

A Conceivability Argument Against the Existence of an Essentially Conscious Necessary Being

Conceivability arguments have had a significant place in the history of Western philosophy of mind since the scientific revolution. Rene Descartes argued from the conceivability of the mind without the body. And in recent times, there has been much discussion of the conceivability of bodies without minds – or ‘zombies’ as they have become known – and whether they rule out physicalism about consciousness (Chalmers 2006, Goff 2017).

In this paper, I will consider an argument which starts from the conceivability of there being no consciousness, and on that basis attempts to demonstrate the non-existence of an essentially conscious necessary being. This argument is worth considering not only because its conclusion is significant, but also because it has interesting things to teach us about modal rationalism: the view that conceivability and possibility are connected in a philosophical significant way.

Part I outlines the argument. Part II raises an objection to that argument and resolves the objection by modifying both the argument and modal rationalism itself. Part III considers what implications this conclusion has for various conceptions of God, and also its bearing on the Big Question of why there is something rather than nothing.

I – The Argument

Here is the argument we will be considering:

P1: It's conceivable that there is no consciousness.

P2: If it's conceivable that there's no consciousness, then it's possible that there's no consciousness.

C1: It's possible that there is no consciousness.

P3: If it's possible that there is no consciousness, then there is no essentially conscious necessary being.

C2: There is no essentially conscious necessary being. (from C1, P3)

P3 seems solid. An essentially conscious necessary being exists, as a conscious being, in all possible worlds. This is incompatible with there being a possible world in which there is no consciousness.

In explicating P1, we need to think more deeply about the nature of conceivability. In my previous work I have almost exclusively worked with *negative conceivability*, where a state of affairs is negatively conceivable just in case it can't be ruled out priori. However, working on this topic has made me realise that we need to be working with positive conceivability (the reason for this will become apparent in addressing the objection of the next section).

Building on work by Stephen Yablo, (1993) David Chalmers (2002) defines positive conceivability as having the following three characteristics:

- (i) It has a mediated objectual character that goes beyond merely entertaining a proposition: one imagines a situation in which the proposition is true.
- (ii) It is not tied to sensory imagination.
- (iii) It is possible to fill in arbitrary details in the imagined situation such that no contradiction reveals itself.

Let us take each of these in turn. If I wanted to know merely that the proposition <there are dragons breathing fire> is *negatively* conceivable, then I simply have to attend to the proposition itself, establishing that it contains no contradiction or incoherence.

However, when it comes to *positive* conceivability, there are *two* elements at play. Firstly, there is an imagined scenario; for example, I might picture in my mind a green dragon breathing fire onto the Eiffel Tower. Secondly, I recognise that imagined scenario as one in which the proposition <there are dragons breathing fire> is true.

Turning to the second characteristic, the form of imagination involved in positive conceiving is not limited to sensory imagination. I can, in some sense, imagine things that cannot be represented with sensory imagery, such as infinity, or a four-dimensional object.

Finally, all sorts of things can be imagined very superficially, in such a way that unavoidable contradictions are hidden. The third characteristic aims at removing this problem.¹

Turning to P1 itself, it is notable that the zombie worlds that are focused on in conceivability arguments against physicalism are standardly defined as possible worlds which are physical duplicates of our universe in which there is no consciousness; not

¹ Notice this isn't *reducing* possibility to conceivability, as possibility occurs in the definition of conceivability.

just no consciousness in brains or bodies, no consciousness at all.² In other words, in so far as one accepts the conceivability of such worlds, one accepts the truth of P1. Even if one doesn't think zombies are conceivable, it seems that we could conceive of a purely physical possible universe which did not exist long enough for consciousness to emerge.³

Presumably defenders of an essentially conscious necessary being challenging P1 would agree that the facts of physical science don't entail the existence of consciousness, but nonetheless hold there are certain forms of consciousness whose non-existence is inconceivable. But then the onus would be on such defenders to make the case for this. Anselm's and Descartes' ontological argument would perhaps be one way of doing this. Whilst acknowledging this as an option that would, if successful, remove the challenge we are considering in this section, there is not the space here to make a case for the unsoundness of these arguments. I hope the reader judges it worthwhile to explore the challenge that arises if those particular ontological arguments – in contrast to Plantinga's modal ontological argument considered below – fail.

I conclude that there is a reasonable case for P1 and will assume its truth in what follows.

