Religious Studies **42**, 315–328 © 2006 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0034412506008419 Printed in the United Kingdom

Theism and modal realism

PAUL SHEEHY

Department of Philosophy, Richmond upon Thames College, Egerton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW2 7SJ

Abstract: **This paper examines the relationship between the classical theistic conception of God and modal realism. I suggest that realism about possible worlds has unwelcome consequences for that conception. First, that modal realism entails the necessity of divine existence eludes explanation in a way congenial to a commitment to both modal realism and classical theism. Second, divine knowledge is dependent on worlds independent of the creative role and action of God, thereby suggesting a limitation on the nature of divine knowledge and on the nature of God's creative role. Third, modal realism indicates the existence of real, albeit non-actual, worlds of appalling evil threatening the classical conception of divine omnipotence and benevolence.**

Introduction

God is omniscient. He knows all the true propositions about the world. Divine knowledge of the world exhausts all there is to say about the world through the course of its history. Let us call that set of propositions, S. It is reasonable to suppose that S represents just a fraction of the domain of propositions which are in fact true and which could be true were the world different in varying ways and in varying degrees from the way it is actually. To know all that can be known suggests that an omniscient entity knows all of the actual facts and all of the possible facts. Or to put matters in a different way, God knows all of the actual states of affairs and all of the ways things could have been. On a conception of an eternal God as being atemporal and non-spatial, as outside of time and space, there is no difficulty in attributing knowledge of the actual, possible, and necessary to God. For, a being outside of time and space grasps or cognizes S and all of the other sets of consistently held propositions in, so to speak, a timeless instant: as Boethius notes, it is as if God knows everything in a single glance. I set to one side the difficulties attendant on a timeless conception of God. The question of whether God can know what it is to experience certain qualitative or phenomenal states is also set aside. An omniscient mind knows at least the

propositions which fully describe the domain of space-time as observed from a third-party perspective.

An objection which might be raised immediately is that we should not conceive of God as outside of time in order to express the classical theistic notion of God as eternal. Throughout this paper I shall regard God as outside of space and time. God is conceived as atemporal in much of the writing in the tradition of classical theism and, as such, an atemporal God does not represent a soft target for criticism. Or at any rate it is an understanding of God articulated in much scholastic philosophical theology, and hence it has exerted an important influence on current philosophical, theological, and folk conceptions of God. Perhaps the canonical statement of eternity as timelessness is the claim of Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* that '[E]ternity is the complete and total possession of unending life all at once'. I also presuppose a realist attitude is taken to God, conceived as that unique entity essentially possessed of 'great-making' attributes – properties such as benevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence held to a complete or perfect degree. One who is already disposed to reject the reasons for focusing on a timeless God may take my arguments – to the extent she agrees with them – as further grist to her temporal mill. Of course, she will also have to consider the implications of an account of modality for her conception of God.

God and modality

The view that God knows all the sets of propositions about the world which could be true implicates the theist in an account of modality. God knows of some proposition, p, which is not in actuality true (say, Paul is a professional footballer), those instances or circumstances in which it would be true. That is, God knows those ways the world would be such that Paul is a professional footballer. To hold that God knows that a proposition, p, is possible at a time, t, is to say (in the case of the world as it actually is) that God knows that p. Or in cases where p is possible, but not actually true, God knows all the ways the world would be such that it is the case that p at t. It is possible that I be in the pub rather than typing right now. Matters need not have been very different from the ways in which things actually are, and an omniscient mind knows all the ways in which things would be arranged (throughout the history of the world) were it true that I am in the pub right now. Should something not be possible – say the proposition, q, that I am both in my office and in the pub at t – then an omniscient mind knows there is no state in which the world could be such that q is true.

It is, perhaps, worth observing that one may label such divine knowledge as knowledge of 'bare possibility'. A stronger demand is that omniscience entail knowledge of (all) true counterfactual claims (this demand does not presuppose

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412506008419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that any such claims are true). That is, of conditionals of the form, 'had Oswald not shot Kennedy, then someone else would have done so', or, more mundanely, 'were Paul to have gone to the pub then the paper on God would have made sense'. That the state of affairs specified in the antecedent is possible does not in any obvious way entail that the conclusion would have followed were the antecedent in actual fact the case. If the truth of a counterfactual claim depends on the similarity between different sets of consistent propositions about the complete history of the world, then God is in a position to determine immediately such degrees of similarity.

