is (4) and (5). I want to argue, then, that a strict keeping of the dichotomy between our epistemizing and reality puts pressure on the notion that truth is purely a metaphysical concept.

**REALIST:** My reply is easy to see. We should simply take some one of (1), (2), and (3) to be false.

**IRREALIST:** Why?

**REALIST:** Because the laws of logic demand it. If (2) and (3) really do contradict each other, one must be false. That's the law of noncontradiction. I heard Peter van Inwagen give a simple argument against this position once. It goes like this. First, if \( W_1 \) is actual, then freewill exists. Second, if \( W_2 \) is actual, then freewill does not exist. Third, it is not both the case that freewill exists and that
freewill does not exist. Therefore, it's either not the case that freewill exists or it's not the case that freewill does not exist.

**IRREALIST:** So van Inwagen is a realist, and he says that my (r), (2), and (3) cannot all be true. Since contradictions are impossible, either (2) or (3) must be false. It makes more sense to reject as false one of (2) or (3) than to reach the absurd conclusion that there is more than one world. But that argument surely misses my point. First, van Inwagen's third premise rests on an interpretation of the law of noncontradiction, namely, a realist interpretation. Without that realist interpretation, his third premise doesn't go together with his first and second to give his conclusion. Furthermore, van Inwagen's argument is legitimate if we epistemically value the negation of (4) or (5) more highly than (r), (2), or (3). But then he slips in some epistemic rankings again, precisely what we agreed to keep out of our discussion.

**REALIST:** I admit that we cannot access the world without epistemizing. That is implied by the realist position. The world is "out there" independent of our epistemizing it, but if one is to know about it, one must engage in some epistemological enterprise or other. Neither irrealism nor antirealism follows from that fact. Furthermore, that neither irrealism nor antirealism follows from the necessity of epistemizing to access the world doesn't show that we can talk about metaphysical matters stripped of all epistemizing. Of course we know that (1) is true and that therefore either (2) or (3) is false. So we don't have to buy (4) or (5). In fact, there is no pair of contradictory statements both of which we must admit is true. We can always take one of them to be false. So this kind of argument will never force us to the conclusion that there is more than one world.

**IRREALIST:** Your reply begs the question against irrealism. You say the world is the way it is and that our epistemizing has nothing to do with it, thus setting aside any role for epistemic weighting or ranking. But when I want to agree with you and actually set aside epistemic rankings, you reject my suggestion. You cannot say that epistemizing must be set aside when doing so favors realism and yet appeal to it when the argument runs against realism. Either we can use epistemizing to decide metaphysical issues or not. If we can epistemically rank-order the premises and thereby decide metaphysical issues, then our epistemizing contributes to the way the world is and irrealism wins. If we cannot, then my foregoing irrealist argument goes through, pure logic wins, and there is more than one world. Either way, irrealism wins.

**REALIST:** Aren't you trading on an ambiguity among two distinct meanings of "decision"? One is an epistemic sense of decision, as in "I decide which statement is true," that is, I decide which way to believe. The other is a metaphysical sense, as in "I decide which way the world is going to be," that is, the world is caused to be the way it is by my believing it to be so. On the one hand, if you take the latter meaning, then your argument might find success, but I see no reason to take the latter, as it is surely an absurd notion. On the other hand, the former allows that the world is what it is, all the while keeping our discovery of
the world a completely independent enterprise. We can take our best epistemic shot at the world, but our believing one way rather than another has no causal link (from belief to world) at all.

**IRREALIST:** Perhaps. But if that is the case, then at best you realists are left with being able to discuss only worlds as you epistemize them and not the world itself. Your realism precludes ever getting at the world, and we are left with a very radical form of skepticism. The world known (reasoned about, argued over, etc.) is the world epistemized and not the world as it is in itself. Realism can never claim to know or, for that matter, rationally to surmise that the world itself is a realist world. What grounds could you produce except grounds filtered through your epistemic weightings and rankings? You can never talk about the world itself. You can only talk about the world as you rank-order it. And isn’t that what so many antirealists are saying these days? There is no difference between the world we talk about and the world as it is. To suggest that the world is a singular, fixed way is to assume something we cannot show without epistemizing. Either there is no functional difference between “the world” and “the world epistemized by me (or us)” or “the world” is simply beyond our means and we cannot talk about it.

