God and Modal Concretism

RICHARD DAVIS

Department of Philosophy
Tyndale University College
Toronto, Ontario

According to David Lewis, we all believe there are countless ways in which things might have been different from the way they are in fact. Surely, for example, the world could have existed even if, say, Quine had been a politician, or if there had been one less page in *Word and Object*, or indeed if there had been no such person as Quine at all. All these things, we are inclined to think, might have been the case. And thus we find ourselves saying, “There are many ways things could have been.” However, as Lewis notes, this sentence involves an existential quantification over objects of a peculiar sort: “ways things could have been”—“possible worlds,” if you like. At face value, then, our modal discourse commits us to belief in possible worlds—as peculiar as that may seem. Those who feel squeamish at this prospect can perhaps console themselves with the fact that failure to believe in real, live alternate possibilities ends in Spinozism: the view that (in Samuel Clarke’s words) “nothing which is not, could possibly have been; and nothing which is, could possibly not have been; and that no mode or circumstance of the existence of anything could possibly have been in any respect otherwise than it now actually is.” For most of us, I dare say, this is a difficult pill to swallow.

Over the past few decades, possible worlds have been enlisted in a bewildering array of philosophical and theological causes. In philosophy, one naturally thinks of Kripke’s account of *de re* necessity, or the Lew-

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I examine Graham Oppy’s claim that all modal theistic arguments “must be question-begging,” since they presuppose a particular account of the nature of possible worlds “which can only be supported by the further claim that God actually exists.” I argue that Oppy is mistaken here. For even if theism implies the falsity of (say) David Lewis’s concretist account of worlds, a proof for God that starts from this assumption is not thereby ensnared in a vicious circularity. I go on to present some materials for a modal theistic proof immune to all of Oppy’s criticisms.

is-Stalnaker analyses of counterfactuals; in theology, of Plantinga’s free will defense against the problem of evil, and Flint’s case for divine middle knowledge. In this paper, I want to examine Graham Oppy’s contention that despite their utility in these and other areas, possible worlds cannot be profitably deployed in the construction of modal proofs for the existence of God, that is, proofs “which [make] use of the premise that God is a being who exists in every possible world.” For these “must be question-begging,” he says, since they all presuppose a particular “account of logical space”—that is, of the nature of possible worlds—“which can only be supported by the further claim that God actually exists.” This is a truly fascinating charge. In what follows, I first show that while theism does presuppose a certain modal framework, this in no way implies that theistic proofs premised thereon are objectionably circular. I then briefly present the materials for a modal theistic proof that would circumvent all of Oppy’s criticisms.

Theism and Concretism?

Let us begin with the Lewis insight that possible worlds are “ways things could have been”—total and complete ways. Notice that this tells us very little about what worlds are. It does not tell us, for example, whether they are propositions, states of affairs, sentences, or what have you. So what precisely are they? What is their nature? Lewis endorses what has been called Concretism. Possible worlds are maximal physical objects (MPOs, for short):

There are countless other [possible] worlds . . . . Our world consists of us and all our surroundings, however remote in time and space; just as it is one big thing having lesser things as parts, so likewise other worlds have lesser otherworldly things as parts. The worlds are something like remote planets; except that most of them are much bigger than mere planets and they are not remote. Neither are they nearby. They are not at any spatial distance whatever from here. They are not far in the past or future, nor for that matter near; they are not at any temporal distance at all from now. They are isolated: there are no spatiotemporal relations at all between things that belong to different

8. Ibid., 20.
10. This term was originally coined by Peter van Inwagen. See his *Ontology, Identity, and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 206–8.
worlds. Nor does anything that happens at one world cause anything to happen at another.\textsuperscript{11}

So we are all quite familiar with at least one possible world: the actual world, the spatiotemporal physical object that Carl Sagan calls “the cosmos.” The cosmos is \textit{maximal} in the sense that all its parts are spatiotemporally related to one another. This is unexceptional. What is rather unexpected, however, is this additional claim that there are “countless” \textit{other} worlds: MPOs spatiotemporally inaccessible both to us and each other. If Lewis is right, then, there is a (probably) infinite horde of maximal, physical, causally unrelated worlds.

Now as Lewis himself notes, this sort of modal realism is apt to produce incredulous stares. But let us set that aside. The salient question is whether theism is compatible with Concretism. Can a theistic proof be erected on Concretist footings? Here we must note, first, that modal theistic arguments typically get their traction by advancing some crucial possibility claim: for example, that the property of maximal greatness (that is, being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent in every world) is possibly exemplified;\textsuperscript{12} or that it is possible that there is a being that causes the existence of every necessary being other than itself.\textsuperscript{13} Given the further assumption that what is possible does not vary across worlds, it is then inferred that in \textit{every} world there is a being who possesses maximal greatness or causes necessary beings to exist.