The dominant approach to analysing modal notions of possibility and necessity has been via the use of possible worlds.[1] For a proposition, *p*, to be possible (or state of affairs, *s*, to be possibly the case) we may say that there is a possible world at which *p* is true or *s* the case. To be necessary is for it to be the case in all possible worlds (or when we talk of something, *x*, necessarily or essentially possessing some property, F, it is the case that *x* is F in all worlds in which there is *x*). Now, there is extensive discussion and controversy concerning which account is to be preferred of the semantics and metaphysical implications of modal theories. At the risk of oversimplification, modal realists maintain that all possible worlds are real, but only ours is actual – with actual functioning as an indexical term.[2] That is, when we talk of a possible world we refer to a world of spatially and temporally related objects. Any world, *w*, is discrete from any other world in which there are objects not related spatially or temporally to objects in *w*, and modal locutions are to be understood in terms of quantification over such worlds. Our actual world – the totality of everything existent in space-time – is just one of a plurality of concrete, real worlds. Each world is self-contained and complete in the sense that there are no causal connections between a world and any other, and the history of each world is determined entirely by how things are within that world. For the inhabitant of a world, *that* world is not only real but actual. The truth of the proposition, 'this is the actual world', depends on the context of utterance and it will always be true. Just as it is always true that where I stand is always 'here'.

Modal realism furnishes a reductive account of our modal concepts such that we can understand the meaning of our modal locutions in terms that do not themselves depend on or presuppose modal notions. They are analysable in terms of the facts or states at worlds – and we are very familiar with facts and states in a world. An analysis of counterfactual conditionals can be grounded in the idea of similarity between worlds. On a possible worlds account a proposition is a set of worlds and the metaphysics of properties can be understood in terms of a property being a class of possible objects. Now, there is much controversy on the matter of whether we should be prepared to pay the ontological price entailed by realism. Lewis has notably urged that the price be paid because of the contribution of realism to an elucidation of major metaphysical issues. The central

concern of the present paper is to see if modal realism can be held consistently with a commitment to the God of classical theism.

Three challenges

The relationship between the classical conception of God and a commitment to modal realism can be examined by considering three challenges or questions. First, can the necessity of divine existence be elucidated within the framework of modal realism? Second, is the classical understanding of divine knowledge consistent with the role of God as creator, given the constraint modal realism appears to impose on an understanding of divine knowledge as knowledge of existent worlds? Third, does the existence of real worlds of terrible suffering – actual suffering from the perspective of the inhabitants of a world – undermine the classical understanding of divine omnipotence and benevolence? The dialectical role of the challenges should not be seen as an attempt to demonstrate the clear incoherence of the conjunction of the classical conception of divine nature and modal realism. Rather, the point is to establish the commitments and revisions, if any, to the classical conception that may need to be acknowledged. As Lewis has observed, in much of our philosophical discussion and argument what we accomplish is to measure the price.[3] Whether the cost is an acceptable one for the theist may depend upon the extent of the revisions forced upon the classical conception of divine nature with which she began.

Realism tells us that each possible world exists in space-time, but worlds are wholly discrete from one another and enjoy no causal congress, there being no casual relations between the entities of one world and any other. Necessity is defined in terms of existence in all possible worlds. Given the spatio-temporal discreteness of each world a single entity cannot enjoy transworld identity. An object exists only at a particular world. It – say, Paul – does not have parts in different worlds; it cannot be stretched across more than one world. The response to this difficulty is to appeal to counterparts. A counterpart of an object – say, Paul – is that object, C, at another world such that nothing in that world is more like it (Paul) than C is. To say that it is possible that Paul is a professional footballer, or could be a leading figure in origami, is to say that there is at least one possible world in which there is a counterpart of the actual Paul who is a professional footballer or leading origami practitioner. Now, if we take God to be outside of space and time, then we cannot explain the necessity of God's existence in realist terms. For there is no God at the actual world or counterparts at each of the other worlds. God is not reductively analysable into entities present in worlds or the relations in which they stand. Talk of God as a necessary being thus eludes elucidation in the realist framework of modality.

