


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Modal panentheism: Addressing the modal problem of evil

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## Abstract

Modal panentheism claims that God encompasses all possible worlds and that a substantial number of possible worlds exist. This article defends a version of modal panentheism that is grounded in perfect-being theology, which maintains that God holds all great-making properties to the highest possible degree. In addition to goodness, modal panentheists consider encompassment to be a great-making property, and therefore, God (a maximally encompassing being) is said to encompass all possible worlds.

Nagasawa argues that modal panentheism faces a significant problem: the modal problem of evil. The argument states that if modal realism is true, then there exists a substantial number of possible evils that contradict God's perfect goodness. Nagasawa proceeds to claim that modal evil poses a greater threat to modal panentheism than actual evil does to traditional theism.

This article develops two responses to the modal problem of evil. The first response (*maximal-panentheism*) argues that God need not be all-good or all-encompassing. The second response (*no evil worlds*) argues that worlds contradicting God's perfect goodness are not possible worlds. In the light of these responses, I claim the modal problem of evil for modal panentheism is no more intractable than the problem of evil for traditional theism.

**Keywords:** encompassment; maximal God; modal realism; modal panentheism; perfect-being theology; problem of evil

## Introduction

Several recent articles have sought to establish pan(en)theistic conceptions of God through perfect-being theology, which takes God to possess all great-making properties to the highest possible degree (Harwood 1999; Lancaster-Thomas 2020; Nagasawa 2014, 2016, 2024). In this article, I focus on panentheistic perfect-being theology: the school of thought that understands the world to be in or part of God.<sup>1</sup> One version of panentheism, modal panentheism, claims that encompassment is a great-making property and, therefore – on the proviso that a version of modal realism is coherent – God is said to encompass all possible worlds (Nagasawa 2016, 92–96). In addition to encompassment, properties such as power, knowledge, and goodness are also said to be great-making. This gives rise to a problem: the modal problem of evil.<sup>2</sup> According to Yujin Nagasawa, if modal panentheism were true, then there are a substantial or infinite number of worlds that contain significant amounts of evil.

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(For the purpose of this article, I describe any worlds that might contradict God's perfect goodness – such as those containing significant amounts of, types of, or gratuitous evil – as *evil worlds*.) Therefore, if God encompasses all possible worlds, then God is partly identical to evil worlds, and God cannot be perfectly good (Nagasawa 2016, 100–103). Nagasawa goes on to claim that because the modal problem of evil appeals to all actual and possible instances of evil, it constitutes a significantly greater threat to modal panentheism than the problem of evil does to traditional theism, which only draws on actual evil.

The primary aim of this article is to show that the modal problem of evil is no more of a threat to modal panentheism than the problem of evil is to traditional theism. To this end, I apply recent work from perfect-being theology and theistic multiverse theory. The first solution (*maximal-panentheism*) appeals to the maximal-God thesis, which defines God as the being that possesses the maximal consistent set of great-making properties (Hill 2005; Nagasawa 2017; Plantinga 1977). If failing to encompass evil worlds or being limited in goodness increases God's overall greatness, then maximal-God may be limited in goodness or encompassment. The second solution (*no evil worlds*), which does not appeal to the maximal-God thesis, claims that evil worlds – like evil universes – are not possible worlds (Forrest 1981; Kraay 2010; Turner 2014). The argument states that if God exists, then God exists necessarily, and, therefore, all possible worlds must reflect God's perfect goodness. In the light of the proposed solutions, I maintain that modal panentheists are able to eliminate any possible evils that would otherwise be incompatible with God's goodness.

