Realism and Non-Realism in Old Testament Theology: A Formal-Logical and Religious-Philosophical Assessment

Jaco Gericke (University of Pretoria)[1]

ABSTRACT

In contemporary Old Testament theology there is no consensus among its practitioners as to how we should perceive the relation between the intra-textual representations of YHWH and their supposed counterpart in extra-textual reality. In this paper, the author attempts to describe via both informal and formal-logical discourse, three major ontological positions operative in contemporary Old Testament theology as reconstructed from the perspective of philosophy of religion. It is suggested that the concepts of naïve-realism, critical realism and non-realism (or anti-realism) as utilised in this particular subdiscipline of philosophy may provide useful, nuanced and functional meta-ontological categories for classifying what Old Testament theologians appear to believe about the text-reality relation and the ontological status of YHWH.

A   INTRODUCTION

What is the relation between text and reality? Given the many and varied representations of YHWH in the text, how are we to think of their relation to the world outside the text, the everyday world in which we ourselves are living in right now? More specifically, what is it in the world outside the text that Old Testament scholars think is the extra-textual referent of the depictions of YHWH in intra-textual discourse? In symbolic logical notation, we may ask:

$$x = ?$$

where 'x' stands for intra-textual representations of YHWH and '?' for the supposed extra-textual counterpart. In order to describe and evaluate the various answers implicit in recent writings of Old Testament theologians across the spectrum, I have found it useful to enlist the aid of a debate that has all but dominated the last twenty years of discussion in the discipline known as

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philosophy of religion (Hick 1997:2; Cupitt 2002:4). As usual, however, its concerns have for the most part failed to attract the attention of the philosophically-shy establishment that is Old Testament scholarship. The issue I am referring to is the one of realism vs. non-realism in religion. In the context of Old Testament theology, I wish to involve this debate by discussing three different ontological perspectives demonstrably operative among contemporary Old Testament theologians, i.e. naïve realism, critical realism, and non-realism/anti-realism. Each of these views will be described with reference to:

1. What is involved in holding the particular ontological perspective in the context of *philosophy of religion* in general;

2. What is involved in holding the particular ontological perspective in the context of *Old Testament theology* in particular;

3. How the particular ontological perspective may be *defined via formal* logic so as to distinguish it from the other two views discussed here;

4. What each perspective identifies as *the extra-textual referent* for the intra-textual depictions of YHWH;

5. How each perspective *operates* in practice;

6. Who might be considered as being *a representative* of the particular viewpoint?

In other words, the objective of this paper is not to argue in favour of one particular ontological perspective or another but rather to provide an informative discussion of scholarly viewpoints via descriptive and reconstructive meta-onto-theological analysis. This will allow Old Testament scholars to obtain a fresh and somewhat different perspective on the whole repressed controversy regarding the text-reality-relation thus providing us with a functional means of identifying the ontological assumptions implicit in any writing on the subject of YHWH in the Old Testament.

B   REALISM AND NON-REALISM IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Before I commence with the meta-theological descriptive analysis, a word or two about terminology may be in order. In what follows we shall concern ourselves with three fundamental concepts, i.e. 'naïve-realism', 'critical-realism', and 'non-realism' (or 'anti-realism'). On the one hand, readers with little or no philosophical background might like to know that the concept 'realism' has nothing to do with someone being what we call 'realistic' – by which we mean that he or she is sober, objective and acknowledges the facts of the matter or situation at hand. No, in philosophy in general, and in philosophy of religion in particular, the term 'realism' has a very specific meaning (see Craig 2005:887-891; Mautner. 2000:472-473; Williamson 1995:746-748).

On the other hand, those who do have the relevant philosophical background would do well to keep in mind, as John Hick (1997:2) reminded us, that *in philosophy of religion a concept like 'realism' (or 'non-realism') does not have precisely the same meaning as its equivalent in other philosophical subdisciplines*. Thus, in philosophy of religion, the 'realism vs. non-realism'-debate should therefore not be confused with its counterparts in, for example, metaphysics (e.g. the mediaeval debates between realists and nominalists on the ontological status of universals), epistemology (e.g. the debates on empiricism, rationalism and idealism), philosophy of science (e.g. realism vs. anti-realism/ instrumentalism/neo-pragmatism), ethics (positions of moral realism vs. emotivism or non-cognitivism), or philosophy of language (semantic realism vs. structuralist and post-structuralist non-referentiality), et cetera (Hick 1997:3-4)

