

## Monotheism and Modal Realism

### A) Introduction

This essay joins two interesting, explanatory, and, to many minds, incredible metaphysical hypotheses.

The first of these, philosophical monotheism, has a long history. Philosophical<sup>1</sup> monotheism is the view that there is an intentional agent such that everything distinct from Him exists in virtue of His will. Such an entity is perfectly good, perfectly knowing, and perfectly powerful. Arguably, these features may follow from being an intentional agent in virtue of whose will everything else exists. Being perfectly good, for instance, may be a consequence of God creating all values, since objective values are distinct from God Himself.

The second, modal realism, has a much shorter history and many fewer adherents. There may have been at most one adherent in all history so far, David Lewis. The central thesis of modal realism is that other possibilities are fully real. Compactly put, “actual” is an indexical rather than a unique feature of our real world.

These views are interesting because they are both very productive both of explanations and of consequences. The explanations offered by the theories appeal to different demands.

Philosophical monotheism gives an absolutely general answer to the “why?” we ask when motive behind some event or state of affairs. When we ask why there are notches in the stones of a prehistoric wall, we are looking for something that could be a reason for an agent to make notches in the stones. Part of the idea of philosophical monotheism is that such “intentional explanation” is fundamental, that “impersonal” explanation is derivative from a fundamental intentional ground.<sup>2</sup>

The explanations Lewis seeks are metaphysical accounts of modality, intension, and properties that reduce such phenomena to particulars. The fundamental idea is that if we expand the range of particulars to include all the entities, that is, the entities in other worlds as well as the one of which we are elements, then modality, content, counterfactuals, causality, and properties can all be given an account. Lewis point of view is essentially Humean—particulars are intelligible; anything else is intelligible just in case it can be explained in terms of particulars alone.

This essay examines the possibility of combining these two ideas. The result will not preserve every feature of the theories, but the combination will solve problems in each theory. That is, the combination of monotheism and modal realism will be an

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<sup>1</sup> “Philosophical” monotheism should be distinguished from Biblical monotheism, which, besides considerable ambiguity, is quite short on theory and generalizations. The scripture most consistent with the view is the Koran. Philosophical monotheism is a view held by the Islamic philosophers, followed by Maimonides and Aquinas.

<sup>2</sup> Historically, taking the intentional stance toward the world is prior to taking an impersonal stance. Arguably, the impersonal stance was only invented by the Ionians in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. Arguably also, this invention was spurred by the fact that polytheism leaves an explanatory intentional concerning the origin of the gods and the world in which the gods find themselves.

One could speculate that the fundamental concept of causation is the kind of causation that connects deciding to raise my arm with my arm going up. The natural explanation of anything would then be on that model.

account that gives satisfying answers to troubling or weak features of the theories taken separately. Each theory fills in the gaps of the other.

The major weakness of philosophical monotheism is the Problem of Evil. The hypothesis of a perfectly good being such that everything that is the case is so in virtue of this entity's will seems to conflict with the observed moral facts about events in the world. It is safe to say that theodicy, the attempt to reconcile monotheism and the evils of the world, has been the central topic of monotheistic theorizing since the time of the Deuteronomic author, if not before. *Prima facie*, the amount of evil in the world is a compelling argument against the existence of an all-powerful and perfectly good God.

Two weak points of David Lewis' modal realism are the Principle of Plenitude and the concept of causal necessity.

The principle of plenitude is the principle that every possibility corresponds to a possible world. But why could there not be gaps in the population of possible worlds? Since the realm of possible worlds is just an array of entities, it would seem that there could be gaps—for instance there just might not be any possible worlds where my counterparts are between 6' and 6'2". Given that Lewis' project is to explain modality in terms of particulars that just are, and given that what there just is seems contingent, the principle of plenitude has to be taken as a metaphysical necessity in itself. That is, the principle of plenitude is a modal proposition that does not seem especially plausible and that constitutes a counterexample to the explanation of modality in terms of what just is.