But perhaps I should have been more circumspect earlier. Let’s get rid of the “decision” talk and consider this way of putting the irrealist argument.

(1) Contradictions are impossible.
(2') \(P\)
(3') \(-P\)
(4') Therefore, there is more than one world, one in which \(P\) is true, another in which \(-P\) is true.
(5) Therefore, truth is world-relative.

Consider also this supporting argument.

(A) Either our epistemizing (1-3') contributes (somehow) to the truth of (1-3') or it does not.
(B) If our epistemizing (1-3') contributes (somehow) to the truth of (1-3'), then irrealism obtains.
(C) If our epistemizing (1-3') does not contribute (somehow) to the truth of (1-3'), then the irrealist argument is successful, and irrealism obtains.
(D) Therefore, irrealism obtains.

**REALIST:** I don’t see how (B) or (C) are to go.

**IRREALIST:** Taken straightforwardly, premise (B) simply gives us irrealism. Suppose we epistemize (1-3'). The antecedent of (B) then is either true or false. If it is true, then the truth of (1-3') depends somehow on our epistemizing them, in which case there is surely more than one way the world is, for there is more than one way to epistemize (1-3'). Truth thus is world-relative. Irrealism obtains. But if the antecedent of (B) is false, then the truth of (1-3') has nothing to
do with epistemizing and thus epistemizing is irrelevant to the irrealist argument just presented. This irrelevance drives a large wedge between epistemology and metaphysics, precisely what the realist typically claims. Thus (C) comes into play.

**REALIST:** I can grant that, but (C) appears to be the truly controversial move.

**IRREALIST:** The antecedent of (C) says that the truth of (1–3') is in no way shaped by our epistemic stance toward (1–3'). So if we do not in any way epistemize the premises in the irrealist argument, then we cannot appeal to reasons to reject any of the premises. That leaves three possibilities with regard to the truth or falsity of (1–3'). Before we explore those possibilities, however, it is important to note that the discussion is focused not on defending the truth of (1–3') (that would be to rank them epistemically) but rather on understanding what true epistemic neutrality looks like in regard to this argument.

**REALIST:** I see. So the issue isn't whether we actually have evidence for or against the truth of any of the premises. Rather, the question is, since we aren't allowed to appeal to such evidence, how are we to treat (1–3')?

**IRREALIST:** That's it. And as it turns out, it looks as if the position that claims all the premises are true is at least as viable as any other position—in fact superior to some—and therefore the argument goes through.

**REALIST:** I don't see why I should buy that conclusion.

**IRREALIST:** Here's why. Let's consider the possible combinations of truth values for the premises. First, let's suppose all the premises are false. There is no solace for realism here. Because all three are false, (1) is false. But then contradictions would be possible and that is a fate worse than irrealism, for then anything goes. We are left with a true and complete antirealism that is no better than a radical relativism. So if we get irrealism if (1–3') are true, we get a kind of antirealism if (1) is false. Taking this route won't help you.

**REALIST:** I'll surely admit that.

**IRREALIST:** The second possibility is that some of (1–3') are true and others false. But which ones? We can tell right away that it won't be (1) that is false, without rendering the worlds not only multiple but completely relative. That leaves us with (2') and (3'). Although it is possible that one is true and the other not, without introducing some reason to pick one over another (which, by assumption, we cannot do, for that is to epistemize them), we look to be on shaky ground. Why should we take the situation one way rather than another? According to the realist dichotomy between epistemizing and reality, believing, knowing, taking, accepting, and so forth have nothing to do with the way reality is, as you've been wont to point out. We must remain epistemically neutral. We cannot, by supposition, epistemically rank-order the premises one way or another.

**REALIST:** I guess that's all right.

**IRREALIST:** That leaves the third possibility, that (1–3') are all true. But then (4') and (5) follow, and irrealism obtains! One could suggest that evidence can be marshaled against (1), (2'), or (3'). But to marshal such evidence is to epis-
temize the premises. Again, we can't do that, by supposition. Hence if we are consistent in not introducing epistemic rank-ordering, then the irrealist argument is successful, and irrealism obtains.