Precisely what is meant by *theological* 'realism' and its opposite will be discussed below. Moreover, as part of that discussion, I have also found it useful to provide abstract definitions of each of the three ontological viewpoints (naïve-; critical-; and non/anti-realism) by way of symbolic-logical notation for readers interested in formal representation. In this regard, the following *key of symbols* (logical connectives/operators, variables, predicate constants, etc.) are provided as specific reference for the symbolic logical notation throughout this article:

R_0	realism
R_1	naïve-realism
R_2	critical-realism
R_3	non-realism/anti-realism
$\forall x$	all (universal quantifier)
$\exists x$	some (existential quantifier)
x	representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse
x^1	God in extra-textual reality
x^2	historical-cultural persona of God
y	symbolic personifications of human ideals, etc.
$=_{df}$	is defined as (equals by definition)
$=$	equals (identity)
$\supset$	if…then (entailment)
$\wedge$	and (conjunction)
$\vee$	or (disjunction)
$\sim$	is not (negation)
$\equiv$	if and only if (material equivalence)

Also, though not unrelated, note that the concern here is *not*, as it may appear *prima facie*, with arguments for or against the existence of YHWH (theism and atheism) (on which, see Gericke 2003; 2004:30-57; 2005:5). For in the context of the jargon in *philosophy of religion*, the realism/non-realism debate is primarily concerned with the *ontological status* of divine reality, which is a slightly different issue than arguing for or against the *existence* of that reality. Asking what the

ontological status of YHWH is, is technically not so much about whether or not YHWH exists, but rather represents *an inquiry regarding what people mean when they affirm or deny a certain mode of divine existence.* Moreover, the present concern should *not* be confused with the question concerning whether or not we should conceive of revelation as propositional, what the nature of religious language is, or whether any particular religious experiences can be considered as being epistemologically justified. To be sure, some of these issues do overlap with the present concern. However, any attempt to deal with such matters will remain incidental and on the periphery of the present discussion.

1   Realist perspectives on YHWH in the Old Testament

The current debate on realism and non-realism in *philosophy of religion* has only come into prominence from the 1980's onwards and has borrowed its jargon from western epistemological discussions that were at their height during the first half of the twentieth century. In the context of philosophy of religion, *the term 'realism' denotes the belief that a deity exists independently of human beliefs or of the discourse in which depiction takes place* (Hick 1997:3). In the context of the present discussion concerned with ontological perspectives in Old Testament theology, therefore, realism may be defined as *any view that assumes or claims that intra-textual representations of YHWH refer to an extra-textual deity who exists independently of the discourse depicting him* (Gericke 2004:33).

In formal logical definition, the basic and yet unspecified realist perspective vis-à-vis the non-realist/anti-realist one on the ontological status of YHWH as depicted in the Old Testament may be construed as follows:

$$R_0(x) =_{df} (\forall x)(x) \supset ((x^1 \wedge x^2) \wedge \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv y))$$

Which was reconstructed as:

1.	$(\forall x)(x) \supset ((x^1 \wedge x^2) \vee y)$	Premise 1
2.	$R(x) \supset \sim y$	Premise 2
3.	$R(x)$	Premise 3
4.	$\sim y$	2 & 3
5.	$(x^1 \wedge x^2)$	1 & 4
6.	$\sim (\exists x)(x \equiv y)$	1 & 5
7.	$(\forall x)(x) \supset ((x^1 \wedge x^2) \wedge \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv y))$	1 & 6
8.	$R(x) =_{df} (\forall x)(x) \supset ((x^1 \wedge x^2) \wedge \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv y))$	2 & 7

In this regard, two related yet distinct forms of realism may be distinguished, i.e. *naïve realism* and *critical realism*.

a   Naïve realism

There is of course, and will probably always be, a naïve realism in religious belief as there is in epistemological assumptions. The theologically untroubled believer who has not been bothered by the problems of biblical criticism is a naïve realist in the sense that he or she takes the text (in our case, the Old Testament) at face value. For these theologians, what you see in the world of the text is what you get in the world outside the text. By way of analogy: the text is assumed to be a *window* on the phenomena it depicts. In other words, according to naïve realism, *all representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are equal to (literally depict) God in extra-textual reality. Moreover, it is not the case that some representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are there if and only if they are cultural-historical personae of God or because they are merely symbolic personifications of human ideals, values and commitments.* In formal logical notation, this definition of 'naïve realism' vis-à-vis the other two ontological perspectives could be constructed as follows:

$$R_1(x) =_{df} (\forall x)(x) \supset (x = x^1) \land \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv (x^2 \lor y))$$