P2 leads us deeper into the weeds of modal rationalism. The simplest form of modal rationalism would go as follows:

Simple Modal Rationalism — For any proposition P, P is conceivably true iff P is possible true.

Simple Modal Rationalism is not popular, as many are convinced by the examples of a posteriori necessities put forward by Saul Kripke (1980) and Hilary Putnam (1973, 1975), such as water being H₂O. We cannot discover just through reasoning that water is H₂O – we have to do some science. And yet identity statements are plausibly necessary. Water *just is* H₂O; they are one and the same thing. And therefore, not even an all-powerful God could create water without creating H₂O, or vice versa.

This kind of a posteriori necessity entails scenarios that are conceivable but not possible. Given that we can't know through reasoning that water is H₂O, it is conceivable, say, that water is a fundamental element, as the Greeks believed. But given that water is necessarily H₂O, and H₂O is essentially a non-fundamental

² Chalmers' anti-physicalist arguments consider the premise 'P&~Q' where Q is an arbitrary experiential truth, which might be the truth that someone is conscious, in which case ~Q asserts that the world is a zombie world. The corresponding premise of my anti-physicalist conceivability argument simply asserts that the world is a zombie world.

³ On the panpsychist view I have defended in many places (Goff 2016, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2024), the universe contained consciousness from its very start. But accepting panpsychism is compatible with thinking physicalist worlds are conceivable, at least physicalist worlds without consciousness.

substance, it is impossible for water to be a fundamental element. Modal rationalism is false.

To make modal rationalism consistent with these a posteriori necessities, we need to nuance the connection between conceivability and possibility. I will work with *essentialist modal rationalism*, the view Martine Nida-Rumelin (2007) and I (2011, 2017, 2019) have (independently) developed.⁴

Essentialist modal rationalism builds on a distinction between two kinds of concepts:

Transparent Concept — A concept C referring to entity E is transparent just in case C reveals the nature of E (i.e., what it is for E to be part of reality is a priori accessible for someone possessing C, in virtue of possessing C). Plausible examples are <sphericity> (it is a priori that for something to be spherical is for all points on its surface to be equidistant from its centre) and <party> (it is not so easy to articulate what it is for something to be a priori, but that's compatible with knowing a priori what it is for something to be a party).

Opaque Concepts — A concept C referring to entity E is opaque just in case C reveals little or nothing about the nature of E. Plausible examples are <water> (it is not a priori that for something to be water is for it to be composed of H₂O molecules) and <lightening> (it is not a priori that for something to be lightening is for it to be such and such form of electric discharge).

Roughly the idea is that conceivability and possibility remain entwined when we confine ourselves to conceiving exclusively through transparent concepts. A simplified version of essentialist modal rationalism could be defined as follows (there is a further modification needed to define modal rationalism, but it won't be very important in this argument so I'll save it for the appendix):

Essentialist Modal Rationalism — For any proposition P, P is possibly true just in case: (i) P is conceivably true, (ii) P contains only transparent concepts.

Why accept essentialist modal rationalism? One attraction is that it gives us a nice diagnosis of the gap Kripke and Putnam opened up between conceivability and possibility, which is the principal reason analytic philosophers began to think conceivability doesn't entail possibility. The reason it's conceivable but not possible that water is a fundamental element is that the concept <water> does not reveal what water's essential nature is. If I don't have access to water's essential nature, then of course I can't know what defines it across modal space.

⁴ An alternative is David Chalmers' (2006) two-dimensionalist form of modal rationalism. I have argued (2017, Papineau & Goff 2014) that Chalmers' view makes semantic assumptions Chalmers has never properly justified. Also, essentialist modal rationalism is a bit easier to explain!

Modal rationalism also gives us an account of the epistemology of modality. Given that we lack a telescope to observe other possible worlds, how do we know what is and isn't contained in them? Essentialist modal rationalism has an answer: work out what's conceivable, among the things we know the nature of.

Finally, we might justify essentialist modal rationalism via a basic intuition against there being a gap between conceivability and possibility even when one has a complete understanding of the essence of what one is conceiving of. Imagine an all-powerful being trying to create a million-sided object. She examines the idea from all angles, in intricate detail, and finds no incoherence in it. She then tries to create one, and finds that nothing happens, revealing to her that this perfectly coherent state of affairs must be in fact impossible. Modal space being unintelligible in this way seems deeply weird, at least to me.