Is there anything about Concretism that would undermine such proofs? Well, on all accounts, to say that an object exists necessarily is to say that it exists in every possible world. But if worlds are MPOs, this might be a problem. For what would it be to exist \textit{in} a maximal, physical object? The answer that suggests itself initially is that existing in an MPO (the cosmos, let us say) essentially involves being a part of it.\textsuperscript{14} But MPOs, as we have said, are physical objects. That means that their parts must also be physical and thus occupy specific spatiotemporal locations. It follows that God’s existence cannot be necessary; on the contrary, it will be flatly impossible. For obviously, no MPO could possibly include God as a physical part, since he is an immaterial substance. So at face value it looks as though Lewis’s Concretism is incompatible with theism and actually entails atheism.

Oppy is surprisingly optimistic here. It does “seem wrong,” he says, to think of God as “in a particular part of spacetime”; still, perhaps “He exists everywhere. Or perhaps he exists outside of spacetime, yet is tied to a given world by the quasi-causal relation of being its creator. I do not know.”\textsuperscript{15} This

Philosophia Christi

seems to me confused and confusing. If it “seems wrong” that God should physically occupy some part of space-time, then would not it be doubly wrong to claim that he exists everywhere—that is, at every part of space-time? Surely to exist at a point in space-time is to physically occupy some spatiotemporal region within it. Therefore, to exist everywhere in a maximal, physical object is to physically occupy all of its subregions, in which case God must be identical with each and every physical part of the cosmos. And so if the cosmos is the mereological sum of its parts, as Lewis holds, God turns out to be identical with the entire space-time universe. Spinoza would have been pleased with this result. Even worse, though, if God exists in this way in every world, he will be identical with each of the “countless” maximal, physical objects in Lewis’s ontology. Accordingly, there will either be a single possible world (since each world is identical with one and the same thing—namely, God), or we shall be forced to say that every world is identical with a distinct God. Neither alternative, of course, is acceptable to the theist; the first saddles her with Spinozism, the second with pantheism.

Still, what about this other possibility Oppy mentions, but is not sure about: that God exists outside space-time in each world but is nevertheless its creator? Will this help “tie” God to a possible world? Here there is no help to be found in Lewis. For “if worlds are causally isolated,” he says, “nothing outside a world ever makes a world.”17 The reason is not hard to fathom. If God creates every world, then every world will be causally related to every other by virtue of being causally related to God. But then on Lewis’s own theory, these worlds will not be discrete physical wholes “but parts of a greater world,”18 so that in reality there will only be one MPO not “countless” many. So Oppy’s original uncertainty on this score seems justified; we are not going to secure the existence of God in a Lewis world simply by making God its creator.

But there is yet another possibility to consider. Lewis reluctantly acknowledges that if “spirits” (that is, God, immaterial souls, and the like) did exist, they would be “outside of space.”19 Nevertheless, he conjectures that they might exist in worlds, not by creating them, but simply by standing in spatiotemporal relations to the things within them:

I can . . . allow marvellous Spirits who are spatiotemporally related to other things by being omnipresent . . . [Still] I am not sure why I need to defend the possibility of spirit tales—after all, people have been known to accept impossible theories, as witness naive set theory—but

17. Ibid., 3. It goes without saying that nothing inside a world could create that world, “for that would be an impossible kind of self-causation” (Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds, 3).
18. Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds, 84.
19. Ibid., 73.
in fact I think I give them at least as much room in logical space as they deserve.\textsuperscript{20}

Unfortunately, this throwaway remark is flawed in several respects. First, it does not come anywhere near to showing that God could exist in a maximal physical world. Indeed, strictly speaking, what Lewis contemplates is impossible. If God is a “marvellous Spirit,” then (by Lewis’s own admission) he will exist “outside of space.” But then how could God possibly be spatiotemporally related to things? For surely, if God is “outside of space,” he is not \textit{spatially} related to anything, in which case he could not very well be spatiotemporally related to anything either. Moreover, if God is spaceless, he does not exist \textit{in} the cosmos. Here the problem, fundamentally, is that Lewis is on record as holding that a world is “composed of [its parts] and of nothing more.”\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, to exist outside space is to exist outside a world; and of course it goes without saying that if something is outside a world (in this respect), it cannot also be inside it (in that same respect).

You might reply that God could exist in a Lewis world purely in virtue of his omnipresence; he can be spatiotemporally related to the physical parts of a world by being everywhere present within it. Again, Oppy says he does not know whether this could be true. \textit{Is} it in fact true? Here we must note that the doctrine of God’s omnipresence does not say that God is \textit{spatially} everywhere present; rather, as Thomas Aquinas noted, God is present everywhere by way of his power and knowledge; for any object that exists at a given point in space and time, that object is “subject to his power” and laid “bare and open to his eyes.”\textsuperscript{22} Now of course, if this is so, then God is causally related to everything (as indeed I believe he is). But it scarcely follows that God thereby sustains spatiotemporal relations with the parts of a Lewis world. For here Swinburne is surely correct when he observes that although God “is everywhere present, he is not spatially extended; he does not take up a volume of space—for he has no body.”\textsuperscript{23}

So we are stuck with the conclusion that on Lewis’s view there is simply no way for God to get his foot into a world, and hence no world in which God exists. His existence is therefore impossible. Not only is Lewis unable to see why he needs to defend the possibility of these “spirit tales”—or of God’s existing in an MPO—he likens the attempt to do so with showing that a view known to be impossible—for example, naive set theory—is possible after all. It is wholly futile. While he \textit{says} that his modal theory leaves theists with “as much room in logical space as they deserve,” it is quite apparent that he does not think they deserve any at all. Perhaps there is some dialectical room

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Aquinas \textit{Summa Theologiae} I, q.8, a.3
for the theist to wiggle about, but there is no vacancy in Lewis’s “logical space”; all the rooms are fully occupied.