**REALIST:** I still say that the world is the way it is completely independent of the way we relate to it epistemically. I see how the first and third possibilities go. But I'm not really convinced by the second. Why can't we just retreat to the position that we don't know which of (2') and (3') is false, but that one must be true while the other is false? We don't have to introduce epistemic rankings here. We just have to admit that one isn't true.

**IRREALIST:** So you would be willing to admit that realism is stuck between the rock of admitting that epistemizing contributes to the metaphysical nature of the world and the hard place of skepticism.

**REALIST:** Yes, I think that's fine. My realism may leave the world a little mysterious, but that isn't anything new.

**IRREALIST:** Yes. But I believe you are actually worse off than that. As it turns out, there is no noncircular way of being a realist, once you retreat to the position of admitting that you could be wrong about the way the world is.

**REALIST:** Now you accuse us realists not only of skepticism but of circularity?

**IRREALIST:** Yes. My premise (1) is actually metaphysically neutral between there being a singular world and multiple worlds. That is, although (1) is taken to be true, there is no built-in commitment to a realist interpretation of the law of noncontradiction over against an irrealist interpretation. We irrealists can, and desire to, hold onto (1). One difference between you realists and we irrealists on this score is that we, following the strict distinction between epistemological projects and the metaphysics of the situation, want to remain epistemically neutral about (1) through (5). By remaining neutral in this way, we get the conclusions (4') and (5). About this, we irrealists are quite sanguine. How can you realists avoid these irrealist conclusions? What reason can you proffer to defend the single-world interpretation of (1)? None. Except, perhaps, to assert that there is only one world, and along with it the realist interpretation of the law of noncontradiction. But that is the realist thesis itself. And surely that begs the question against us irrealists. Realism is not the default position on these matters. Irrealism is on ground just as solid. Unless, of course, you introduce some epistemic ranking among the premises. But that puts us back to the earlier challenge.

**REALIST:** Well, can't I offer some set of reasons for realism?

**IRREALIST:** What would those be, except more already epistemized reasons? And therein lies the rub. Any reasons you realists offer will in fact count toward irrealism's truth, for they will all be epistemized reasons. When they are stripped of epistemic rankings, there simply is no reason to opt for realism over irrealism, without circularity.

**REALIST:** Well, on the grounds you've appealed to, circular reasoning is acceptable, for we know that any proposition follows from that proposition if we stick to logic. "p therefore p" is perfectly valid, deductively.
IRREALIST: Yes, but that proves my point and doesn’t help yours at all. There are all kinds of odd things about deductive logic, stripped of all epistemic concerns. One of them is that logic alone cannot tell us anything about the world... or the worlds. Logic is at best neutral vis-à-vis these matters.

REALIST: But aren’t you irrealists in the same skeptical boat? Why should we realists accept your conclusion? What evidence have you provided?

IRREALIST: We’ve provided (1), (2’) and (3’). And you can substitute whatever you wish for P and-P. Perhaps that there is a God and that there isn’t a God will do. Or maybe that humans have rights based in our natures and that humans do not have rights based in our natures. And so on. Pick your favorite metaphysical issue and draw from it two contradictory claims. All we need is some argument with contradictory statements substituted for P and-P. We do not offer those as epistemically ranked propositions. We offer the bare logic of the situation. We need no other reason. The strict separation of epistemic concerns from metaphysical ones opens the door to irrealism, just the opposite result from what realists often claim.

REALIST: But aren’t you, too, slipping in some epistemology here? You, after all, take (1), (2’), and (3’) to be true. Why should we realists accept this presupposition?

IRREALIST: We’ve already gone over that ground. What alternative have you got? You are down to (2’) and (3’). If you rank-order them, then you, too, are taking one to be true over the other and then irrealism’s won. If you simply say that one must be false, although you have no way to determine which one, you’ve slipped in a realist interpretation of (1). Our taking (1), (2’), and (3’) to be true is simply admitting that irrealism is correct, that truth is world-relative, and that our epistemizing the world is world-shaping.