Establishing essentialist modal rationalism doesn't quite get us P2. According to essentialist modal rationalism, we are entitled to infer from conceivability to possibility when our conception involves only transparent concepts. So, of course, the next question we need to ask is whether the concept of consciousness is transparent, given that this is the concept involved in conceiving that there is no consciousness.⁵

Revelation is the thesis that the essences of experiential states are somehow revealed in experience, e.g. that when I have a certain pain state, the essential nature of that specific pain state – what it is for someone to instantiate it – is somehow apparent to me (Goff 2015, 2017, Liu 2019, 2021). Can we make this thesis more precise by characterising it as equivalent to, or perhaps as entailing, that phenomenal concepts are transparent? One difficulty is that phenomenal concepts are often rough and ready. I might think of 'that pain I had the other day,' which I remember rather vaguely. Clearly such a rough and ready concept does not capture all the nuances of the character which essentially defines the particular conscious state it refers to, and so this concept could not correctly be characterised as 'transparent.' Moreover, we may from time to time misapply phenomenal concepts, e.g. thinking we're experiencing red when in fact we're experiencing orange.

David Chalmers (2004) has tried to get around this worry by focusing on what he calls 'direct phenomenal concepts,' defined as concepts whose content is based entirely on attention to experience. For example, I'm in pain, and I attend to the experience and just think *that feeling*, without imposing on it some characterisation based on earlier experiences.

⁵ Of course, we also have the concepts of existence and negation. These are arguably not referring concepts, and so cannot be said to be 'transparent' as I have defined that term above. However, it's plausible that we grasp a priori what we are claiming when we use terms expressing these concepts; we do not defer to reality to fix the meaning, in the way we do with 'water' and 'lightening.'

In my book *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, I took this same approach. However, more recently I've been having some doubts. One source of these doubts is meditation. When you first begin meditating on the breath, it seems like you're simply attending directly to the breath, without imposing anything new on it; in other words, it feels you're forming a direct phenomenal concept of the breath. However, after you've been meditating for a couple of hours, it becomes apparent that all of that time you have in fact been imposing on your breath a very subtle idea of breathing, a kind of caricature of the experience you are in fact happening. In other words, you are not in fact having a direct experience.

These kinds of careful reflections on consciousness make it plausible that we never in fact have perfectly direct phenomenal concepts, that it's a limit we become closer to, e.g. in meditating, but never quite achieve.

In order to address this problem, I now propose defining Revelation as follows:

Revelation – A phenomenal concept is transparent in so far as it accurately captures what it's like to have its referent.

This definition of Revelation allows that we never have a perfectly transparent concept that captures all the details and nuances of the experience it denotes. At the same time, we don't want to overplay our deficit. It's plausible that even in everyday acts of attending to our experiences we grasp an awful lot of what it's like to have them. According to the above definition of Revelation, in grasping an awful lot of what it's like to have our experiences, we thereby grasp an awful lot of the essential nature of those experiences.

Why accept Revelation? I personally find it self-evident. Or at least, it seems to me self-evident that when I think about my experience in terms of what it's like, there is *some property* I (to a large degree) understand the essence of. Many physicalists deny this, holding that when I attend to my experience, I'm just kind of blindly 'pointing' at something within myself whilst having no understanding of its nature. What I'm pointing at, for these physicalists, turns out to be a brain state.

If I try to articulate why I find this self-evidently false, I'd say that when I attend to, say, the qualitative character of a red experience, I apprehend *how that quality contributes to the character of my experience*, and it seems to me that in understanding *how a quality contributes to the character of my experience*, I thereby have a positive understanding of *something*.⁶ Admittedly this isn't going to persuade those who reflect carefully and don't find this to be self-evident, but I find it's worth saying because many who don't already have a god in the race also find it self-evident upon reflection.

⁶ I am inclined to the view that the conscious state in question *represents* a reddish quality, rather than instantiates a reddish quality. So to be more precise I should say that I apprehend *how representing that quality contributes to the character of my experience*.