The secondary aim of this article is to demonstrate that modal panentheism is deserving of further scholarly attention. Modal panentheism is a novel philosophy. In fact, it has only been discussed by Nagasawa, who proposes and rejects the view in the space of the same article (2016). I intend to show that Nagasawa dismisses the view far too quickly. In addition to responding to the modal problem of evil, I also build upon Nagasawa's suggestion that encompassment is a great-making property. I go on to claim that modal panentheism is preferable to other pan(en)theisms because it involves a far greater being – that is, a being that encompasses not just everything actual but everything actual and possible – which offers plausible solutions to several intractable problems in the literature. I also suggest that Nagasawa's version of modal panentheism constitutes a greater conception of God than modal panentheism *simpliciter*, which considers God's sole property to be encompassment. For these reasons, I take Nagasawa's modal panentheism to be a promising worldview that is deserving of further scholarly attention.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I present an argument for the God of modal panentheism from perfect-being theology. Second, I overview some of the central features of modal panentheism. Third, I outline the modal problem of evil. Fourth, I develop the maximal-panentheism solution to the modal problem of evil. Fifth, I defend the no evil worlds solution to the modal problem of evil. I conclude that the modal problem of evil is no more of a threat to modal panentheism than the problem of evil is to traditional theism.

### The perfect being

It is generally accepted that if God exists, then God is perfect. According to Nagasawa, nearly every discussion concerning God's existence focuses on this understanding of God (2017, 2). In fact, Katherin A. Rogers has claimed that, across all debates relating to God's nature, no philosopher has ever argued for a God who is 'less than best' (2000, 2).<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I develop an alternative concept of God from perfect-being theology. Perfect-being theology is the school of thought that aims to understand God's nature in reference to the perfect-being thesis, which maintains that God is the greatest metaphysically possible being. According to proponents of the perfect-being thesis, the greatest metaphysically possible being must possess all great-making properties to the highest possible degree. It is important to emphasize that the greatest being is said to hold intrinsic great-making

properties and not extrinsic great-making properties. Properties are said to be extrinsically great-making if they are great for oneself, the world, others, or in the context of one's character. In contrast, a property is said to be intrinsically great-making if and only if, all other considerations being equal, an entity that possesses some property is greater solely in virtue of possessing that same property. It is for this reason that intrinsic great-making properties are favoured over extrinsic great-making properties: intrinsic great-making properties mark the fulfilment of ultimate greatness (they do not serve some further end) and allow for a cross-entity comparison of value (we can compare the values of radically different entities by measuring their intrinsic values).

In determining which properties are intrinsically great, perfect-being theologians consult their intuitions through thought experiments. Nelson Pike offers the following example:

Consider the following game: There are two doors. Behind each door is an object. On the front of each door is written the name of a quality. On the second door is written the contradictory of the name written on the first. ... The object behind each of the doors bears the quality indicated on the front. ... You are to choose a door. The point of the game is to pick the door concealing the object that ought to be preserved (1970, 135–149).

Given the choice between preserving that which is powerful, knowledgeable, and good or preserving their contradictories (not-powerful, not-knowledgeable, and not-good), perfect-being theologians unanimously favour the former. Consider Hill's responses to the thought experiment.

*Power:* 'most people think powerlessness a worse thing than power, which is one reason why people are always trying to expand their power by modern technology or exercise or the acquisition of money or getting promoted at work' (2005, 125).

*Knowledge:* 'we mostly think that knowledge is a good thing – we want more of it ... we are ... inclined to admire the knowledgeable ... that apparently devote their lives to knowledge as an end in itself' (2005, 27).

*Goodness:* 'The right thing to do, it seems, would be to preserve the entity behind door number one – to save the morally good thing over that which is not morally good.' (2024, 5)

Following Hill, God is said to hold each of the specified great-making properties – power, knowledge, and goodness – to the highest possible degree. I take this method of identifying great-making properties to capture the essence of the perfect-being theologians' approach. In the discussion that follows, I use this same approach to argue for the intrinsic value of encompassment. Below, my central claim is that encompassment is no less plausible of a great-making property than the other properties traditionally attributed to God. The comparative premise is used to secure the following conditional: if traditional perfect-being theology is reasonable, then so too is panentheistic perfect-being theology.