It seems to most people that a rock that is dropped must fall, and similarly for other generalizations and causal explanations that appeal to general laws. Laws of nature, that is, seem to give a kind of necessity to their instances. We can acknowledge that the laws of nature could have been different, but we are still inclined to apply a kind of modality to physical necessity. Such intuitions about causal necessity and the necessity of physical laws fit poorly with Lewis' Humeanism. Lewis can argue that his counterfactual account still handles such necessities, by a modification of the accessibility relation to "has the same natural laws." But the mere predicate "is a natural law" does not explain any necessity.

## B) Philosophical Monotheistic Modal Realism:

### 1) The philosophical monotheist's God for modal realists

#### a) One God:

A core idea of philosophical monotheism is that there is exactly one god among all the things that exist. Thus there is only one God in all the possible worlds. God is the creator of all the possible worlds, since by hypothesis nothing exists unless God does, and possible worlds are, by modal realism, real entities. If God is the creator of every possible world, then, given that an entity is a part of a world just in case it causally interacts with entities in that world, God is part of every possible world.

For God to be the same entity in every possible world, God must have no intrinsic accidents. Thus God has different relational properties in each of the worlds, but is the self-identical God everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis on many occasions has discussed gods. On all these occasions, he discusses gods who do not fit the criterion of philosophical monotheism. Each of the gods Lewis discusses are world-bound and so are not

b) Properties of God

The philosophical monotheist takes it to be a metaphysical necessity that all and only the entities (other than God) that God wills or permits exist. For our purposes, it can also be a metaphysical necessity that God is perfectly good and has perfect and complete knowledge.

Being the entity such that every other entity distinct from Him exists in virtue of His will arguably entails these other features. If values are objective entities, then they only exist in virtue of what God does or wills. The fundamental idea that intentional explanation is basic makes actions for the perceived good. Since God's will is the reason any state of affairs obtains, God knows what is the case. So the perceived good and the real good are the same for God. Goodness is a by-product of God's intentional action.

Properties, even those of God, can be treated as Lewis treats them, as sets of objects.

c) Possible worlds as island universes

Given that God is the same entity in every "world," and that God bears causal relations to every "world," there is really only one possible world, consisting of spatio-temporally disconnected universes, one corresponding to each Lewisian "possible world." Given philosophical monotheism, there can be only one possible world, since God, as it were, joins all the possible worlds by causal interaction with each of them. However, the real effect of this is that the Lewisian possible worlds, with some reservations discussed below, become island universes within the one possible world. Every spatio-temporal being is part of exactly one universe. Except for God, the island universes have no common elements.

d) Creating island universes/possible worlds

Every island universe exists in virtue of God's will. "In virtue of" can be read counterfactually, but the counterfactual cannot be analyzed in terms of island universes. Just as in Lewis's system, "If it were possible to construct a 19-sided polygon, then there would be possible worlds in which 19-sided polygons are constructed" cannot be given a counterfactual account in terms of worlds differing from the actual in the respect of permitting such constructions, so "If God had wanted to make only 500 duplicates of this world, there would be only 500 duplicates of this world" cannot be given a counterfactual account in terms of worlds in which God wills otherwise. Counterfactuals about the framework in which counterfactuals are analyzed have to be taken as primitive. Thus God's willing that the existent island universes exist and the Principle of Plenitude must both be construed as primitive metaphysical necessities.

e) Causality

The causal powers of God's will, except for the above "global" effects of bringing about the existence of universes, can be given a counterfactual account in terms of universes in the same way that Lewis explains causality in terms of possible worlds. That is, the dependence of John being 5'11" tall on God's will comes out to the fact that in the closest universes in which God does not will that a counterpart of John is 5'11" tall, that counterpart is not 5'11" tall.

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causally responsible for some other entities, namely entities in other possible worlds. The philosophical monotheist God cannot have counterparts.