In any event, even if I am wrong about this, there is a much more direct route to the incompatibility of theism and Concretism—one that goes unnoticed by Oppy. According to Concretism, there are concrete, physical objects and set-theoretical constructions on these objects. In fact, that is all there is. What we normally think of as properties, says Lewis, are not Platonic universals; properties are to be seen instead as “the sets of their instances.” The property of being red is not an abstract object; it is the set of all red things. There are also propositions; however, a proposition is simply “the property of being a world where that proposition holds.” Now given that properties are sets, what this means is that a proposition just is a set—the set of all MPOs at which that proposition is true. Consequently, if \( p \) is a necessarily true proposition, \( p \) is identical with the set of all MPOs. And if \( p \) is necessarily false, then \( p \) is identical with \( \{\emptyset\} \), the empty set.

Now there are obvious problems here. As Plantinga notes, Lewis’s view implies that \( \text{Andrew is a cleverly disguised prime number} \) is the very same proposition as \( \text{The color red weighs six pounds} \), which is clearly mistaken. Indeed, every impossible proposition whatsoever is identical with \( \{\emptyset\} \), so that in reality there is only one necessarily false proposition. And the same goes for necessarily true propositions; each of these is identical with the set of all worlds. And since there is just one such set, there is only one necessarily true proposition. Again, this is something I think we all know to be false.

There is little doubt therefore that Lewis’s modal theory is metaphysically deficient. But what shall we say about Concretism from a theistic perspective? Well, suppose we let \( S \) stand for the set of all MPOs—the sole necessary truth. Then recall that \( S \) contains only concrete, physical objects. Now contrary to what Oppy asserts, from a Christian or theistic perspective the creation of concrete, physical reality is a contingent affair. God could...
have refrained from creating anything physical. This is entirely possible. But necessarily, if he had, then $S$ would not have contained anything; that is to say, $S$ would have been the empty set! Thus the conjunction of theism and Concretism implies that it is actually possible that a necessary truth (that is, something that could not possibly be false) could have been false and in fact necessarily false. And of course this is not possible.

**Theism and Circularity?**

Perhaps it is time to return to our original question: Is it really true that any modal theistic proof must be circular, since it inevitably assumes an “account of logical space” that itself presupposes the existence of God? Well, we now know that theism and Concretism cannot both be true. But Oppy asks,

> How are we to choose between Lewis and the theist? By construction, there really isn’t anything to choose between the accounts which they offer of modality . . . . In general: the only good way to decide whether to follow Lewis or the theist is to decide whether or not God exists in the actual world.

> [Accordingly] there can be no modal argument for the existence of God. Any modal theistic argument must be question-begging, since it will rely on assumptions about the nature of logical space which can only be supported by the further claim that God actually exists.  

This is a fascinating but slippery bit of reasoning. Letting $T$ stand for “Theism is true” and $C$ for “Concretism is true,” we are initially confronted with this incompatibility of $T$ and $C$, that is, $\sim \Diamond (T \& C)$. The question is how to choose between them. And Oppy’s claim is that the “only good way” to break this deadlock is for the theist make a certain assumption about the nature of logical space that only follows if theism is true.

Here I want to ask two connected questions: (a) Is there only one good way to choose between $T$ and $C$? and (b) Is it question-begging for a theist to reject $C$, but then go on to offer a modal argument for God’s existence? Oppy is a little shy on the details; but I take it that he has something like the following in mind. Since $\sim \Diamond (T \& C)$ entails $C \rightarrow \sim T$, 31 it would be somewhat foolhardy for the theist to adopt Concretism in her attempt to argue modally for God; for $C$ entails the negation of theism. So her modal proofs for theism must proceed on the assumption that $C$ is false. But notice that $\sim \Diamond (T \& C)$ also entails $T \Rightarrow \sim C$, in which case this starting assumption, $\sim C$, is an entailment of theism itself. And isn’t that a problem?

---

31. I use the double-line arrow to represent strict implication.
Perhaps we can see that it is as follows. A modal theistic proof will assume \( \neg C \). Presumably, however, theism is not supposed to follow from \( \neg C \) alone; so other (true) premises will be needed. Let \( P \) represent the set of premises required to take the theist from \( \neg C \) to \( T \). A modal theistic proof will then take this form:

(1) \((\neg C \& P) \Rightarrow T\).