In addition to the traditional attributes, those exploring alternative understandings of God have suggested that the greatest metaphysically possible being would be all-physical (Lancaster-Thomas 2020, 75–89) or all-encompassing (Nagasawa 2016, 92–96). According to Asha Lancaster-Thomas, 'physical existence is a great-making property' and 'therefore a God that exists naturally is greater than a God that exists supernaturally' (2020, 81). Here, I do not claim that natural (or physical) entities are greater than supernatural (or non-physical) entities. Instead, I take physicality to be one aspect of encompassment. According

to Nagasawa, one aspect of an entity's greatness may be understood 'in terms of the scope of that which it encompasses' (2016, 92, 2017, 13). Encompassment is to be understood in terms of the degree to which an entity occupies existence. There are two aspects to this: first, how *much* of existence an entity encompasses and, second, how *long* an entity encompasses that aspect of existence. Traditions vary on what they take to be encompassable; for example, Spinoza understood an all-encompassing being to be identical with the totality of the natural world, whilst Vedaānta maintains that an all-encompassing being would be identical to both the natural world and supernatural states of affairs. Here, I remain neutral on the existence of supernatural states of affairs. For our current purposes, it suffices to say that an all-encompassing being would be identical to everything that exists: there is nothing that has, does, or will exist that is not partly identical to an all-encompassing being.

Nagasawa introduces the possibility that encompassment may be a great-making property. However, to parallel the arguments for God's traditional attributes, modal pantheists must present a similarly reasonable intuitive case for the greatness of encompassment. Therefore, let us consider encompassment in isolation from all other properties. Playing Pike's game, suppose you were given a choice between preserving entities that *encompass some aspect of existence* (time, space, and anything beyond) and preserving entities that *do not encompass some aspect of existence*. All other considerations being equal, it seems that the former should be one's preference. To illustrate why, let us consider an example: landmarks. Knowing nothing else about the nature of a landmark, people typically consider the spatial scope and longevity of landmarks to be a valuable quality – that is to say, all other considerations being equal, the size and endurance of a landmark are believed to contribute to its greatness. The Great Barrier Reef, the Great Wall of China, the Great Ocean Road: we describe such entities as *great* by virtue of their dimensions and age. This seems to be one reason why charitable organizations work so hard at protecting long-standing entities; 'Don't cut down that Great Basin Bristlecone Pine; it's 5,000 years old!'

Comparing Hill's justifications for the traditional attributes with our case for encompassment, it seems no less plausible that encompassment is a great-making property than power, knowledge, or goodness. I draw the following conclusion: if it is reasonable to believe that power, knowledge, and goodness are great-making properties, then it is also reasonable to hold that encompassment is a great-making property. The argument can be stated as follows.

- 1a. God holds all great-making properties to the highest possible degree. (Premise)
- 2a. It is reasonable to believe that power, knowledge, and goodness are great-making properties. (Premise)
- 3a. It is no less reasonable to believe that encompassment is a great-making property than it is to believe that power, knowledge, or goodness are great-making properties. (Premise)
- 4a. It is reasonable to believe that encompassment is a great-making property. (2a–3a)
- 5a. It is reasonable to believe that God holds power, knowledge, goodness, and encompassment to the highest possible degree. (Conclusion)

The argument for divine encompassment (1a–5a) demonstrates one of two things. First, the argument may indicate that the popular approach of perfect-being theologians (appealing to intuitions) is inadequate. If one were unconvinced by the argument presented, then – as the reasons offered for the greatness of encompassment are roughly as reasonable as the reasons for believing in God's power, knowledge, or goodness (3a) – being sceptical of God's encompassment means that one should be similarly sceptical of God's traditional attributes. For our current purposes, I accept the possibility that the argument is a *reductio*

of perfect-being theology, as my argument is premised on the sensibility of perfect-being theology. Second, the argument may give weight to a range of pan(en)theisms. If God holds power, knowledge, goodness, and encompassment to the highest possible degree, then it is reasonable to maintain that the world is identical or constitutes a proper part of God. In the following section, I develop and defend a particular version of this view – modal panentheism – and outline why modal panentheism ought to be preferred over other pan(en)theisms.