As is the case with Lewis' system, any entity or event will have many causes. God's will will be a cause of every event and entity, but that does not exclude other causes, which other causes, of course, God also causes. The relation between causation and laws of nature are discussed below.

### 3) What universes would God create? Two problems solved

The fundamental theistic metaphysical modal truth is that nothing can exist unless God wills that it exist. Given that God's perfection is essential to His existence, the population of universes depends on which worlds a perfect intentional agent would make. Plausibly, a perfectly good intentional makes every universe that is worth being, that is, every universe that is better than nothing. A perfect agent leaves nothing worth doing undone. Given that nothing could exist unless God willed it to exist, the possible universes are just the ones God would make. Apparently possible universes that God does not make are metaphysically impossible: Since God necessarily makes all and only universes that are worth being, and since nothing exists unless God wills it into existence, some apparently possible worlds are not possible. The fact that we can imagine such worlds has no more weight than the fact that we can imagine there being a proof of the inconsistency of the continuum hypothesis with the other ZF axioms.

The thesis that God's will brings about every universe worth being solves two problems:

a) First, the Problem of Evil disappears: Each universe is real. There are an infinity of worlds in which no December 2004 Tsunami occurs. There are infinities of universes in which counterparts of this Tsunami kill exactly as many humans, one fewer humans, two fewer humans, and so on. However, any doable deviation from the *actual* world is not an emendation but a replacement. But that replacement already exists, given that God creates every universe worth existing. Given God's greatness, one would predict that an infinity of qualitative duplicates of any such universe exists.

Given the reality of every universe, the only way to eliminate our particular Tsunami is to eliminate the rest of this universe as well. So God would have to sacrifice all the pleasant lives, cuddly kittens, and great art of this particular universe to get rid of this particular Tsunami. It would be small comfort to you and your children that there exist qualitative duplicates of you in universes just like this one but Tsunami-free. Given how wonderful at least the surviving children are, it is hard to see that their elimination would be a net gain.

God, like you, is not satisfied with the existence of duplicates and counterparts—Gods loves every individual. Given the metaphysically necessary divine feature that God maximizes goodness in creation, God will make this world with all its sad features, as long as it is better than nothing.

b) Second, God's infinite goodness supplies a reason why there are no gaps between universes. The universes that exist do not just happen to exist, but exist in virtue of the necessity of God's infinite goodness. So, there is every reason to hold that between this universe, in which I am 5'11" tall and a universe in which my counterpart is 6'2" tall there are quite similar universes differing primarily in having every gradation of my counterpart's height between 5'11" and 6'2". In effect, God's infinite goodness absorbs the Principle of Plenitude, as long as it is plausible that those intermediate universes are worth being given that this one is.

The result will be a kind of partial plenitude. The universes that are worth being are densely packed, as it were. In fact, there arguably are an infinity of duplicates of each qualitatively distinct universe. But alleged universes that are not worth making do not exist at all. This is not to say that we have any idea what universes are worth making. We know that ours is, but, given that the universes are quite large, no local evils of whatever magnitude could rule out the possibility that the universe as a whole is globally worth being.

What about the left-out apparent possibilities? One might think that this diminishes the capacity of the combined system to discuss modality. What is the status of alleged worlds that are worse than nothing? They are metaphysically impossible. There are apparent inferences we can make about them, but those inferences are only trivially truth-preserving. It could be, in some sense, that Nixon, Eisenhower, and Humphrey named the same entity. But that does not give the counterfactual, "If Nixon were Eisenhower and Eisenhower were Humphrey, then Nixon would be Humphrey" any support. Likewise, it might seem that if the square root of two were rational, then three times the square root of two would be also. This seeming is illusory.

In the same way, "If God made a world that was, all things considered, worse than nothing at all, and the world had six entities in it, then that world would have an even number of entities in it" must also be rejected. Speculations about the consequences of impossible suppositions are not part of legitimate modal reasoning for a modal realist. If philosophical monotheism is correct, then the supposition that God creates evil on purpose is metaphysically impossible.