Or it escapes explanation in realist terms if a world is defined exclusively in terms of entities related in space and time. The theist could propose that any world consists of a closed set of spatio-temporally related objects plus all that is outside of space and time – the domain of abstracta. An atemporal God would turn out to be in or part of every world, and hence necessary within a realist framework. In extending our understanding of a world in this fashion, however, there is now the need to explain how a commitment to an atemporal realm of abstracta relates to the motivation for modal realism. After all, realism about possible worlds as spatio-temporally closed and complete domains (as 'large possible individuals')[4] provides (arguably) a framework whereby those traditional inhabitants of an abstract realm such as properties and numbers can be explained without commitment to any kind of Platonism. The classical conception of God as presented herein is committed to at least one atemporal and non-spatial entity, God. However, there is need to motivate a principled case for a more populous abstract domain.

The question of whether modal realism allows an account of the necessity of divine existence may just prompt the criticism that this is so much the worse for the earlier stipulation that God be conceived as outside of space and time. However, it appears that modal realism is no more amenable to the alternative conception of God as being in space and time. Now the necessity of God is expressed through there being a God in every possible world, where the counterpart of the actual omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God is that individual closest to the actual God. The counterpart of the God of the actual world in some possible worlds may not possess just the same great-making properties, but rather be the best candidate as counterpart. Even if we accept that a unique individual possessed of great-making properties exists at every possible world, a radical revision of the classical conception is required. For, now there is a single God for each world. Is the object of worship in the actual world *our* God alone? Or is it the mereological sum or set of Gods? The former view seems to violate too much the sense in which God is unique and the latter undercuts any clear sense in which God is unitary.[5]

Against this avenue of criticism the theist may deny that a unique God in each world does violence to the classical conception. From the perspective of any world there is just one God and that God alone is the object of worship at that world. For the inhabitants of any world it is true that our God is the actual God and that claim is true in every world. While this addresses the claim that modal realism forces the object of devotion to be a strange sum or set of Gods, the proposal invites a further challenge. Within the tradition of classical theism God is the ultimate source or ground for what there is: 'it must be said that everything, that in any way is, is from God'.[6] Now, on a classical conception of God, it seems that a single entity is ultimately responsible for what exists. Modal realism commits us to the thesis that a plurality of worlds exist. The theist must be clear as to

whether 'everything, that in any way is' refers to the set of all worlds and of whether there is a single creator for all of these worlds. Or, whether 'everything, that in any way is' is restricted or limited in scope to refer one at a time to each single world, and whether each world is brought into being by the creative act of its own God.[7]

Returning to the atemporal model of God, classical theism regards God as the creator and sustainer of the world.[8] Given that there is nothing ontologically special about the actual world – however special it is to those of us who are here – God is the creator of all the possible worlds. From the perspective of a world God has actualized the states of affairs that constitute its history. If God created the worlds with knowledge of their histories, then it appears that the creative act depends upon that knowledge. Therefore, we cannot analyse God's knowledge in realist terms. Divine knowledge is not knowledge of worlds as they stand independently before God; the worlds do not determine the content of what God knows. The worlds reflect what God knows, namely the possible ways in which propositions may be consistently conjoined or ordered.[9] If, on the other hand, we analyse divine knowledge as knowledge of world histories, then it seems that we must accept the independence of those worlds from any creative role of God. Of course, the question of whether divine knowledge depends on something independent of God or whether all that can be known (the facts) depends on God echoes the question posed with respect to value in the Euthyphro dilemma.