A middle-way between full Revelation and the physicalist position just outlined is to say that whilst knowledge of what it's like to have the experience is positive knowledge of *an aspect* of the essence of the experience, there is more to the essence of the experience than this aspect. In conversation, I find this is a common position among anti-physicalists as well as physicalists. My response is that the onus is on a proponent of such a 'partial Revelation' view to provide an account of phenomenal concepts that could make sense of this. It seems to imply that phenomenal concepts are made up of two 'sub-concepts,' one of which is transparent and one of which is opaque. How does the reference-fixing work in each sub-concept, and how do these two sub-concepts unify together into a single concept? I rarely find any detailed answers to these questions.⁷

For those unimpressed by appeals to self-evidence, I have argued elsewhere (Goff 2017: Ch. 5) that Revelation offers the best explanation of the special justification we enjoy with respect to our own consciousness (although, of course, the base claim here that we enjoy a special justification with respect to our own consciousness may also ultimately rest on appeals to what is self-evident).

We have thus far been talking about phenomenal concepts of specific conscious states rather than the general concept of <consciousness> that occurs in P2. However, the general property of consciousness is a determinable of which specific conscious states are determinates. For those not familiar with this terminology, it just means that particular conscious states are specific ways of instantiating the general property of consciousness, just as squareness and triangularity are specific ways of being shaped. Revelation implies that a 'perfect' phenomenal concept, one which perfectly revealed what it's like to have the experience it denotes, would fully reveal the essence of the experience it denotes. This seems to me to imply that the general concept of <consciousness> is transparent.

Perhaps I can press this with an analogy. Being round is just a specific way of being shaped, and therefore if you understand what it is for something to be round, you thereby understand what it is for something to be shaped. Likewise, feeling a given pain is a specific way of being conscious, and therefore if you understand what it is to have that pain, you thereby understand what it is to be conscious.⁸

We are now in a position to put together the following argument for P2:

P1: <there is no consciousness> contains only the concept of 'consciousness.'

⁷ Robert Schoer (2010) has offered one of the few detailed attempts to make sense of this. I respond in Goff 2017: Ch. 5.

⁸ I think I've argued this somewhere before, but I can't remember where.

P2: *Essentialist modal rationalism* – For any proposition P, P is possibly true just in case: (i) P is conceivably true, (ii) P contains only transparent concepts.⁹

P3: The concept <consciousness> is transparent.

C: If it's conceivable that there is no consciousness, then it's possible that there's no consciousness.

We now have all the premises in place to infer the non-existence of an essentially conscious necessary being via the argument outlined above.

II – An objection

An initial worry one might have about the above argument is that it seems one could construct a conceivability argument *for* the existence of an essentially conscious necessary being.

The existence of an essentially conscious necessary being seems at least *negatively* conceivable. There isn't any obvious contradiction or incoherence in the idea of an essentially all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good – I'll assume for the moment that these states essentially involve consciousness – necessary being. This would seem to compel modal rationalists to accept that such a being is possible. But as Alvin Plantinga (1974) has outlined at great length, a necessary being cannot exist in some possible worlds but not others. Either there is a necessary being in all possible worlds or there is a necessary being in no possible worlds. We might thus present the following argument:

P1: It's conceivable that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

P2: If it's conceivable that there is an essentially conscious necessary being, then it's possible that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

C1: It's possible that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

P3: If it's possible there is an essentially conscious necessary being, then it's necessary that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

P4: If it's necessary that there is an essentially conscious necessary being, then it's actual that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

C2: It's actual that there is an essentially conscious necessary being.

⁹ If we were working with the full account of essentialism modal rationalism discussed in the appendix, we'd also need to add to P1 that <there is no consciousness> does not refer to any brute one offs.

This not only challenges our argument but also raises a deep problem with modal rationalism itself, as it seems to have delivered contradictory results: that an essentially conscious necessary being both does and doesn't exist.¹⁰

The first step to addressing this is to adopt a form of modal rationalism on which it is positive, not merely negative, conceivability which is linked to possibility. An essentially conscious necessary being is negatively conceivable, but is such a being positively conceivable? Certainly, we can positively imagine a being who has the states traditionally associated with God: omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. But can we positively imagine a being who exists necessarily? What are we bringing to mind when we do that?

On modal rationalism, a necessary being is one whose non-existence can be ruled out a priori. Modal rationalists have to hold this, because otherwise there would be a state of affairs – namely the non-existence of that necessary being – which was both conceivable and impossible. In other words, on modal rationalism, a necessary being has what we might call an 'existence-guaranteeing essence,' defined as follows:

Existence-Guaranteeing essence – An essence such that if you grasped that essence, you'd be able to rule out a priori its non-instantiation.