In the "keeping score" terms in which many people think of metaphysics, the metaphysical necessity of the existence of the monotheist's God is on a par with Lewis' principle of plenitude or its "recombination" version. Thus, the derivation of a version of plenitude from God is perhaps not an advantage of the combined theory over Lewis' theory. Both theories have a metaphysical necessity that is not *ce*.

#### 4) Causal necessity

Suppose that an *a* being *F* causes that *a* to be *G*. In closest possible worlds with a not-*G* counterpart of *a*, that counterpart of *a* is not *F*. Suppose in fact in both worlds it is true that  $\forall x(Fx \supset Gx)$ . This universally quantified truth, if a causal law, while not a strictly necessary truth, still seems to have some kind of necessity. Lewis' Humean conception of laws of nature as just general contingent truths seems unsatisfying.

God can help. What, according to philosophical monotheism, are laws of nature? Briefly, laws of nature are God's decrees. God's decrees discriminate between accidentally true generalizations and laws. Suppose that God's will is like ours in the following way: When I decide to have three cookies, I've decided to have an odd number of cookies, and I am aware of this consequence. But my intention is not that I have an odd number of cookies but rather that I have three cookies. When God makes a world without frogs, He knows that He also makes a world in which "All frogs are green" is true, but does not intend His action under that description.

The laws of nature would be in orderly worlds approximated by universally quantified conditionals using "natural" predicates. Laws of nature, as the term implies, are enacted by God, and so intended by God to be true in a world. Accidental regularities

in a given world are known but unintended consequences of truths about a world that are intended by God.

In worlds in which miracles occur, which include according to scripture the actual world, the laws of nature are rather more complex than we imagine. Following Maimonides, laws in worlds in which God performs miracles are rather more complex than simple universally quantified conditionals. When God performs a miracle, His will for events in that world

Also, to the extent that, for causal purposes, two worlds with different laws are more remote from one another than two worlds with the same laws, laws of nature will be excellent guides to causality.

So, suppose that it is God's will, and not just a consequence of other things willed by God, that  $Ax(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$  be true in both the world where  $Fa$  and  $Ga$  and the world in which not  $Gc(a)$  and not  $Fc(a)$ . Then, the causal relation is no accident. It is supported by a law of nature, i.e. by God's willing that a universal generalization be true. Causal necessity is thus a consequence of the efficacy of God's intentions: If you drop a rock, it has to fall because God willed about world  $a$  that  $Axa(Dxa \rightarrow Fxa)$ , and God's will is in every possible world efficacious.

Given that worlds that are at all close will have identical laws, any genuine case of causation for a person who believes in direct connections among events will correspond to a case in which the closest possible world analysis gives the right truth conditions. If there is no "causal connection," there should be equally close worlds in which things turn out both ways, i.e. where  $Gc1(a) \ \& \ \neg Fc1a$  and  $\neg Gc2(a) \ \& \ \neg Fc2(a)$ . That is, nothing about the laws of nature locally in force makes the result go one way or the other, so the closest worlds differ among themselves on the topic.

Solution to Lewis' second difficulty: Causal Laws aren't strictly necessarily true, and causal connections are not necessary. However, causal connections supported by laws of nature are necessary, given that God has decreed those laws of nature, i.e. that those laws really are laws.

### 3) Primitive "natural properties"

Reminder: for Lewis, properties are sets of individuals in the worlds. Among the sets of individuals are the tiny minority of sets that are "natural," i.e. that really characterize things. Lewis has to take the distinction between the natural and the others as primitive.

God can help, by the same distinction above. The natural properties are the ones God has in mind in creating intentionally. God is aware of each of the uncountable infinity of subsets of individuals that are being created when He creates the worlds, but only some of these subsets are ones that He wills to exist. Since the worlds are created intentionally, the laws that God wants and the features that God wants in them are the natural properties.