Which was reconstructed as:

1	$(\forall x)(x) \supset (x = (x^1 \lor x^2 \lor y))$	Premise 1
2.	$R_1(x) \supset \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv (x^2 \lor y))$	Premise 2
3.	$\sim (x^2 \lor y)$	Premise 3
4.	$\sim x^2 \land \sim y$	Distribution (3)
5.	x^1	1 & 4
6.	$R_1(x)$	2 & 5
7.	$\sim (\exists x)(x \equiv x^2 \lor y)$	2 & 6
8.	$(\forall x)(x) \supset (x = x^1)$	1 & 5
9.	$R_1(x) =_{df} (\forall x)(x) \supset (x = x^1) \land \sim (\exists x)(x \equiv x^2 \lor y)$	6-8

Of course, the exact nature and contents of interpretation may vary between different Old Testament theologians from different religious and historical communities. In this regard it may only have been the first audiences of the Old Testament who were unconditional naïve realists and who literally believed in YHWH as depicted and in all the other mythological phenomena juxtaposed with his character in the Old Testament. Today's naïve realists, mostly people who one might otherwise label 'fundamentalists' or 'conservatives' in biblical scholarship, are only such in a conditional sense. Thus they will insist that what critical biblical scholars view to be mythological phenomena actually exist in the world outside the text. However, because they view these entities through the filters of Christian dogmatic theology, much of the discourse is reinterpreted to harmonize the understanding with orthodox beliefs about what the text – being

the inerrant word of God – *should* be saying about the deity. Thus YHWH-as-depicted is held to be a real extra-textual entity, but when asked what he is like, the modern naïve realist will start describing 'the Lord', an updated version of the Israelite deity who has more in common with 'the God of the philosophers' than with the philosophically-crude divinity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – to borrow Pascal's phraseology. In this regard, one example of naïve-realism in Old Testament theology is found in the *Biblical Theology* of Scobie (2003). According to him (2003:21; cf. also Kaiser 2000:12):

> The Old Testament is the inerrant word of God and shows us God as he really is in himself. It is revelation that transcends culturally relative ideas about the Creator and communicates his nature directly and unmediated. What you see in the text is what is there in the real world outside the text. *There is no difference between Yahweh and the Living God outside the text.* (italics mine)

Of course, many Old Testament a/theologians who deny that YHWH and other mythological phenomena depicted in the text have exact corresponding extra-textual counterparts can only do so if they too assume the validity of the naïve-realist perspective. Thus many of the more crude forms of atheism in the popular debunking of Old Testament theology as a worthwhile discipline – denying as they do the existence of YHWH-as-depicted and therefore of God *per se* – are themselves often based on the assumption of the validity and normativity of a fundamentalist or conditional naïve-realist perspective on the ontological status of intra-textual representations of the Hebrew deity. It should therefore be clear that realism is not to be equated with theism, particularly since one can be an atheist for the very reason that one is also a naïve-realist with regard to the ontological status of YHWH as depicted in the biblical discourse.

b   Critical realism

The term 'critical realism' – in the context of *philosophy of religion* – refers to the view that particular representations of the divine in religious traditions should not be equated with God *in re*. Rather, all depictions of deity, though they are held to refer to *something* extra-textual, only do so in a manner that is thoroughly relativised by the particular historical and cultural contexts in which the beliefs arise. In the context of Old Testament theology, therefore, the critical realist is the one who believes that YHWH as depicted is *not* to be completely and unequivocally equated with God *in re* in extra-textual reality – as is the case in naïve realism. Rather, YHWH as depicted in the texts is *God-as-perceived-from-the-perspective-of-Israel*. According to this view then – and with reference to the analogy above – the text should therefore, in its relation to extra-textual reality, not be compared with a *window* (naïve realism) but instead should be likened to a(n) (expressionist) *painting*. In other words, according to critical realism, *all representations of YHWH in intra-textual depictions are equal to (literally depict) cultural-historical personae of God. Moreover, it is not the case that*

some representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are there if and only if they equate with either God in extra-textual reality or because they are merely symbolic personifications of human ideals, values and commitments. In formal logical representation, the critical realist viewpoint – vis-à-vis naïve- and non-realist perspectives – may be construed as follows:

$$R_2 (x) =_{df} (\forall x) (x) \supset (x = x^2) \wedge \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv (x^1 \vee y))$$