REALIST: Still, the world is the way it is independent of my epistemizing it.

IRREALIST: Do I detect a little metaphysical foot stomping here? Why should I accept that?

REALIST: Why should I accept your absurd position, with more than one world?

IRREALIST: Because I was just following your rules and trying to describe the world without epistemically weighting the description. The onus is on you to show the superiority of your position. I’ve given my argument. What’s yours?

REALIST: Well, I know the law of noncontradiction is true.

IRREALIST: I agree, but it’s metaphysically neutral vis-à-vis realism and irrealism, so that’s not going to help you much.

REALIST: Sure. But the law of noncontradiction applies in all worlds, right?

IRREALIST: That depends on what you mean. It applies in all the worlds there are, I suppose. I’m not talking about merely possible worlds. I mean the actual worlds.

REALIST: Precisely. There is no world such that the law of noncontradiction doesn’t apply. What about the world of worlds, or if you like, the superworld? Does the law of noncontradiction apply there? Your argument seems to operate
that way. (i) seems to be true universally, and therefore you can allow for the contradiction between (2') and (3') and yet also for both to be true. You can do this because there is a kind of superworld of worlds for it to range over.

IRREALIST: Let's grant that for the moment.

REALIST: But then how about this argument?

(1) Contradictions are impossible.
(2") There is only one world.
(3") There is more than one world.
(4") Therefore, there are at least two superworlds, one in which there is only one world, one in which there is more than one.
(5') Therefore, truth is superworld-relative.

You can see where this is going. First superworlds, then supersuperworlds, then supersupersuperworlds, and so on. Pretty soon, we are in infinitely bad shape, with more worlds than we can shake a metaphysical stick at. There is a reason to reject your initial argument. It shows far too much.

IRREALIST: I don't think so.

REALIST: Don't tell me you're willing to buy an infinite regress too.

IRREALIST: I'm not sure. I've always wondered exactly what is wrong with them. As a realist, I suppose I would be worried. But as an irrealist, it's a whole lot less clear. Does it matter whether there are just two worlds or an infinite number of worlds? Once we've planted the garden, let a thousand flowers bloom—or maybe even an infinite number of flowers! There is no logical inconsistency in superworlds or supersuperworlds. It's a little uncomfortable and certainly more than I can imagine. But philosophers ought to be used to that.

But then again, I'm not sure that superworlds are the same as worlds. Perhaps we should put a stop to your argument before it gets off the ground. Perhaps we should just say that superworlds don't function like worlds at all, for then we'd have problems with the law of noncontradiction.

REALIST: How so?

IRREALIST: What I am concerned with is that by holding so fast to the law of noncontradiction I've admitted too much. Perhaps there is some single facet of all worlds that is common among them. And isn't that a sort of singular, realist superworld?

REALIST: Precisely. I was coming back to that. Not only does your argument seem to allow for an infinite regress of worlds; it also seems to admit that there is at least one singular facet of the worlds that is fixed, namely, the law of noncontradiction. Maybe that is all the world really is independent of us, and the rest we add. But then we realists have gotten our lever, and although perhaps we won't move the world, we can at least show that there is some aspect of the world that doesn't depend upon our epistemizing.

IRREALIST: Maybe you are right. But have you gotten a piece of the world without epistemizing? Don't you, as well as I, just hold the law of noncontra-
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diction to be true? Haven't we “made the world” by believing that that is the only way we can make sense of the world? Perhaps that was inchoately behind your earlier point that we irrealists too beg the question, simply in the opposite direction from you. We assume the law of noncontradiction, as do you. We take it one way, with lots of worlds. You take it the other way, with only one world. Who is “right,” and how do we decide? I've been thinking that taking things to be true by assumption, as we do in working logic proofs, is not an epistemic issue. But by assuming that, wasn't I giving away my store? Wasn't I leaving the world simply beyond my reach, which is what I've been accusing you of all along? So maybe the world really is mysterious, even on my irrealist view.

ALI ST: Precisely.

IRREALIST: But we shouldn't move too quickly here. There may be a good response. Haven't we just admitted that we have to epistemize the law of noncontradiction in order to solve anything here? We have to take it to be true?