An *existence-guaranteeing* essence is the polar opposite of an *existence-negating* essence, i.e. an essence such that if you grasp that essence, you're able to rule out a priori its instantiation. The property of being a square circle has an *existence-negating* essence. Once you grasp it, you can just 'see' that there couldn't be something that instantiates it. An *existence-guaranteeing* essence would be one that, once you grasp it, you can just 'see' that there *has to be* a being that instantiates it.

However, while we have a positive understanding of many *existence-negating* essences, we have no positive understanding of an *existence-guaranteeing* essence (at least, assuming Anselm's and Descartes' ontological arguments fail). Everything we can positively imagine is conceivably non-existent.

The fact that we cannot conceive of an *existence-guaranteeing* essence doesn't show that there is no such thing. This might just be a limit of understanding. Dogs cannot do mathematics, but that doesn't show that there are no mathematical truths. To put it another way: we cannot positively conceive of an *existence-guaranteeing* essence, but we cannot rule out that there is *some* possible being that can positively conceive of an *existence-guaranteeing* essence.

¹⁰ Spencer 2018 considers something like this concern, using it not to raise challenges for modal rationalism, but rather to undermine conceivability-based arguments for God. He does not consider the option we will consider below that the existence of God – or a necessary being – can be ruled out a priori, but only by someone possessing concepts we do not in fact possess.

On the other hand, nor can we establish that there *is* some possible being that can positively conceive of an existence-guaranteeing essence. Without some appeal to indirect evidence, we should conclude that we simply don't know whether or not an existence-guaranteeing essence is positively conceivable.

We have made some progress. If we formulate modal rationalism as making a connection between *positive* conceivability and possibility, then we can conclude that we simply don't know whether or not a necessary is positively conceivable, and therefore don't know whether or not a necessary being is possible. Or rather, just based on what we can conceive of, we don't know this. A theist or an atheist modal rationalist may draw on independent evidence for God's existence or non-existence to make a case that God exists/doesn't exist, and therefore that God is possible/impossible, and therefore that there is/isn't some possible being that can positively conceive of God.

This is a significant conclusion, as it shows that we cannot make a conceivability argument for God's existence, and that the modal ontological argument does not have much force. Without appeal to considerations that go beyond the modal ontological argument, we should hold that we don't know whether or not God is possible.

However, this also reveals a problem with the argument explored in part I of this paper. We are now accepting that there (epistemically) could be a being with an existence-guaranteeing essence. And given that we have no clue about the character of that existence-guaranteeing essence (if indeed there is one), we cannot rule out that it necessitates the existence of consciousness, in which case there is consciousness in all possible worlds. In other words, something has gone wrong with the reasoning that leads us to the possibility of there being no consciousness.

One might respond by sticking with the argument of part I, holding that this demonstrates that there is no existence-guaranteeing essence that necessitates the existence of consciousness. But such a response would seem to me to get things the wrong way around. The conceivability of there being no consciousness potentially reveals something about the modal status of this state of affairs *considered in and of itself*. But it gives us no grounds for ruling out the possibility of a self-guaranteeing essence, or to limit what such a self-guaranteeing essence might necessitate. In fact, these considerations seem to me to call for essentialist modal rationalism to be modified, in the way that I will now outline.

I want to introduce the concept of 'intrinsic modal status,' defined as follows:

Intrinsic Modal Status — For any state of affairs S, the intrinsic modal status of S is the modal status it has in virtue of S itself.

If there are no necessary beings, then intrinsic modal status may be the same as modal status. But if there are necessary beings, the two may come apart.

To see why, consider *gratuitous evil*, defined as bad states of affairs that could have no justifying reason for someone – even an omnipotent being – to bring them into being.¹¹ For example, plausibly a universe in which every created being suffering terribly forever would be gratuitous evil. Of course, it is contentious whether there actually is gratuitous evil. Many atheists think there is, and that this rules out the existence of God as God would not allow the existence of gratuitous evil. Theists of course deny this, holding that God has some justifying reason for allowing the evil we see. Whether or not there actually is gratuitous evil, hopefully we can all agree that there are examples – such as a universe where everybody suffers for ever – that we can all agree *would* be cases of gratuitous evil.