By modal exportation we then have

(2) \( \neg C \Rightarrow (P \supset T) \).

However, we have already seen that

(3) \( T \Rightarrow \neg C \).

And from (2) and (3), we can validly infer

(4) \((T \& P) \Rightarrow T\).

by modal hypothetical syllogism and exportation. But surely something has gone awry; for now \( T \) appears on both sides of the double arrow. This certainly has the air of circularity about it, since the argument \((T \& P) \vdash T\) is deductively valid even if \( P \)—that is, the conjunction of all the premises in the theist’s modal proof—is false or even irrelevant to theism. Now if all modal proofs were like that, then perhaps Oppy would be right: they would all be question-begging. But is he right?

Well, I do not think so. Here it might be helpful to distinguish between two kinds of circularity: logical and epistemic. An argument is logically circular, we might say, if its conclusion is included among its premises.\(^32\) In this sense, \((T \& P) \vdash T\) is circular because its conclusion, \( T \), is included as the left conjunct of \( T \& P \) (easily following from it by simplification).\(^33\) The question, though, is whether this begs the question in some objectionable way. It is important to see in this connection that begging the question is an epistemic affair. Roughly speaking, an argument is epistemically circular or begs the question if we must presuppose its conclusion, in order to ascertain the truth of its premises, or be justified in accepting them.\(^34\) This certainly seems to be the what Oppy has in mind. For all modal theistic proofs, he says, “rely


\(^{33}\) In his *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), Oppy claims that this charge of logically begging the question merits no attention at all, since every valid argument begs the question in this way (55). But this is false. E.g., quoting William Rowe, Oppy cashes out logical circularity as follows: “when a premise in an argument, or a main conjunct of a premise, is identical to the conclusion” (54). Given this construal, \((T \& P) \vdash T\) is indeed logically circular. However, a simple little argument such as \((P \&(P \supset Q)) \vdash Q\) is not. The quote from Rowe here originally appeared in his “Comments on Professor Davis’ ‘Does the Ontological Argument Beg the Question?’” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (1976): 443.

\(^{34}\) See Alston, “Epistemic Certainty,” 10.
on assumptions . . . which can only be supported by the further claim that God exists.” In other words, one would first have to know that God existed before she could justifiably make use of those assumptions. But then surely, it will be said, \((T&P) \vdash T\) begs the question since in order to know that \(T&P\) is true, we must first know that its conjuncts are true—one of which is the conclusion of the argument itself. An argument such as this is scarcely going to convince anyone with their wits about them.

Alas, however, things are not quite so simple. For there is a subtle mistake in the way we have set up the problem. It is certainly true that \((T&P) \vdash T\) is deductively valid and logically circular. This is indisputable. Still, to turn this into an epistemic problem for the theist, it must be shown that she invariably relies upon the left conjunct of \(T&P\) in her proof for theism, which, after all, is supposed to proceed from \(P\) to \(T\). Is there any reason to think that she necessarily does this? I doubt it. For while it is indisputably true that \((4)\) follows logically from \((2)\) and \((3)\), why think the theist must advance \((2)\) and \((3)\) as the twin epistemic pillars for her theism? I cannot see that there is any reason at all for this supposition. For example, consider \((3)\). Even if \(T \Rightarrow \sim C\), it does not follow that a theist must rely on \(T\) in coming to see that \(\sim C\). Oppy tells us that this is the “only good way” for a theist to reject Concretism. But here I am afraid he does not offer us any evidence to support this assertion.

And the fact is that there are a variety of reasons for rejecting Lewis’s modal theory—all independent of the truth of theism. For example, we have already seen that Concretism entails that there are exactly two necessary propositions (one necessarily true, the other necessarily false) when in fact there are many. Furthermore, as we are by now all aware, Concretism is wedded to counterpart theory: the idea that each of us has physical counterparts in other worlds—individuals that closely resemble us, but “they are not really you.”35 Lewis tells us that for an object—Wiles, let us say—to possibly have a property (for example, being a Harlequin Romance–novelist) there must be a world that includes (as a part) someone very much like Wiles who has that property. The difficulties with counterpart theory are legion.36 One wonders, for example, how some other individual’s being a Harlequin Romance–novelist in a causally remote world has anything to do with Wiles’s possibly being one. Surely Wiles could have been a romance novelist even if none of his counterparts were.37 So this analysis of possible property possession (which, you will note, has nothing whatever to do with theism) is obviously flawed. But if so, there is not simply one good reason to which the theist might appeal in eschewing Concretism. Her being a theist, and theism’s

being incompatible with Concretism, is of course a reason—and a sufficient one at that. But the point is: it is not the only reason; there are plenty of others on offer. As long as she relies on one of these (and not on theism itself), it is extremely difficult to see how Oppy could be correct in his assertion that every modal theistic argument must be question-begging.