One might insist that God initially brings a single world into existence. Then as events occur in that world additional worlds are created to define the range of possible alternatives. This simply restates the problem. In order to bring worlds into being which delimit the range of possibilities God must know what those possibilities are. Modal realism entails that the knowledge of God is knowledge of those worlds. In this sense the worlds are prior to God's knowledge of them; that is, God's knowledge is dependent and so less than ultimate or perfectly held if perfect knowledge requires knowledge to be wholly non-dependent.[10]

Alternatively, the theist may decline to accept that there is a real dilemma here at all. The creation of a world is just God conceiving of that world; and the infinite mind of a timeless God conceives of all the worlds at once, so to speak. It is not a question of God knowing all of the possibilities and then of his creative act in some sense being pursuant to that knowledge. Nor is it a matter of divine knowledge being dependent on independently existing worlds. Following, for example, the arguments advanced by Morris and Menzel in their discussion of the relationship between divine creative activity and the set of necessary, universal truths which furnish a framework for reality,[11] it may be held that each world just comes into being through divine cognitive activity. God's thinking of the worlds to be thus and so is His creating them: that is, creation 'is a function of the efficacious conceiving activity in which God is in fact engaged'.[12]

There is a problem, though, in attempting to dissolve the dilemma in this fashion. The defender of theistic activism (i.e. the view holding God to create and conserve abstract objects as well as spatio-temporal things) surely also owes an explanation of the divine nature in virtue of which divine intellectual activity is the creation of worlds. God causes, or, brings it about (non-causally) that certain properties exist. The theistic activist maintains that the existence of abstract objects and their nature is dependent on divine intellectual activity. To bring a world into existence is to have a set of properties instantiated or exemplified. Again, the existence of that world is to be accounted for in terms of divine intellection. That God brings it about the properties and worlds exist and that they are as they are is a feature of the divine nature. To talk of the divine nature is to say that God has certain properties; those properties are the great-making properties.

The issue now emerges of how we are to consistently explain divine possession of those properties. It appears that the possibility of divine intellectual activity depends on the possession of certain properties while the existence of properties in general depends upon divine intellectual activity. The circularity of the analysis can be broken by an appeal to the notion that God causes Himself to exist and to possess great-making properties such as omnipotence. An appeal to theistic activism as a way or resolving the dilemma of divine knowledge hangs on a satisfactory account of how God can be responsible for His own nature. That price may turn out to be a rather costly one if the very notion of self-causation in the sense required turns out to be untenable in drawing one towards either an incoherent or mysterious claim.[13]

In real worlds there is real evil. For an evil to be possible is just for it to be instantiated at a world. There is no immediate reason to suppose that there are not worlds in which there is a range, intensity, and kind of evil that far surpasses those we have or ever will encounter. Actuality marks out where *we* are in relation to *our* world. From the perspective of an inhabitant of a world that world can only be actual. Modal realism points to the conclusion that there is an immense amount of evil being endured; evil which must be suffered because the existence of that evil is possible. Perhaps the theist can suggest that the overall balance of good and evil is in favour of the former when measured across all worlds. It is, though, a radical modification of our conception of an omnipotent and benevolent God which allows worlds of irredeemable suffering. In particular this benevolent God permits worlds with real inhabitants capable of enduring harms which are worse than our own. There may be a world which is the best of all possible worlds. A God of modal realism has also created (or 'actualized' from the perspective of its inhabitants) the worst of all worlds. We may not care about the fate of our counterparts, but God ought to do so. Furthermore, while it may be chastening for those whose lives are proceeding in a good or bearable manner that things could (so easily) be worse, it is of no succour to the suffering of

an individual that things could be better, and indeed are better in a different world.

The foregoing challenge is a formulation of the problem of evil in its evidential form. The criticism is not that the fact of evil rules out the possibility of God. Instead, the possibility of worlds of terrible suffering entails on a realist view of modality the existence of such worlds. That undercuts our justification or warrant in the belief in the necessity of divine benevolence or omnipotence. A coherent response is to point out that the critic is just mistaken to believe that there are worlds of terrible suffering. It is possible that all possible worlds are equally good or respect some minimum standard or level of decency. Perhaps there is scope for (considerable) differences in the patterns of the distribution of goods and bads through a world history, but the overall level (or ceiling) of evil is the same for all worlds. Now, though, it seems the world cannot be considerably worse than it is and yet that seems relatively easy to imagine. On the view that all worlds are equally good it also appears that the world cannot be better, and that seems especially easy to conceive.