Suppose for the sake of discussion that God exists. What is the modal status of gratuitous evil? On the one hand, the universe where everyone suffers forever seems conceivable, and therefore surely modal rationalists should think it's possible. On the other hand, God would never allow gratuitous evil, and if God exists in all possible worlds, then it surely follows that in no possible world is there evil.

I propose resolving this new paradox by modifying essentialist modal rationalism to hold that conceivability considerations are a guide not to modal status per se but to *intrinsic modal status*. In other words, we can modify essentialist modal rationalism as follows:

Essentialist Modal Rationalism Redefined — For any proposition P, the state of affairs expressed by P is *intrinsically* possible, just in case: (i) P is conceivably true, (ii) P contains only transparent concepts.

Gratuitous evil is positively conceivable (and could be conceived of using only transparent concepts¹²) and therefore is intrinsically possible, i.e. contingent is the modal status it has in virtue of itself. However, if God exists, then gratuitous evil is necessarily non-existent.

This modification to essentialist modal rationalism has crucial implications for the conceivability argument considered in part I. We are no longer entitled to infer from the conceivability of there being no consciousness to the *possibility* of there being no consciousness, but merely to the *intrinsic possibility* of there being no consciousness. In other words, we must make the following modifications to the first part of the argument:

P1: It's conceivable that there is no consciousness.

¹¹ I have developed these ideas, in part, through conversations with Jack Symes.

¹² Assuming phenomenal concepts are transparent, we could conceive of a world of gratuitous evil using only transparent concepts by conceiving of a world in which there are only disembodied souls suffering terribly forever.

P2: If it's conceivable that there's no consciousness, then it's *intrinsically* possible that there's no consciousness.

C1: It's *intrinsically* possible that there is no consciousness.

The problem is that the intrinsic possibility of there being no consciousness is compatible with the existence of a being that has an existence-guaranteeing essence that entails the existence of consciousness. The argument seems to be undermined.

However, I still think we're in a position to rule out an essentially conscious necessary being, at least if we assume that a property can only be part of a thing's essence if it's part of its fundamental nature.¹³

By establishing the intrinsic possibility of there being no consciousness – the argument considered a moment ago – we have thereby established that consciousness is not intrinsically necessary, i.e. its essence does not guarantee its existence. It follows that if consciousness exists necessarily, this must be because the existence of consciousness is necessitated by some *other* nature, such that that other nature exists necessarily. And therefore, if there is a necessary being that is necessarily consciousness, this must be because that being has some other, non-experiential properties which (i) are necessarily instantiated, (ii) necessitate that it has consciousness.

In other words, we can establish that consciousness is not amongst the necessary being's fundamental properties. At best, consciousness is a derivative feature grounded in some other properties of the necessary being. The consciousness of the necessary being may itself be necessary, but it is a kind of derived necessity.

In other words, we can establish the non-existence of an essentially conscious necessary being with the following argument.

P1: It's conceivable that there is no consciousness.

P2: If it's conceivable that there's no consciousness, then it's intrinsically possible that there's no consciousness.

C1: It's intrinsically possible that there is no consciousness.

P3: If it's intrinsically possible that there is no consciousness, then there is no essentially conscious necessary being.

C2: There is no essentially conscious necessary being. (from C1, P3)

¹³ Those who disagree with this are welcome to redefine my conclusion to: there is no essentially conscious being whose consciousness is part of its fundamental nature.

V – Different Conceptions of God

The above argument rules out a certain conception of God: a God that is metaphysically necessary and essentially conscious. However, not all forms of theism characterise God in this way. According to apophatic theism, nothing positive can be said of God, which presumably rules out God being conscious. There have been defenders of apophatic theism in all of the Abrahamic faiths, going right back to their origins.

We established above that, assuming modal rationalism, if there is a necessary being, such a being must have a nature that goes beyond what we can conceive of, as everything we can conceive of is conceivably non-existent. This fits well with the core of apophatic theism. The apophatic theist can hold that if we could conceive of God's nature, we would see that God is something that has to exist, but that this is currently beyond our intellectual reach. This is precisely what theists must say if they want to embrace essentialist modal rationalism.

What about the compromise to apophatic theism formulated by Aquinas, on which we know of certain properties of God *by analogy*? On this view, we can say that God is 'conscious,' but that sentence is true not because God really has the property of consciousness, in so far as that is a property we have a positive grasp of. Rather something is true of God that is in some way similar to what is true of us in so far as we are conscious.