Theism and Conceptualism

What I want to do now is to offer a brief sketch of how a modal proof for theism might unfold such that non-Concretism is assumed, but without begging any questions in favor of theism. My aim is not to defend this argument in the sort of detail one wants in an indisputably successful piece of natural theology. (I hope to do that elsewhere.) Rather, my goal shall be to demonstrate that at no point in my argument is there so much as a hint of epistemic circularity.

Let us begin with a useful distinction that Oppy draws between ground-level and higher-level modal judgments. A ground-level modal judgment is a modal claim that does not presuppose any particular theory of modality. You might suggest, for example, that Wiles could have been a romance novelist. That seems right; there does not seem to be anything necessary about his being a Princetonian mathematician. However, if you went on to say that Wiles could have been a romance novelist given that he has an other-worldly counterpart who is, you would be making a higher-level, theory dependent judgment about modality. For of course to say that Wiles has such counterparts entails or involves Concretism.

Now if this distinction holds, and I think that it does, why could not the theist’s actual epistemic basis for ~\(C\) be some ground-level (and thus non-question-begging) judgment about modality that also happens to serve in her proof for theism? For example, assuming that we are not Spinozists, we have it that there are possible worlds. We also pretheoretically know that worlds are both maximal and consistent (“complete ways things could have been”). Further, if we analytically unpack this ground-level concept of a world, we see that it already contains a basic distinction between “ways things are/ could have been” and the “things that are/ could have been that way.” But if this is the case, we can say that the former are true or false, depending on whether things really are or could have been that way. We can also hold that these ways are intentional objects: they are of or about the things that are or

38. In *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, Oppy considers (and rejects) four kinds of modal arguments: those based on the ‘actually’ operator, the ‘necessity’ operator, a weak principle of sufficient reason, and the notion of an incomprehensible being (65–84). This list is nowhere said to be exhaustive. And in fact, the argument I sketch below is an instance of none of these kinds.

39. This is noted in van Inwagen, *Ontology, Identity, and Modality*, 169.
could have been that way. (After all, how could they be true/false, if they were not about anything?) As Searle points out in another connection:

An intentional state is satisfied if the world is the way it is represented by the intentional state as being. Beliefs can be true or false . . . [and an] intentional state is satisfied or not depending on whether there is indeed a match between propositional content and the reality represented.40

What Searle says here about intentional states and beliefs applies equally to possible worlds; they represent reality (as a whole) as being a certain way. Accordingly, they are true or actual if reality really is that way; false or non-actual if not.

And now the question is: Can a maximal physical object do that? Can a Lewis world represent things as being a particular way? In answering this question, it might be helpful to begin with a quick piece of advice from another Lewis. According to C. S. Lewis: “[Physical] events in general are not ‘about’ anything and cannot be true or false.” I am not so much interested in events as I am with this connection Lewis makes between “aboutness” and “truth or falsity.” On the face of things, what we have here is a ground-level judgment about events. The slamming of a door is not “about” the door of course; it just “happens.” And that is the way things go with events. They are the sorts of things that “take place” or “occur.” Moreover, we can know this without having anything like a theory of events—for example, a theory that tells us whether they are individual substances, say, or properties (for example, of time intervals or classes of individuals). The point is that at the ground-level, we know they are not intentional objects.

But then by parity of reasoning: An MPO will not be about anything either, and therefore could not possibly be true or false. An MPO, rather, will be one of those things that ways are about; it will be represented by them (or not), but will not itself represent anything. Here we can think in terms of Aristotle’s categories. An MPO will have a certain quantity (for example, for Lewis, some worlds are larger/smaller than others) and a quality (it will be a material rather than an immaterial object). Its parts will occupy certain of its subregions (that is, they will have a place), and they will stand in spatiotemporal relations to one another. Some of them—that is, some of the parts—will be active (that is, reading books or orbiting planets); others passive (that is, being run over, robbed, or what have you). What an MPO will not have, however, no matter how far we pursue the matter, is aboutness.

So perhaps we should consider the possibility that possible worlds are something else: physical objects of a sort that could display intentionality—sets of sentences perhaps. Unfortunately, there just do not seem to be

enough sentence inscriptions to go around. If worlds are sets of sentences, then being maximal and complete they would have to be infinite sets. Furthermore, since there are an infinite number of worlds, there would then have to be infinities of infinities of sentences. And there just are not. Moreover, as Searle points out, sentences, pictures, diagrams, and the like (while clearly physical) have at best derived (or “added on”) intentionality. And if derived, then derived from something else. If we are not prepared to consider an infinite series of derived intentional causes here, then we will require a first, intrinsically intentional case. Thus Searle says: “All derived intentionality is derived from the intrinsic.”

So consider the sentence “Wiles knows his sums.” This sentence is not intrinsically intentional; it is not in and of itself about anything. It is a mere sequence of shapes (letters). But we English language users can certainly employ this sentence to single out Wiles and say of him that he knows his sums. Whatever intentionality this sentence enjoys, therefore, is inherited from us. It follows that we must be capable of being in intentional states. Surely, for example, we must first possess the capacity to think about Wiles (and his facility with sums) before we can settle on using the sentence “Wiles knows his sums” to express that truth about him. According to Searle, these sorts of intentional states (for example, thinking of Wiles that he knows his sums) are caused by neurobiological processes in the brain. But once we have this causal explanation in hand, he says, “there cannot be a further interesting philosophical question as to how” these states refer. They just do; they are intrinsically intentional.