REALIST: Well, you have, at any rate.

IRREALIST: But what is the force of that “have to”? I said, “We have to, in order to solve anything here.” That is, we have to in order to describe the world. But isn't the law of noncontradiction itself then nothing more than an epistemic principle, a way of constructing the world? Why take it to be a metaphysical statement? Or if it is, its metaphysical status is identical to its epistemological status. What I mean is that the law of noncontradiction has the ontological status it has because it has the epistemic status it has. That is, it is true because it coheres with the rest of our epistemic web of belief, warrant, rationality, knowledge, or what have you. It is true because we take it as fundamental to getting around in the world, that is, for describing the world. Its not being true would be too weird epistemically and metaphysically. Now of course you realists will want to introduce your “but we could be wrong” strategy here. However, it isn't clear how to do that. What we all need is for the law of noncontradiction simply to be (part of) the way the world is. It looks, however, as if it can't have that status, even on the grounds of logic alone, without our epistemizing. In some sense, it is true because it is the “way things are,” and yet it is true because that is the way we take it. It is hard to tell the difference. In fact, I see no difference in this case. But then that falls right into our irrealist hands and we win. The world is the way we take it to be. Or the world makes us take it this way. There is one thing we can't be mistaken about, and that is the law of noncontradiction. But that isn't because that is the way the world is and therefore our minds are caused to think that way. Instead, as Kant saw long ago, the world is the way it is with regard to the law of noncontradiction because our minds “make it” so. We epistemize the world. Indeed, there is no distinction between the way the world is and the way we epistemize it, at least on the most fundamental of levels. No, irrealism still comes through in the end. I take back my earlier hesitation. The world is not beyond our ken, not because it's “out there” and we have minds that can conform to it. Rather, because we are here, and the world or worlds conform to us.
REALIST: Two comments. First, Kant at least believed in some sort of universality for the rational mind's operations. Your position seems no better off, in the final analysis, than the kind of radical relativism you rejected earlier. Surely something isn't true simply because I believe it is. Second, and this I want to explore a bit, don't we still have to account for the infinite regress problem? It's one thing to say that there are many worlds and truth is relative to them. It is another to say that there are many, perhaps infinitely many, superworlds and that truth is relative to them. Aren't we just forced into the kind of radical relativism you earlier wanted to avoid by affirming the law of noncontradiction? Isn't the notion of truth here just getting a little too thin? It seems more like make-believe—I believe it and therefore I make it so.

IRREALIST: Well, all right. I wasn't really happy with my earlier response to this issue either. Perhaps I have gotten us into an unhappy infinite regress. Is there some way to avoid this unhappiness?

REALIST: Let me suggest something, in the unlikely hope that you'll agree.

IRREALIST: I'm not opposed to taking help from my metaphysical enemies. Go ahead!

REALIST: What if you stop the regress with God?

IRREALIST: Surely you jest. Irrealists are trying to get away from a "God's eye" point of view.

REALIST: Hear me out. Following your arguments, there are many worlds because there are conflicting true statements about the world taken as a singular world. Similarly, just as there are apparent conflicts that generate the various worlds with their various contents, so are there apparent conflicts among world-descriptions that generate various superworlds. This is the source of the infinite regress.

IRREALIST: Yes.

REALIST: On your grounds, we can't stop the infinite regress by reducing all the worlds to one, as the materialist might be accused of. Instead, let's look for some unifying (as opposed to reducing) feature.

IRREALIST: What do you mean?

REALIST: Goodman says that we build worlds out of other worlds.1 One might thus suppose that there is a first world. Whence this first world? Goodman suggests that the search for a universal or necessary beginning world is best left to theology. Taking our cue from Goodman, but applying the suggestion to the "superworld problem," let's turn to theology to help us avoid the infinite regress of worlds.

IRREALIST: Go ahead.

REALIST: In short, God is going to help you. God, too, is a world maker, although he has a different sort of ontological status than we do. And he provides the unification of all the worlds created by us.

IRREALIST: But how can God help? Isn't God just one more person making up

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Realism and Irrealism

worlds? How can God be a unifying factor without himself getting caught up in the beliefs and attitudes and other world-making activities?