This view also seems not to be ruled out by the argument of this paper. Recall that positive conceivability involves a relationship of the mind to two items: a proposition and an imagined scenario, with the former being recognised as true in the latter. On Aquinas' view, the imagined scenario seems to be missing. We have a proposition 'God is conscious,' which is in a sense true – true in the way 'his temper is fiery' is true. But we lack any further positive understanding of the feature of God which is similar to being conscious, and hence the best we can do is imagine a being with the consciousness we do have a positive understanding of, which is not literally the property God possesses. In other words, on Aquinas's view we are unable to positively conceive of God, and therefore, if the argument of this paper were framed in terms of this conception of God, the argument would not get off the ground.

There are also a couple of ways of making sense of a conscious God, compatible with the argument of this paper. Firstly, we might adopt Richard Swinburne's (2004) view that God is essentially conscious but does not exist necessarily. Secondly, one could hold that God has some fundamental non-experiential nature that necessitates God's consciousness. On this view, God is *necessarily* conscious but is not *essentially* conscious: God is not conscious in their fundamental nature. On this view, we could think of God's first act of creation – albeit a timeless act from eternity – as making themselves conscious.

We can see, then, that the argument of this paper does not rule out theism. Nonetheless, the conception of God it does rule out – an essentially conscious necessary being – is a popular one in contemporary analytic philosophy, and to that extent the conclusion of my argument is significant.

I would like to finish by saying a few words about the ‘Big Question’ of why there is something rather than nothing. An important argument for theism is that it allegedly answers this question by postulating God as the source of being. The classic response of the teenage New Atheist is to ask why God exists. It seems to me that, in so far as we’re thinking of God as an essentially conscious being – a kind of ‘Big Mind’ – this question has force. It does seem reasonable to ask why that Big Mind exists rather than nothing at all; at least, it’s reasonable in so far as the question of why there’s something rather than nothing is reasonable in the first place.

Richard Swinburne (2004) has argued that the conscious God hypothesis is very simple, as all of God’s mental properties are ‘to the max,’ and so we don’t have the question of why, say, God’s power is exactly such and such level and not higher or lower. To that extent there is less of a brute fact than on other hypotheses. I find his argument persuasive. Nonetheless, Swinburne still leaves us with a brute fact. He makes the itch less itchy but he doesn’t scratch it.

The only way to get a fully satisfying explanation to why there’s something rather than nothing is for the source of being to have an existence-guaranteeing essence. Perhaps in the life to come God reveals to us their nature, and at that point we see that God just *has to exist*. Finally, there is an end to Cartesian doubt!¹⁴ This is the kind of afterlife I yearn for. In contrast, if Swinburne’s God exists, then those philosophers lucky enough to get to heaven will spend the rest of eternity thinking, ‘Is this real? Am I dreaming and about to wake up?’ I would want my money back.

This paper has argued against the existence of an essentially conscious God. I also happen to think that an essentially conscious God could not fulfil the yearnings of the human heart.

Appendix: The Full Definition of Essentialist Modal Rationalism

The slightly simplified definitions of essentialist modal rationalism offered in the paper get into trouble with what I like to call ‘brute one offs,’ by which I mean entities that are not uniquely picked out by their essences. Consider two electrons, call them ‘Bill’ and ‘Bob.’ Bill and Bob share all of their essential features and are yet nonetheless distinct entities. Someone who has a transparent concept of Bill and a transparent concept of Bob will not thereby be in a position to know that Bill and Bob are not identical. For such

¹⁴ It’s not clear this would end all Cartesian doubt. We may still have doubts about the choices of God or of other individuals. Nonetheless, the (hopefully good) ultimate source of being would be known with certainty, and this may make other important truths certain also.

a person, the proposition <Bob the electron is identical with Bill the electron> is conceivably true but not possibly true.

I get around this problem simply by building into the conceiving in question information about identities and non-identities. More precisely, I ultimately define essentialist modal rationalist as follows:

The Full Definition of Essentialist Modal Rationalism – For any proposition P, the state of affairs expressed by P is intrinsically possibly true just in case:

(i) P is conceivably true,

(ii) P contains only transparent concepts,

(iii) In so far as P contains concepts referring to brute one offs $B_1, B_2 \dots B_n$: P^* is conceivably true, where P^* is the proposition formed from conjoining P with true information concerning all identities and non-identities between the entities involved in $B_1, B_2 \dots B_n$.