Well, suppose we go along with this idea. Still, if “ways things are/could be” are simply sentences, each of which arises from (or at least presupposes) some intentional state caused in us by neurobiological processes, then there must be an actually infinite number of brain states—one at least for every natural number. And of course there is not. Further, the existence of brains and brain states would be logically necessary, and of course they are not. To avoid this result, we could try moving to the idea that worlds are Platonic Forms or abstracta of some sort—maximally consistent propositions, say, or states of affairs, or properties. We might then take the position that these entities, which are wholly independent of human cognitive and linguistic activity, are just brutally intentional.

Unfortunately, “just so” stories like this seem to dismiss the problem. The problem is to account for a specifically complex sort of representation. Ways have aboutness but also a specific content and form. To simplify matters, think of ways as propositions. The proposition Wiles is clever is of course about Wiles. More specifically, it is about his having of a particular property (that of being clever). But why should it have to do with him and

42. Searle, Mind, Language and Society, 94.
43. Ibid., 98.
that property and his having of it? Why should the content take that particular ontic form (that is, S-is-P)? Notice, too, that its being arranged in this way is a necessary condition for its correctly representing Wiles as being clever. The question is: How could this proposition just be there so to speak—replete with just the right logical form, intentional “directedness,” and propositional content so as to properly represent Wiles? To reply, “Well, that’s just the way it is. And that’s all,” seems to be guilty of what Gale and Pruss call the “taxi cab objection”: dismissing a legitimate request for explanation (like a passing cab) when it suits one’s purposes.⁴⁴

Perhaps an analogy will help. You are watching the home video I shot last spring of my daughter’s seventh birthday. The action begins with a wide angle shot of all her little friends seated around the kitchen table, but eventually moves in for a close-up of my daughter as she blows out the candles. You then (somewhat benightedly) ask why this footage concerns my daughter’s birthday instead of, say, the cruise you and your friends took last fall around Balboa Island. You demand to know why, in particular, attention focuses on my daughter as opposed to the waterfront property John Wayne once owned overlooking Newport Bay. Suppose I furrow my brow and reply, “Well, that’s just the way things are with this video. And that’s an end on’t.” Sure, that is possible; but clearly, as an answer to your request for an explanation, my reply is pretty anemic.

Now I do not mean to suggest, of course, that propositions just are pictures. Not at all. Still, they are like pictures in that they represent specific states of affairs. And it seems highly plausible to suppose (doesn’t it?) that if my home video represents things as being a particular way, then this is due to a certain sort of mental activity on my part as the camera operator. I direct my attention specifically to my daughter (and her activities), and in so doing I naturally leave out a host of other individuals and events. This is why the video is about her and not them. But then why should things go any differently for propositions? Indeed, if what we have been saying about propositions is correct, it seems reasonable to suppose that

(5) Every proposition is an effect of some mind.

Perhaps, for example, propositions are really thoughts. If so, then as I direct my attention to Wiles and his knowing his sums, mentally attributing the latter to the former, I bring it about that the proposition Wiles knows his sums exists. Following Quentin Smith, let us say that Conceptualism is the metaphysical thesis that (5) is true.⁴⁵

---


⁴⁵ Actually, Smith defines Conceptualism as the view that (5) is necessarily true. See Quentin Smith, “The Conceptualist Argument for God’s Existence,” Faith and Philosophy 11 (1984): 38–49. For my part, I think the conceptualist argument can make do with merely the truth of (5).
Now if a possible world $w$ is simply a maximal proposition—a proposition such that for any proposition $p$, $w$ either entails $p$ or entails its denial, $\neg p$—then every world is also an effect of a mental cause. The question, then, becomes: How shall we account for this no doubt unexpected result? Consider, for example, the actual world—$\alpha$, for short. As Smith reminds us, $\alpha$ is not to be identified with the set of all true propositions; that leads to set-theoretic paradox. Rather, he says, $\alpha$ is “an infinitely complex conjunction”\(^{46}\) of all true propositions. If this is the case, then perhaps we can explain $\alpha$’s existence by saying that each of its conjuncts is caused to exist by a discrete, finite, nondivine mind (a human mind, let us say). However, as Smith rightly observes, to reason in this way is to commit the fallacy of composition. For even if each conjunct could be thus explained (and this is doubtful anyway, since there are not nearly enough human minds around to think all those conjuncts), we would still need a mental cause for their conjunction. Hence, “there must be some mind that grasps [or thinks] the actual world, for a conjunction of all true propositions is itself a proposition.”\(^{7}\)

Presumably, there need only be one such mind given the assumption that propositions (and hence possible worlds) are necessary beings. If for any worlds $w$ and $w^*$, $w^*$ exists in $w$—that is, if every possible world exists in every other—then every world exists in the actual world.\(^{48}\) Hence any mind that was the cause of $\alpha$ would also be the cause of every world. But then this mind must also be infinite and necessary, since there are an infinite number of propositions (at least one for every natural number) and each of these we may presume is a necessary being.