It is worth noting at this point the similarity between this third challenge and what has been labelled 'the modal problem of evil'.[14] Roughly stated, this is the thesis that there is a possible world in which there is a level and kind of evil such that an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God would not permit.[15] A dilemma is generated for the theist. If such a wretched world is possible – which, following modal realism, means that such a word exists and is actual for its inhabitants – then the necessity of the divine omnipotence or benevolence is to be abandoned and so the classical conception of God must be modified. Or, one must hold that such a world is not possible, even though it seems entirely reasonable to suppose that a sufficiently vile state of affairs could be the case.

A response to the challenge of evil worlds is to draw apart the claim that a state is conceivable from the claim that it is therefore possible.[16] That we can conceive of a vile world as a feature and feat of our imaginative and conceptual capacities does not entail that it is possible. The question of whether some state, *s*, is possible or not is a metaphysical issue, which we have no reason to expect to be settled by our conceptual or imaginative faculties but by the nature and limits of reality. The challenge to the necessity of divine omnipotence or benevolence on the grounds that evil worlds are possible relies somewhat obviously on the claim that:

EW An impermissibly evil world is possible.

We are inclined to accept EW because such a world seems to be conceivable. However, EW is only possible if it is false that God is necessarily omnipotent and benevolent, for the God of classical theism would not permit the state of affairs described by EW. While this is not an argument for the necessity of those divine

attributes, it does suggest that EW is no less a controversial claim than the one the theist makes concerning the necessity of divine omnipotence and benevolence.[17] Indeed, far from challenging the classical conception of God, the possibility of evil worlds must presuppose its falsity, and yet that conception of God is precisely the issue on which the appeal to evil worlds is meant to cast light. The most the theist need concede is a standoff with respect to intuitions concerning the divine nature and the range of possible worlds.

Care is required in offering this form of response. If we are able to conceive of, say, a world of abject and terrible suffering (a world which allegedly turns not to be possible because of the divine nature), then presumably an omniscient divine mind can also conceive of such a world. This suggests that divine intellection involves in part thinking about evil worlds. On the earlier theistic account of divine creation of worlds as God thinking of them, it would seem that God brings in to being those evil worlds of which He is capable of conceiving. A dilemma re-emerges. If God can conceive of the worlds we can, then those worlds exist. If we can conceive of worlds which undercut the necessity of divine omnipotence and benevolence, then, given theistic activism as an account of divine creation, such worlds exist since God also conceives of them. If they exist, God is not necessarily omnipotent or benevolent. Or, one can deny that God can conceive of such worlds, which indicates a limitation on divine cognitive capacity relative to us.

A way through the apparent dilemma is to deny that such evil worlds are conceivable at all. In entertaining thoughts about vile worlds I am really thinking of something different. I am not conceiving of a world which would rule out the necessity of divine omnipotence or benevolence. I am simply in error to have judged of my thoughts that I have conceived of such a world, and this is not an error God could make. Now, though, we should perhaps revisit the balance of intuitions. It certainly seems as if I can really conceive of a truly evil world and there is no clear source or indication of error to indicate that I should consign such thoughts as somehow ill-formed or as being about something else. Moreover, what else would the thoughts be about? Perhaps I would be conceiving of a world which is not vile enough to undermine the classical conception of God. Now, though, the operative notion of conceivability just seems to be the same as possibility.[18] I can only conceive of that which is possible. A commitment to the classical conception of God requires us to abandon our considered and reasonable judgements concerning possible states.

A response which regards evil worlds as impossible discounts the very strong sense that terrible worlds do seem possible, and the sense in which, even if it does not entail possibility, conceivability is a generally reliable guide to that which is possible. Perhaps this is just the continued grinding away of intuition on one side of an argument. While not a counter-argument to the theistic response outlined earlier, it does indicate that a commitment to the necessity of divine

omnipotence and benevolence in the face of the conceivability of evil, albeit impossible, worlds means that one must acknowledge that conceivability is a rather poorer guide to possibility than we may have reasonably suspected. Given a commitment to modal realism, it also suggests that rather more of our thoughts than we had previously suspected may be about states which exist at no world, for any imaginings about an impermissible world is a thought about some state(s) that are instantiated at no world. My belief was a 'mock' belief, and the theist owes an account of how I can come to have impossible thoughts and of how one should analyse the content of such thoughts.