This may seem like cheating, but I don't think it is. The core idea of essentialist modal rationalism is that the gap between conceivability and possibility opens up when we don't fully understand the metaphysics of what we're conceiving of. In the case of conceiving of Bill and Bob, the bit of metaphysics we're missing is, and is nothing other than, information about whether the entities we're conceiving of are or are not identical. It's the lack of that information that renders a certain impossibility – Bill being identical with Bob – conceivable, just as failing to know that water is essentially H_2O renders it conceivable that water is a fundamental element. The way to close the gap is to fill in the missing bit of metaphysical information.

References

Chalmers, David, J. (2002) 'Does conceivability entail possibility?' in T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.) *Conceivability and Possibility*, Oxford University Press, 145-200.

Chalmers, David, J. (2004) 'Phenomenal concepts and the knowledge argument,' in P. Ludlow, Y. Nagasawa & D. Stoljar (Eds.) *There's Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument*, MIT Press.

Chalmers, David, J. (2006) 'The Two-Dimensional Argument Against Materialism,' in B. P. McLaughlin & S. Walter (Eds.) *Oxford Handbook to the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford University Press.

Goff, Philip (2011) 'A posteriori physicalists get our phenomenal concepts wrong,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 89: 2, 191-209.

- Goff, Philip (2015) 'Real acquaintance and physicalism,' in P. Coates & S. Coleman (Eds.) *Phenomenal Qualities: Sense, Perception, and Consciousness*, Coates, P. and Coleman, S. (Eds.), Oxford University Press.
- Goff, Philip (2016) 'The phenomenal bonding solution to the combination problem,' in G. Bruntrop and L. Jaskolla (Eds.) *Panpsychism*, Oxford University Press.
- Goff, Philip (2017) *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, Oxford University Press.
- Goff, Philip (2018) 'Did the universe design itself?' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 85: 99-122.
- Goff, Philip (2019a) 'Essentialist modal rationalism,' *Synthese* 198 (Suppl 8): 2019-2027.
- Goff, Philip (2019b) *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*, Pantheon.
- Goff, Philip (2020a) 'Panpsychism and Free Will: A Case Study in Liberal Naturalism,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 120: 2, 123-144.
- Goff, Philip (2020b) 'Cosmopsychism, micropsychism and the grounding relation,' in W. Seager (Ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism*. Routledge.
- Goff, Philip (2021) 'Putting Consciousness First' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 28: 9-10, 289-328.
- Goff, Philip (2024) 'How exactly does panpsychism explain consciousness?' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 31: 3-4, 56-82.
- Goff, Philip & Papineau, David (2014) 'What's wrong with strong necessities?' *Philosophical Studies*, 167: 3, 749-62.
- Kripke, Saul (1980) *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press.
- Liu, Michelle (2019) 'Phenomenal Experience and the Thesis of Revelation,' in D. Shottenkirk, M. Curado & S. Gouveia (Eds.) *Perception, Cognition and Aesthetics*, Routledge, 227-251.
- Liu, Michelle (2021) 'Revelation and the intuition of dualism,' *Synthese* 199: 3-4, 11491-11515.
- Plantinga, A. (1974) *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press.
- Nida-Rümelin, Martine (2007) 'Grasping phenomenal properties,' in Alter, T. & S. Walter (Eds.) *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*, Oxford University Press.
- Papineau, D. (2006) 'Comments on Galen Strawson: Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism,' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 13: 10-11, 100-109.

Putnam, Hilary (1973) 'Meaning and reference,' *Journal of Philosophy* 70: 19, 699-711.

Putnam, Hilary (1975) 'The meaning of 'meaning,' *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: 131-193.

Schroer, Robert (2010) 'Where's the Beef? Phenomenal Concepts as Both Demonstrative and Substantial,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88: 3, 505-522.

Spencer, Joshua (2018) 'Conceivability and possibility,' in G. Oppy (Ed.) 'The Ontological Argument,' Cambridge University Press. pp. 214-237.

Swinburne, Richard (2004) *The Existence of God, 2nd Edition*, Oxford University Press.

Yablo, Stephen (1993) 'Is conceivability a guide to possibility?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53:1-42.