### Some Criticisms

Now as I said earlier, this is not intended to be a full-scale defense of a modal argument for theism (though I do believe that it could be filled out to become one). Instead, I will have accomplished my purpose even if the argument I have sketched turns out to be unsound. For as long as my proof is not defective by virtue of being circular or question-begging, that will be enough to show that Oppy is reaching when he says that all modal proofs for theism must be question-begging.

Here it is interesting to note that Quentin Smith, in his discussion of the conceptualist argument, spends the bulk of his time examining the rational acceptability of (5). Thus, for example, Smith says that (5), if true, “cannot

---

47. Ibid.
48. Here we must make a sharp distinction between existence and actuality. While every possible world exists, only one such world is true or actual. See Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity, 46–7.
be settled by observation or induction.” Hence it must be either an analytic or synthetic a priori statement. But, he argues, it cannot be analytic:

The concept of a proposition includes such concepts as having relations or properties among its parts, having parts that are ordered to each other in a certain way, and being a bearer of a truth value (assuming the principle of bivalence). Perhaps the concept of a proposition also includes the concept being understandable or possible, being an object of a propositional attitude, but even if these latter concepts are included they do not entail conceptualism since a platonist would freely admit that each proposition can be grasped by some possible mind. But it is implausible to think that the concept of a proposition includes the concept of being the effect of some mind.  

Here it looks as though Smith is proposing to unpack the concept of a proposition by—in Frege’s words—“giving a simple list of characteristics in no special order.” (We might call this the “Laundry List” approach. Frege calls it “one of the least fruitful” ways to analyze a concept.) And Smith’s idea, I take it, is that since platonists will not “freely admit” that being the effect of some mind (M) is on the list, it cannot be that this concept is included in being a proposition (P).

Now it is certainly true that M is not going to be on everyone’s laundry list for a proposition. So (5) is not analytic in the sense that there is universal agreement about P’s entailments, which can all be inspected in advance. It hardly follows, however, that P does not include M. The problem, as I see it, is that Smith has fallen prey to the temptation to parse concept inclusion in purely psychological terms. No doubt there are those of us who fail to grasp the fact that being the number 4 and being the square root of 16 are necessarily coextensive: that (necessarily) anything’s having (or falling under) the one entails its having (or falling under) the other. Perhaps this is due to an insufficient grasp of the concept of a square root, poor tutoring in mathematics, or whatever. We should not be surprised to discover, therefore, that being the square root of 16 is not going to make it onto everyone’s laundry list for the concept of the number 4; not all of us are going to “freely admit” this. But it does not follow that being the number 4 precludes being the square root of 16.

Well then, in what sense is M included in P? According to Frege, there is a “more fruitful” way to analyze a concept. Perhaps what we can infer from P “cannot be inspected in advance . . . [for] we are not simply taking out of the box again what we have just put into it”—for example, defining "bach-

50. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 101.
elors” as “an unmarried male” and then concluding that being unmarried is included in being a bachelor. This is wholly trivial and, in certain cases, actually cripples an argument with epistemic circularity. Thus, for example, if \( M \) were included in \( P \) in this sense, my modal argument for theism from the existence and nature of possible worlds (that is, maximal possible propositions) would certainly be question-begging. For its conclusion would be “put in,” as it were, “in advance” in the very concept of a proposition employed by the premises.

The question is: Can we reasonably hold that \( M \) is indeed included in \( P \) but not in an epistemically suspect way? Apparently, Smith thinks not. On his reckoning, if (5) is not an analytic a priori proposition, it must be synthetic a priori; in which case, as he thinks, \( M \) is not included in \( P \), though the connection between them is still known a priori. The proposition \( P = M \)—that is, (5)—should therefore be self-evident, Smith asserts, for any person who is rational with respect to believing (5). But this is manifestly untrue, since there are “some platonists and nominalists,” who are rational in this respect, “and yet both understand and reject (5).” Accordingly, the crucial premise in the conceptualist argument is unable to gain any footing with rational folks; hence the argument fails.

How shall we explain this state of affairs? If (5) is either an analytic or synthetic a priori proposition, why is it that not everyone who understands (5) automatically believes it? The answer, I believe, is that while (5) is a necessary truth, it is known a posteriori. But this does not mean that \( M \) is not included in \( P \); for as Frege teaches us, a definition or analysis of the “more fruitful” sort will involve one concept’s being included in another “as plants are contained in their seeds, not as beams are contained in a house.” We can therefore agree that \( M \) cannot simply be a member of \( P \)’s laundry list; nor even, perhaps, a direct entailment of some one concept that is. For the sense in which plants are contained in their seeds is implicit and known to us only after they have been “drawn out” so to speak.