The view that we can conceive of some terrible state which is not possible because of the divine nature may be thought to gain some support from the fact that there are many things one can conceive which turn out to be metaphysically impossible. Drawing on a classic example, we know that water is H_2O. Following the approach developed by Putnam and Kripke, we can say that upon being named (or baptised) the wet, watery stuff of our acquaintance, 'water', always picks out or refers to H_2O: that is what it means. Water cannot be anything other than H_2O. Now, I might nonetheless conceive of a world in which the watery stuff flowing in rivers and so on is named 'water' and is composed of another combination of elements – say (inevitably) XYZ or whatever. In this way I am able to conceive of water as other than it actually is. 'Water' just denotes the wet watery stuff at a world. Depending on which world is taken as the actual world, and on whether I am considering counterfactual hypotheses across worlds, there are different senses in which I think of 'water'.[19] While I can conceive of a world in which 'water' picks out something other than H_2O, I cannot (on the supposition that our world is the actual world) conceive of water as anything other than H_2O. *That* thought turns out to be impossible given the function of water as a rigid designator. Whenever I pick out water in a counterfactual context my thought is of a certain kind of stuff in the world, namely H_2O.

In the case of impermissible worlds one is not conceiving of 'evil' in different senses. The theist needs to note the distinction between the impossibility of (really) conceiving a natural kind term as differing in essence and the alleged impossibility of conceiving a world in which there is, say, a considerably different degree of torture. While it may be impossible to conceive of torture as anything other than bad or wrong, there seems no conceptual difficulty in thinking of it existing to a different degree. Furthermore, there seems no impossibility in supposing that a reduction or increase in torture does not entail an adjustment in the goods and bads elsewhere and when in a world such that the level of overall evil has to be maintained at a level permissible in light of divine of nature. The 'impossible' thought the atheologian entertains is not that something is other than it (essentially) is, but that there can be more or less of it. That, it seems to me, is a very different type of thought. Such thoughts about extent seem possible in a way that thoughts of metaphysical impossibilities do not.

The theist can stand her ground and insist that certain evil worlds are impossible granted the existence of the God of classical theism. However, if such worlds cannot exist, then some account of the ease with which we conceive of them is owed. An analogy with the sense in which I can imagine water not to be H_2O or gold not to have an atomic number of 79 does not seem to be available.

A commitment to modal realism raises three independent problems for the classical conception of God. The theist can defend the classical conception of God provided she is prepared to pay the price. The necessity of divine existence requires the inclusion of atemporal entities in the modal realist model of worlds. Divine knowledge can be regarded as non-dependent upon worlds provided one is committed to divine self-causation. Divine benevolence or omnipotence is not threatened by the reality of evil worlds provided one accepts that we have at least as much reason to endorse the classical conception of God as we do to regard as possible those worlds which threaten such a conception. The first may be thought to modify modal realism in an unwelcome fashion. The second demands that we make sense of self-causation, and the third forces us to give up our considered and apparently reasonable judgements concerning what is possible and conceivable. Rather than address the challenges directly, it can be urged instead that we give up modal realism in favour of a non-realist approach.[20] To the extent that the theist believes there are independently powerful reasons to endorse modal realism, this too is an unwelcome and (in light of the separately grounded motivation) perhaps surprising option. In this paper I shall not assess whether non-realism is consistent with the commitments of classical theism, but sketch two responses that allow the theist to consistently accept modal realism as a way of analysing our talk of the possible and the necessary.

Knowledge

A way of conceptualizing divine omniscience is to regard the (actual) world as the only world God could create. We preserve modal realism but at the price of reducing it to a kind of triviality. Knowledge of the actual world exhausts knowledge of both that which is actual and possible. Indeed, if there is no other way things could be, then we can say of everything that is that it is necessary. Divine benevolence is not threatened because there is no alternative set of consistent propositions describing how states of affairs could be better than they are. Now omniscience and benevolence are preserved at the price of sacrificing once again our considered judgements about what is possible and necessary. The price for the theist is increased further because divine omnipotence and freedom are restricted. God can only create this world.