### Modal panentheism

Modal panentheism consists of two claims: first, that God encompasses all possible worlds and second, that there exists a substantial (or infinite) number of possible worlds. I take each claim in turn. Regarding the first claim, if it is reasonable to believe that encompassment is a great-making property, then – following perfect-being theology – it is reasonable to believe that our world is encompassed by God. This only gives us pantheism, which brings us to the second claim. The second claim concerns the ontological status of possible worlds: that God encompasses all possible worlds (a type of modal realism). According to modal realism, our world exists as part of all other possible worlds that also exist. To borrow from David Lewis, ‘These [other] worlds are something like remote planets; except that most of them are much bigger than mere planets, and they are not remote. ... There are so many other worlds, in fact, that absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is’ (1986, 2). It is this second claim that makes the view panentheistic. As Nagasawa puts it, ‘Modal panentheism is a version of panentheism rather than pantheism because it entails existence beyond the actual world which we inhabit, namely, other possible worlds. That is, the actual world is only a proper part of God’ (2016, 93). Like Nagasawa, I do not consider the panentheist label to be indispensable; I use the term only to distinguish between modal conceptions of God and traditional pantheism, where God is regarded as the totality of existents in our actual universe (Buckareff 2022, 8). I develop this view below, offering six points of clarification regarding the motivations and nature of modal panentheism.

The first point of clarification concerns why one ought to favour modal panentheism over other types of pan(en)theism. Nagasawa does not offer standalone arguments for believing that modal panentheism is true (direct motivations) but, instead, offers comparative reasons for preferring modal panentheism over other types of theism (indirect motivations). These indirect motivations include modal panentheism’s ability to solve the traditional problem of evil, the problem of no best possible world, and the fine-tuning problem (2016, 96–100). Michael Almeida concurs, suggesting that theistic modal realism offers solutions to the paradox of sufficient reason, the less-than-best problem, and the problem of arbitrariness (Almeida 2017a; 2017b, 8). Adding to this list, I maintain that modal panentheism is preferable to other pan(en)theisms because it involves a far greater being – that is, a being that encompasses not just everything actual but everything that is actual and possible. If God is the greatest metaphysically possible being, then the God of modal panentheism is more deserving of the label *God* than pan(en)theisms that restrict God’s existence to our actual world. A being that encompasses everything actual and possible is more encompassing than a being that encompasses what is actual and, therefore – as God must hold encompassment to the highest possible degree – modal panentheism should be preferred over pan(en)theisms that limit God to our world. Ultimately, modal panentheism relies on the coherence of (a type of) modal realism. Nevertheless, modal panentheism does not depend on there being independent arguments for modal realism outside of perfect-being theology. If modal realism can be deduced from the perfect-being thesis, and perfect-being theism is reasonable, then believing in (a type of) modal realism is reasonable.

Therefore, I maintain that the argument from perfect-being theology for modal panentheism may constitute part of a direct motivation for modal panentheism. Of course, to complete the case for modal panentheism, one must offer a proof for perfect-being theism, which shows that it is reasonable to believe in the entity specified by the perfect-being thesis. This is not, however, our current focus, which is to develop and defend the coherence of modal panentheism.