REALIST: We have to go back to something earlier in our conversation first. At one point you suggested that any two contradictory pairs of statements would get your argument off the ground. One of your examples was "God exists" and "God doesn't exist." Obviously, if we are to use God as the ground of unity, God can't be "in" one world and not in another.

IRREALIST: True enough. But I don't see how you can treat God differently from any other controversial piece of metaphysical furniture.

REALIST: Well, I can because God isn't a piece of metaphysical furniture. He is beyond our world or worlds and yet in the worlds. Just as for a while we thought the law of noncontradiction might resolve our debate on the side of realism, so now God might.

IRREALIST: Well, I said that the law of noncontradiction was an epistemic principle and therefore counted on the irrealist side. How are you to keep God from falling into the same problem? Why isn't God just an epistemic posit, just as the law of noncontradiction is?

REALIST: One of the things that bothers realists about irrealism is its tendency toward relativism. Even if your position avoids the radical relativism created when one denies the law of noncontradiction, your final conclusion, (5), has truth relative to worlds.

IRREALIST: True enough. But I think I can avoid relativism of a radical sort at least, noting that we all, realist and irrealist alike, appeal to the law of noncontradiction, thus making the world or worlds one way rather than another.

REALIST: But that doesn't seem to be enough. For if the law of noncontradiction is epistemic, then what is to stop someone, or all of us, from simply denying it?

IRREALIST: Yes, I have to worry about that.

REALIST: And doesn't your position simply give us humans far too much ability to shape the world?

IRREALIST: Yes, I worry about that too.

REALIST: Perhaps these two worries are connected.

IRREALIST: Yes, I suspect so. But on my irrealism, not just anything will go. There are limits to what will count as true in any given singular world, even if statements ruled as false in one world are true in some other world.

REALIST: I understand that. But that is grounded in your acceptance of the law of noncontradiction.

IRREALIST: Yes, I suppose it is.

REALIST: So we face a dilemma. Either realism obtains and there are objective limits to the way a world can be but we are stuck with (potential) skepticism about the world, or irrealism obtains and we avoid skepticism, but only at the cost of (potential) radical relativism.

IRREALIST: I think that is the best we can do.
REALIST: That is where God enters the picture.
IRREALIST: How so?
REALIST: God is not part of the world, or any world, in the sense that God is just another thing in the world. God, put in Platonic terms, is like the Good—beyond simple being. God is the underlying ground of contingent being, but he isn’t a being as we are.
IRREALIST: So is God real or not? That is to say, is God something that is what God is, independent of our thinking about him, conceptualizing him, believing things about him, and so forth?
REALIST: Yes, God is real, but he is not just another thing. God is the ultimate Reality. God is the objectivity in an otherwise nonobjective world.
IRREALIST: Surely God is just another epistemic posit, though.
REALIST: No. God is needed not just epistemically but metaphysically. Here’s why. If irrealism obtains, then the world is as it is, or worlds are as they are, because of our epistemic contributions.
IRREALIST: Yes.
REALIST: And if irrealism obtains, it’s possible for us to deny the law of non-contradiction and so remove the so-called objective limits on what can be in a world.
IRREALIST: Yes.
REALIST: I have questions, then. If I (or we) make the world, then how do I (or we) get here? What is my source?
IRREALIST: So irrealism is a sort of underground argument for God’s existence?
REALIST: Yes, but we have to careful about the notion of existence. I think one of the oddities of irrealism, at least atheistic irrealism, is that it leaves unexplained, and perhaps unexplainable, the age-old question of why there is anything at all. It may be right that I contribute something to the world’s being the way it is. But if that’s all there is to the story, I am the creator of the world, and even the creator of myself. Yet we are deeply suspicious that the world doesn’t depend in this way upon me. I am simply part of the world, and I can’t make myself up. I am contingent. There must be something outside the world, so to speak, to account for it. And the existence of that outside “something” can’t just be contingent. And yet that something must be able to bring things about in the world.
IRREALIST: I see. And there is the place for God, the Being beyond simple being.
REALIST: Yes. Now if God made the world and then made us, we don’t have to bear the burden of causing the world. But we can’t take God’s involvement in our world to follow the rules we are used to. But if your argument about our epistemic contribution to world-making is correct, we have to allow that God would make us as creative beings who can influence the way the world is as well. But we all recognize that there are limits to what we can do. Those limits, I suggest, derive from God, the Being beyond simple being.
IRREALIST: What becomes of the dilemma you stated earlier? Is it true that either realism obtains and there are objective limits to the way a world can be but
we are stuck with skepticism about the world, or irrealism obtains and we avoid skepticism, but only at the cost of radical relativism?