Throughout this discussion knowledge has been expressed in terms of knowledge of propositions or states or facts, and in particular of propositions about the world. This approach may, though, misrepresent how we should properly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412506008419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understand the objects and scope of knowledge. Knowledge, be it human or divine, might be conceived as knowledge of immutable and universal truths, paradigms of which would be Platonic forms. There is no knowledge to be had of those things subject to change, but instead mere belief, awareness or opinion about them. We – or the philosophers who can devote the time and energy to the proper kind of reflection – may be able to attain some knowledge of these eternal, unchanging truths, while divine knowledge is a complete and immediate cognizing of all such truths. On such an account it seems there may be no knowledge of possibility for that which is possible as opposed to necessary depends upon change. For an entity to be other than it is, then it must be capable of changing with respect to either or both of its non-relational and relational properties.

It is possible that as I type this sentence that I could have had only one arm, I could be wearing a white and not a black shirt, and be taller rather than shorter than most of my colleagues. It is possible because if things were slightly different I would possess properties or stand in relations which differ from those which are actually the case. However, if there is only knowledge of that which is unchanging, eternally true, and so necessary, then there seems no question of God knowing all the propositions about how the world could be. Such propositions would only be true in some derivative or lesser sense (or not properly true at all) than the truth attaching to the set of immutable, universal and necessary statements or facts. The challenges adumbrated in the course of the discussion would fall from view. Now, though, the theist must defend a commitment to this account of knowledge and explain the way in which this conception of divine omniscience accords with the understanding of the God of classical theism she began by defending.

It is a desirable goal of philosophical enquiry into the nature of God to render the nature of God intelligible. An elucidation of omniscience commits the theist to an account of modality. The adoption of modal realism raises the possibility of the need for a radical adjustment of the way in which God has been traditionally conceived in the realist tradition of classical theism.[21]