Second is the question of God's relationship with modal space – that is, how God is connected to the totality of possible worlds. I restrict my focus to three points of clarification, which are intended to reflect some of the core tenets of modal panentheism. First, it is not the case that modal space is prior to God and that – in virtue of being the greatest entity – modal space is, therefore, deserving of the label *God*. As stated, modal realism is derived from the perfect-being thesis and not by independent proofs for modal realism. The argument is as follows: if encompassment is a great-making property, then it is reasonable for perfect-being theists to be panentheistic modal realists. (I take perfect-being theology to be premised on the idea that we can derive extraordinary properties – such as omnipotence and omniscience – from the idea of the greatest metaphysically possible being.) As modal space is derived from the perfect-being thesis, it would be a mistake to say that God depends on possible worlds. On modal panentheism, all worlds depend on the existence of the perfect-being. Second, according to modal panentheism, modal space is not created by God; rather, God is wholly identical to modal space. There are pantheisms in which God creates and becomes partly identical with the world; modal panentheism is not such a view. On modal panentheism, the totality of modal space is the ground of reality. Modal space is, by definition, identical to God and, therefore, has no further cause. Third, modal panentheism does not result in a type of polytheism, where each world is separate and identical to a different god. Rather, on modal panentheism, the greatest metaphysically possible being is the entity that is identical to the totality of modal space. To take a Christian analogy, different worlds are part of God as different persons are part of the Trinity.

The third point of clarification concerns God's transcendence. According to classical theism, God is said to transcend the natural world, and such a view contradicts the central claim of modal panentheism, which understands God as partly identical to the natural world. Attempting to reconcile these positions, Nagasawa has argued that the God of modal panentheism is, in fact, transcendent – that is, God transcends our world by encompassing all other possible worlds (2016, 93). One problem with this approach is that God's transcendence is often understood as the consequence of divine simplicity (consisting of no parts) and immutability (not being subject to change). Therefore, if the natural world consists of parts and is subject to change, one may insist that Nagasawa's conception of transcendence is too weak: the perfect-being must be entirely separate from the natural world. I offer the following reply. Per modal realism, all possible states of affairs are realised across the totality of possible worlds. Therefore, if a world where nothing exists but a simple, immutable entity is conceivable, then there is an aspect of God that exists as a simple and immutable entity. Significantly, this understanding of divine transcendence is not unique to modal panentheism. Again, to take a Christian example, God the Father is simple and immutable, but God the Son is complex and changing. I take such a parallel to be sufficient, as my claim is that the problems faced by modal panentheism are no more significant than those faced by traditional theism.

Fourth is the question of whether possible worlds, on modal panentheism, are abstract or concrete entities. If possible worlds are abstract objects, then possible worlds are nothing over and above abstract states of affairs that are logically or metaphysically possible. Roughly put, if possible worlds are abstract, then God may constitute our actual world and, at the same time, encompass every abstract possible world by holding such worlds in Their mind or understanding. The abstract possible worlds approach has some merit.

For example, positing abstract (and not concrete) worlds is one way of resolving the tension between God's perfect goodness and the existence of modal evil (God knows of all the evils, but very few of these evils exist). However, following the tradition of perfect-being theology, we should accept that an entity that exists concretely is greater (and, in this case, more encompassing) than an entity that exists abstractly. To borrow from Anselm, 'For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater' (1076–8/1995, 100). Comparing a *totality of possible worlds that exist abstractly* with a *totality of possible worlds that exist concretely*, I take the latter to be intrinsically greater. Therefore, I proceed by understanding God's encompassment of possible worlds to be concrete.