**REALIST:** We go between the horns. There is a middle position between realism and irrealism. It is something like irrealism but it is theistic. Not only does God provide the first world(s) into which we then enter and build and change and make, but God also is the unifier of the worlds. He controls how things finally are. For one thing, he epistemizes the law of noncontradiction, so it isn’t just left up to us. But then neither is God’s existence left up to us. God is a metaphysical requirement to avoid radical relativism, but he is also a requirement to avoid skepticism about the world(s).

**IRREALIST:** How do you remove skepticism?

**REALIST:** That is not so obvious, is it? There are a couple of things worth pointing out. First, now that we have God, we have some reason to think that God would make our epistemic abilities conducive, generally, to getting truth about the world. Second, the worlds are, to some extent, the way they are by our epistemizing them. So there isn’t such an extreme gap, so to say, between the way the world is, or at least certain aspects of the world, and one’s epistemizing it.

**IRREALIST:** Would we need to worry about the first point if the second is true? Indeed, isn’t the first true trivially because of the second?

**REALIST:** Perhaps that is right. But none of this will work without God, and one might say that because God made our epistemic abilities conducive to knowledge, he made us as irrealist contributors to the world(s). But on this kind of theistic irrealism, there are some things, or aspects of things, that are beyond our contributions—the law of noncontradiction being contributed by God to the worlds, for example. And if you want to get beyond the worlds, God himself is not made up by us.

**IRREALIST:** How do we know God, then?

**REALIST:** God, as outside the world, can reveal himself to us through some means other than our typical epistemic abilities. I think, for example, this is what happens in Christian, and perhaps all theistic, mystical experience. There is often no skepticism left in the recipient of God’s showing himself this way. A common report among recipients of mystical experiences is that they know God more assuredly than they know anything else. One reason for that might just be that instead of simply knowing about God, the mystic knows God as God knows himself, at least in part. That explains all the mystic’s talk of union with God. But the mystic also has a heightened sense of being known by God. But God’s knowing is a making of the world, and when God makes a world, he makes it well. Perhaps in the mystical revelation, God simply lets the mystic experience, even if not understand, how God’s knowing the world(s) is also the making of the world(s). This extends to the mystic as well. So God’s revelation of his knowing the mystic, changes the mystic. The mystic, in some way beyond our usual ken, knows the way God knows, for the mystic is known by God, and in God’s knowing, the mystic knows himself and God as well. All other knowl-
edge of worldly things ceases to be of import, except as filtered through the primary knowing granted in the mystical experience.

IRREALIST: So what we have suggested, according to my contribution, is that human epistemizing does to some extent influence the world(s). But then that comes at the price of infinite regress and potential radical relativism. Your realist contribution is the objectivity that God supplies, and that objectivity both stops the regress and the radical relativism while admitting that there is an irrealist aspect of the world(s).

REALIST: Yes, that seems a fair summary.³

³ The irrealist argument presented here was uncovered when I was considering what is wrong with Goodman's argument for irrealism. In a way, this argument is what I think Goodman should have said. I have him to thank, posthumously, for his inspiration. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Nicholas Wolterstorff for his criticism of Goodman. It was his way of putting Goodman off that indicated the direction to go. I want to thank William P. Alston, René van Woudenberg, Caleb Miller, and Laura Smit for pushing me to state what the real issue is. I might add that not one of Bill, René, Caleb, or Laura is an irrealist. I'm not even sure I am. Neither am I sure, nevertheless, how to respond to the argument presented by the irrealist here, without begging the question against irrealism.