Notes

1. As Plantinga observes: '[I]n exploring and explaining the nature of necessity, Leibniz turns to the idea of *possible worlds*; we can do no better'. See Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 44. That is, of course, not an argument for their use. However, following the work of e.g. Kripke and Lewis, possible-worlds approaches have dominated discussion of modality. For the purposes of the present paper I confine the choice of modal model to a version of possible-worlds theory. To the extent that the claims of the paper are successful they at least highlight the cost to the theist of adopting a realist/Lewisean possible-worlds approach to modality. While I favour arguments for a possible-worlds approach I do not here attempt to offer one in the face of a Quinean suspicion of modal discourse or the combinatorial approach favoured by Armstrong. Avoiding the toil of argument, I do not consider whether such alternative accounts may prove to be more amenable to the classical conception of God.
2. C.f., of course, David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
3. *Idem Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), x, 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. Challenges of this kind are made in Robin Le Poidevin *Arguing for Atheism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 30–31.
6. Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, I Q44, article 44.
7. Rather than embrace the multiplicity of Gods, the theist might suggest that there is a single God present at all worlds. The theist would now be defending the viability of modal realism with overlap. That is to adopt the modal realist account of possible worlds along with the thesis that some spatio-temporal object(s) exists at more than one world. For a recent defence of modal realism with overlap see, for example, Kris McDaniel 'Modal realism with overlap', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **82** (2004), 137–152. In the present paper I shall not examine the viability of this approach.
8. For present purposes I set to one side worries concerning how an entity outside of space and time could relate to the spatio-temporal realm so as to act as creator and sustainer. It is certainly part of the classical tradition that God, although timeless, is related to the world in this fashion.
9. If propositions are to be analysed as sets of worlds, then this way of describing divine knowledge of the worlds to be created is not open to the theist.
10. What would wholly non-dependent knowledge be? Perhaps it is knowledge immediately present in the mind, available in a non-inferential or direct fashion, and acquired without the mediation of experience or engagement with those objects distinct from the subject and about which she possesses knowledge.
11. Thomas Morris and Chistopher Menzel 'Absolute creation', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **23** (1986), 353–362. The central concern of their discussion is the relationship between an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God as creator of everything distinct from Himself and the Platonist thesis that there is a realm of necessarily existent abstract objects, which could not possibly have failed to exist. These necessary objects provide the framework delimiting possibilities, and the question is whether God is the absolute creator of necessary as well as of contingent reality, and if so, how to reconcile the apparent dependence of necessary truths on God with their necessity. Their (non-Cartesian) response to the question is the thesis of 'divine activism' – 'God can be held to be not just the delimiter of possible worlds, but the absolute creator of such worlds, responsible for the abstract existence and intrinsic features of the entire framework of reality. All modalities are in this way seen by us to be rooted in and dependent on the intellective activity of God' (*ibid.*, 356).
12. *Ibid.*, 357.
13. See Matthew Davidson 'A demonstration against theistic activism', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 277–290. In his critical discussion of theistic activism he sets out in considerably greater detail the same form of objections, and diagnoses as a key problem the commitment to divine self-causation.
14. See, for example, Theodore Guleserian 'God and possible worlds: the modal problem of evil', *Nous*, **17** (1983), 221–238; Laura Garcia 'A response to the modal problem of evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, **4** (1984), 375–358.
15. The argument against the classical conception of God can be stripped down to a rather simple and familiar form. If God possesses of necessity the great-making properties of classical theism, then such a world does not exist, but it does exist. So, God does not possess necessarily the great-making properties. Following Guleserian we can think of a world in which the only contingent, sentient beings are non-rational creatures whose lives are filled with more or less constant suffering, the only moments of relief being the time in which they do what is necessary for survival. In such a world there is no question of, for example, evil resulting from the exercise of free will or playing a role in the development of moral creatures. It is world, though, which it is morally impermissible for the God of classical theism to allow to exist.
16. This is to reject the Humean dictum that conceivability entails possibility – to form a clear idea of anything is an undeniable argument for its possibility. For a response to Guleserian along these lines see Paul Tidman 'The epistemology of evil possibilities', *Faith and Philosophy*, **10** (1993), 181–197.
17. Again see Tidman, 'The epistemology of evil possibilities'. He concludes (193) that '[O]ur ability to conceive of wretched worlds … does not give us reason to think them possible, especially since we can equally well conceive of the possibility that God necessarily prevents such worlds from obtaining.'
18. The Humean dictum restored after a fashion? If I can really conceive of some state, *s*, then *s* is possible. Of course, the test of whether I can really conceive of such a state just is the question of its possibility and so my believing that I have conceived of it will not underwrite its possibility. Rather, a necessary condition for some state being conceivable is that it be possible. The grounds or conditions of possibility

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412506008419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

need to be elucidated. The defender of classical theism may at this point appeal (again) to divine cognitive activity. The conceiving of God delimits the range of possibilities and God cannot conceive of anything contrary to His nature.

19. For related discussion on two-dimensional modal logic and meaning see e.g. David Chalmers *The Conscious Mind* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), and Frank Jackson *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual* Analysis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
20. The non-realist view may hold possible worlds to be ways of talking (to form books or pictures which function to represent how the world could be), as sets of propositions or as basic, irreducible (abstract) entities in terms of which propositions are to be reductively analysed. On this last view see Robert Stalnaker 'Possible worlds', *Nous*, **10** (1976), 65–75. It is a position Stalnaker (74) calls 'moderate realism' – a thesis which 'treats possible worlds as more than a convenient myth or a notational shortcut, but less than universes that resemble our own'. Ignoring the ways in which non-realist accounts differ, the central point is that for the non-realist an analysis of modality appeals to the ways in which sentences, propositions or some other kind of abstract object relate so as to represent how states of affairs could be other than they actually are. To understand and to know what is necessary and possible one must grasp or cognize the ways in which words, propositions, or abstract entities may be combined. On a non-realist model it may be that omniscience and modality become interdefined. The limits of possibility are just the limits on the ways in which a divine mind can combine sets of propositions.
21. I have benefited from discussions on earlier versions of this paper with Peter Adamson, Pierre Cruse, and Stephen Grant. I am also grateful to the instructive criticisms of two anonymous referees for this journal.