Our fifth point of clarification is whether modal panentheists ought to posit, in addition to encompassment, other (traditional) attributes of God.<sup>4</sup> For a conception of God to qualify as a type of modal panentheism, God must encompass the totality of modal space, which includes a substantial number of possible worlds. With this definition in mind, let us say that modal panentheism *simpliciter* takes God to be essentially encompassing but not essentially powerful, knowledgeable, or good. I offer three reasons for not focusing on modal panentheism *simpliciter*. First, restricting God's nature to encompassment raises the question of how such a limitation could be justified. Of course, one might choose to posit modal panentheism *simpliciter* to solve otherwise intractable philosophical problems, such as the problem of arbitrariness or fine-tuning; however, this is a separate project from my own. In this article, my intention is not to posit a God to solve problems; rather, my goal is to develop and defend the coherence of an alternative concept of God. In doing so, like any philosophical theology, one must offer reasons and arguments for attributing some property to God – this is typically achieved by constructing arguments from creation theology, revelation theology, or perfect-being theology. The argument in this article comes from perfect-being theology. To make a case for modal panentheism *simpliciter* from perfect-being theology, however, one must show that goodness, power, and knowledge are not great-making properties; at the same time, they must show that encompassment is a great-making property. (The same applies to arguments from revelation and creation theology.) In each case, it is not clear how one could arrive at a conception of God that is encompassing but not powerful, knowledgeable, and good. Nagasawa's perfect-being panentheism avoids this task. Second, my focus in this article is to respond to the modal problem of evil, which is not levied against modal panentheism *simpliciter* but Nagasawa's conception of modal panentheism. Nagasawa summarizes the modal problem of evil as follows: 'How could the all-inclusive unity be *divine* if it includes all possible instances of evil[?]' (2024, 84).<sup>5</sup> The crux of the matter is God being *divine*. A being is *divine* if and only if it is 'maximally great' (Hill 2005, 2) – that is to say, a being is *divine* if they possess all great-making properties to the highest possible degree (Hill 2005, 7–13). I take this to be the origin of Nagasawa's modal problem of evil: a *divine* being must be maximally encompassing and maximally good. Third, I take Nagasawa's conception of modal panentheism to be a worthier object of worship, and more deserving of the label *God*, than the deity of modal panentheism *simpliciter*. A being who is essentially encompassing, powerful, knowledgeable, and good is greater than a being whose only essential property is encompassment. Therefore, as God must be the greatest being, one ought to defend a powerful, knowledgeable, good, and encompassing God over the deity of modal panentheism *simpliciter*.

Sixth is the nature of God's wider attributes. As we have seen, following the perfect-being thesis, modal panentheists ought to understand God as possessing all other great-making properties – such as power, knowledge, and goodness – to the maximal degree. How modal panentheists ought to understand God's other attributes is beyond our scope. The focus of this piece is to reconcile divine encompassment with perfect goodness; understanding God's knowledge and power in the context of modal panentheism requires its own discussion. In fact, further work will be required to understand the nature of modal

panentheism regarding each of the aforementioned clarifications. For our purposes, the account outlined above is sufficient for understanding and responding to (what is said to be) the strongest objection to modal panentheism: the modal problem of evil.

### The modal problem of evil

Nagasawa outlines what he takes to be a powerful case against modal panentheism: the modal problem of evil (2016, 100–103). The modal problem of evil can be presented as follows. According to modal panentheism, God encompasses all possible worlds and, therefore, God encompasses every possible instance of good and evil. Across the totality of possible worlds, a substantial or infinite amount, types of, and gratuitous evil are possible. (Let us call any world that contradicts God's perfect goodness an *evil world*.) As God encompasses evil worlds, God can be described as both substantially (or infinitely) good and substantially (or infinitely) evil. However, the greatest metaphysically possible being must possess all intrinsic great-making properties and no intrinsic bad-making properties and, therefore, can only be good (as goodness is a great-making property) and cannot be evil (as evil is a bad-making property) or both good and evil (as, again, evil is a bad-making property). The argument concludes that modal panentheism is self-defeating: an entity cannot be perfectly good and encompass every possible world. The argument has the following structure.