Which was reconstructed as:

1.	$(\forall x) (x) \supset (x = (x^1 \vee x^2 \vee y))$	Premise 1
2.	$R_2 (x) \supset \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv (x^1 \vee y))$	Premise 2
3.	$\sim (x^1 \vee y)$	Premise 3
4.	$\sim x^1 \wedge \sim y$	Distribution (3)
5.	x^2	1 & 4
6.	$R_2 (x)$	2 & 5
7.	$\sim (\exists x) (x \equiv x^1 \vee y)$	2 & 6
8.	$(\forall x) (x) \supset (x = x^2)$	1 & 5
9.	$R_2 (x) =_{df} (\forall x) (x) \supset (x = x^2) \wedge \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv x^1 \vee y)$	6-8

Thus critical realists do not literally think of YHWH as a male humanoid deity 'up there' who literally appeared and spoke to people in the actual past. Rather, according to critical realists (who may or may not be in favour of demythologisation), these are pre-critical and even mythical ways of expressing insights gleaned from authentic yet culturally-induced religious experiences. As such, it is arguably the case that most mainstream Old Testament theologians adhere to a more or less critical-realist view on the relation between YHWH as depicted in the text and the God these scholars – who are mostly Christians – apparently believe in. A succinct articulation of this very perspective on the ontological status of YHWH in the Old Testament is encountered in the rhetoric of Gerstenberger (2005:90) who, in his article on the theological implications of the relative socio-cultural contexts in which the Old Testament originated, wrote:

> The close attachment of texts and time-conditioned concepts makes it clear that we are in no way dealing with eternal configurations of any kind, nor with unchangeable truths, but with authentic human efforts to cope with the unspeakable Divine, to give witness to the Eternal within the very flow of temporary existence…This makes concepts of God and our manners to express them in our languages very relative utterances, which nevertheless points to the invisible Only and Exclusive God, who is present in all and above all things.

But while many Old Testament theologians are inclined to follow Gerstenberger and the ontological perspective just articulated (e.g.. Barr 1999), there are others who are far from comfortable with both naïve- and critical-realist views on the

text-reality relation. And they represent a third ontological perspective operative among practitioners of Old Testament theology.

2   The non-realist / anti-realist perspective

Non-realism in philosophy of religion is a relatively recent phenomenon with regard to terminology and official representation. The term is synonymous with, yet less offensive than, 'anti-realism'. As the term indicates, non-realism is the opposite of the realist perspectives. In this regard, non-realists will agree with critical-realists that all our conceptions of God will inevitably be culturally relative and historically contingent. However, they differ from their critical-realist counterparts in that they do not believe that the mythological discourse refers to a supernatural divine being 'out there' who exists independently of the worlds of text and imagination (Cupitt 1989:146).

Thus for non-realists, 'God' is not a personal extra-textual entity to which the texts refer in their own culturally-relative contextual manner. For whereas naïve-realists view the text as being analogous to a *window,* and the critical realists view it as though a *painting*, non-realists think of the text as a *mirror* – i.e., not reflective of anything behind it, but rather projective of something about our*selves.* In other words, non-realism or anti-realism regarding representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse may be defined vis-à-vis the two realist perspectives as (equals by definition) (the view) that *all representations of YHWH in intra-textual depictions are equal to (literally depict) symbolic personifications of human ideals, values and commitments. Moreover, it is not the case that some representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are there if and only if they equate with either God in extra-textual reality or cultural-historical personae of God.* In formal logical notation, this definition would read:

$$R_3 (x) =_{df} (\forall x) (x) \supset (x = y) \land \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv (x^1 \lor x^2))$$

Which was reconstructed as:

1.	$(\forall x) (x) \supset (x = (x^1 \lor x^2 \lor y))$	Premise 1
2.	$R_3 (x) \supset \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv x^1 \lor x^2)$	Premise 2
3.	$\sim (x^1 \lor x^2)$	Premise 3
4.	$\sim x^1 \land \sim x^2$	Distribution (3)
5.	y	1 & 4
6.	$R_3 (x)$	2 & 5
7.	$\sim (\exists x) (x \equiv x^1 \lor x^2)$	2 & 6
8.	$(\forall x) (x) \supset (x = y)$	1 & 5
9.	$R_3 (x) =_{df} (\forall x) (x) \supset (x = y) \land \sim (\exists x) (x \equiv x^1 \lor x^2)$	6-8