So consider the concept of being a proposition. As we have already seen, this concept includes such subconcepts as having a content and logical form, being about something, and representing reality as being a certain way. Now what I am suggesting is that being the effect of some mind is implicitly contained in this cluster of concepts. This is not an obvious entailment, of course, but it can be “drawn out” (thereby extending our knowledge) if we ask ourselves just how a thing might come to coinstantiate this cluster. What sorts of objects even could? Here we argued by analogy. Propositions are like home videos in these crucial (intentional) respects. We know that the intentional properties of home videos are chiefly the result of mental activity. There-

55. Ibid., 46.
fore, the intentional properties of propositions are reasonably explained as the effects of a mental cause. Moreover, this strikes one as a somewhat better explanation than, say, eliminating propositional intentionality, reducing it to something physical (for example, a Lewis world), or insisting that it is an unexplained brute given.

Of course this would all have to be argued out in fuller detail. The thing to see, however, is that in none of this have we explicitly relied upon the truth of the argument’s conclusion—that there exists a single infinite, necessary mind—to grasp the truth of (5). Still, we are not out of the woods yet. For according to Smith, the conceptualist argument assumes that propositions exist necessarily. And this, he believes, is a real problem. For given Conceptualism, the only way for there to be propositions in every world would be if there were a mind that necessarily produced them through its noetic activity. Thus without assuming that possible worlds are conjunctions of propositions, “and without the question-begging assumption that God exists in every possible world . . . it is not obvious that there is a reason for a conceptualist to believe that propositions exist in every possible world.”

But why should we believe a thing like that? It is quite true, of course, that a Conceptualist will (after a certain inferential process) come to believe that propositions are mental effects. But why must her initial reason for thinking that a given proposition exists be that there is some mind that produces it? Perhaps she simply finds herself convinced that there are truths and falsehoods, and hence certain entities—she calls them “propositions”—that are true or false. She might then pay the same compliment to worlds, holding that exactly one of them is true/actual while the others are all false/nonactual. But even if false, these other worlds would still exist, since each would have the modal property of being possibly true. Hence for any worlds \( w \) and \( w^* \), \( w^* \) exists in \( w \) in the sense that if \( w \) were true, \( w^* \) would exist—as a false yet possibly true maximal proposition. In this way, it seems perfectly possible that one embrace the necessary existence of propositions without ever considering the fact that they have intentional properties; or if they do, whether this is best explained as their being the effects of a mental cause.

Now here Oppy might say that he is not interested in logical or epistemic circularity, but rather something quite different. All modal theistic arguments beg the question in a deeper, more revealing way. Suppose, says Oppy, that I am committed to a claim that \( p \) as part of my perhaps tacit reasonable commitment to a broader consistent set of claims \( C \). Suppose further that an opponent produces an argument of the form ‘\( Q_1, \ldots, Q_n \); therefore not \( p \)’ where the negations of one or more of the \( Q_j \) are claims that belong to \( C \). Then that argument begs the ques-

tion against me. Moreover, this is true even if I cannot provide a clear characterization of the set of claims $C$.\footnote{Oppy, \textit{Ontological Arguments and Belief in God}, 56.}

Let us call this “Oppy’s Characterization” (OC, for short). Oppy tells us it is “an adequate partial characterization”\footnote{Ibid.} of what it means to beg the question against someone. But I cannot see that this is so. All that Oppy has done, it seems to me, is to neatly insulate himself (by stipulative definition) against any argument employing premises leading to conclusions with which he disagrees. It matters not whether these premises are more reasonable to believe than his own, or even that his own reasons for disagreement are unclear. You have begged the question against him. Talk about stacking the deck in your own favor! I can only speak for myself here: but I believe I have good reasons for rejecting (OC). (I will not trouble you with a clear account of these, since on Oppy’s view it really does not matter.) It now follows, by (OC) itself, that any attempt on Oppy’s part to make use of (OC) against the position I have been advancing will beg the question against me. And so I think we must say that Oppy’s Characterization, while admittedly partial, is nowhere nearly adequate; it fails to serve for present purposes.

In the end, therefore, Oppy’s claim that all modal theistic proofs must be question-begging seems clearly overdrawn. First, while we shall certainly want to avoid Lewis’s modal commitments in constructing theistic proofs—after all, theism and Concretism are incompatible—it does not follow that the basis for this rejection must be the question-begging assumption that theism is indeed true. There are plenty of independent reasons for eschewing Concretism. But secondly, pretheoretical reflection on Lewis’s notion of possible worlds as “ways things could have been” reveals that they possess a peculiar array of intentional properties. No physical object could have such properties. The theist begs no question, I have argued, in maintaining that if worlds are (say) maximal propositions—each of which enjoys a logically necessary existence—then positing a single, infinite, and necessary mind as the cause of their intentional features is perfectly reasonable. Theistic modal proofs may (or may not) be tenable in the long run; but if they are defective, it seems very unlikely that it will be for the reason Oppy gives: that they all assume they very thing they are trying to prove.