Non-realism is, however, not (apodictically) to be equated with atheism – if by the latter we mean non-belief in the existence (or a positive belief in the non-existence) of any deity of any description (and in any possible sense of the word 'exist') whatsoever. For, on the one hand, some non-realists in *Old Testament* theology may also be realists in *philosophical* theology. Also, many non-realists believe in God, but for them 'God' is a character in a text, a literary construct representing a personification of human ideals, rather than a Being 'out there' (cf. Cupitt 1980:*passim*). Since, however, non-realists do not believe that this 'God' or personification of human ideals exists independently of human language and imagination, both naïve- and critical realists will not think of them as theists in the traditional sense of the word. An atheist position in non-realism is, of course, also possible, as we saw it was in the case of naïve-realism (and, by implication, in critical-realism). Only in this case, the non-realist will not share the commitment to the 'religious ideal' (i.e., the 'God') of his or her theistic counterpart and will deny the usefulness or legitimacy of personifying such ideals at all (and using the word 'God' in connection with them).

As far as examples of Old Testament theologians who appear to subscribe to a non-realist perspective on the ontological status of YHWH in the Old Testament go, the most familiar articulation of this perspective can be found in Brueggemann (1997:57) who writes:

> "I shall insist as consistently as I can that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text and nowhere else *and in no other way*." (emphasis mine)

Brueggemann (1997:614) also claims that YHWH is 'there' in Israel only because of human practices of mediation. In other words, if no one thought about YHWH he would not be 'there'. This is confirmed by his claim that:

> Without these sustained mediations, Yahweh…would disappear from the life of Israel and the life of the world…The reality (sic) of YHWH *depends* on the compelling case made regularly of the witnesses. (emphasis mine)

He also maintains that:

> It has been my wont to say that YHWH's 'natural habitat' is in the text of the Old Testament, and *there is no YHWH outside this text* (Brueggemann 1997:722) (emphasis mine).

These are all non-realist ontological claims, pure and simple. Moreover, it characterizes the later Brueggemann as opposed to the earlier one – the Brueggemann of his Old Testament theology as opposed to Brueggemann the popular writer for Christian media for the laity (where he is more of a mixture between naïve and critical realism). Not surprisingly, therefore, non-realist perspectives tend to crowd around the newer post-modern sociological-critical,

literary-critical and ideological-critical perspectives in Old Testament theology (cf. Perdue 1994:226-251). Even so, it was not wholly absent from the more radical historical-critical perspectives. Earlier examples of this position include, *inter alia*, the writings of Gottwald (1975:42-57) and Clines (1995).

C   CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed *three ontological viewpoints* prevalent in contemporary Old Testament theology regarding the supposed *text-reality relation* with reference to intra-textual representations of YHWH and their supposed extra-textual counterpart. To do so I enlisted the aid of the debate concerning realism vs. non-realism as it features in the discipline known as *philosophy of religion*.

It was demonstrated, both *via* formal and informal description, that in the context of *Old Testament theology* we find, first of all, *naïve realists* who tend to view the texts-reality relation as *isomorphic* and thus equate representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse with an exactly corresponding counterpart in the world outside the text (*text = window*). A second and arguably more popular view is those held by Old Testament theologians who are c*ritical realists*, and they view biblical depictions of YHWH as historically-contingent and culturally-relative perspectives on the one ineffable divine reality – God (*text = painting*). Thirdly, we find a minority group of *non-realists or anti-realists* who believe that the representations of YHWH in the texts are symbolic personification of the ideals of the authors of the Old Testament and their respective religio-ideological communities and that YHWH has no corresponding extra-textual counterpart (text = *mirror*).

In a very real sense, all Old Testament theologians can be classified as adhering to one of these three ontological perspectives. Moreover, this new way of categorisation in biblical meta-theology represents a substantial advance on the popular tendency still prevalent in Old Testament scholarship where all ontological questions – especially those concerned with the ontological ideology of the reader – tend to be dutifully bracketed. Such bracketing, however, represents a strategy of evasion and, for this reason, the present article was written to provide access to a more functional, nuanced and sophisticated manner of explicating scholars' assumptions about the text-reality relation and the ontological status of YHWH.

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Jaco Gericke, Research Associate, Department of Old Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: jaco.gericke@up.ac.za