- 1b. According to modal panentheism, God is perfectly good and identical to all possible worlds. (Assumed for *reductio*)
- 2b. All possible worlds exist and across all possible worlds there exists a significant (or infinite) amount of concrete evil that contradicts God's perfect goodness. (Premise)
- 3b. If God is identical to a significant (or infinite) amount of concrete evil that contradicts God's perfect goodness, then it is not the case that God is perfectly good. (Premise)
- 4b. God is identical to a significant (or infinite) amount of concrete evil that contradicts God's perfect goodness. (1b–2b)
- 5b. It is not the case that God is perfectly good. (3b–4b)
- 6b. It is not the case that modal panentheism is true. (Conclusion)

Evaluating the argument, Nagasawa claims that the modal problem of evil is 'difficult to resolve' (2016, 96) and 'more intractable than any other forms of the problem of evil' (2016, 103). The source of the purported asymmetry is as follows. To address the problem of evil, traditional theists must explain how a perfectly good God is compatible with actual evil. In contrast, to solve the modal problem of evil, modal panentheists have to explain how a perfectly good God could be identical to all actual and possible evil. To be clear, modal space includes every evil state of affairs that is possible. As Nagasawa puts it, 'modal panentheism entails that there is, as part of God ... in which ... millions of innocent children are tortured for an extended period, possibly eternally, for no reason' (2016, 102). On the face of it, this seems like a powerful reason to reject modal panentheism as, to borrow from Richard Swinburne, 'Unending unchosen suffering would indeed to my mind provide a very strong argument against the existence of God' (1996, 106–107).

In the discussion that follows, I reject the purported asymmetry between the modal problem of evil and the traditional problem of evil. I do so by developing two solutions to the modal problem of evil, which I take to be analogous to responses to the traditional problem of evil. The first solution (*maximal-panentheism*) accepts that evil worlds exist but claims that God is not all-encompassing or that God is not perfectly good; this is a rejection of premise 1b. The second solution (*no evil worlds*) claims that evil worlds are not possible

worlds; this is a rejection of premise 2b. Each response constitutes a separate and sufficient solution to the modal problem of evil. Therefore, if one wishes to revive the modal problem of evil, one must reject both the *maximal-panentheism* solution and the *no evil worlds* solution.

### Maximal-panentheism

My first response to the modal problem of evil is the *maximal-panentheism* solution. I claim that the framework defended by Nagasawa in one area of his work (the maximal-God thesis) can be used to solve the problem he formulates against modal panentheism (the modal problem of evil). In his book *Maximal God* (2017) – published amidst his articles on the modal problem of evil (2014, 2016, 2024)<sup>6</sup> – Nagasawa offers the most developed account of the maximal-God thesis to date. Nagasawa argues that traditional perfect-being theologians make the ‘crucial mistake’ of committing to the ‘unnecessarily specific’ claim that the perfect-being thesis – that God possesses great-making properties to the highest possible degree – ought to result in the *omni-God* thesis over the *maximal-God* thesis (2017, 93). The maximal-God thesis states that, rather than God possessing individual great-making properties to the highest possible degree (the *omni-God* thesis), God will possess the maximal *consistent set* of great-making properties to the highest possible degree. That is to say, to quote Nagasawa directly, ‘while God is certainly very knowledgeable, very powerful and very benevolent, He might or might not be omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent’ (2016, 92).

The benefit of adopting the maximal-God approach is that, in responding to arguments against God’s existence, perfect-being theologians are able to correct their understanding of God’s attributes. To take an example, consider Nagasawa’s claim that the traditional problem of evil fails to threaten the maximal-God thesis:

The problem of evil is often presented as an objection to theism in general, but that is not correct. The argument is directed specifically against a version of theism which accepts the *omni God* thesis[.] (2016, 86) ... If the arguments show anything at all, they show merely that God according to perfect being theism, i.e. the being than which no greater is metaphysically possible, is not an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being, which is, given the maximal God thesis, consistent with perfect being theism (2016, 93).

Rather than being a reason to reject God’s existence, Nagasawa understands the traditional problem of evil as a way of understanding the degree to which God possesses great-making properties. I claim that this same approach can be adopted by modal panentheists in response to the modal problem of evil.

According to *maximal-panentheism*, God is said to possess the best consistent set of great-making properties, including goodness and encompassment. By adopting the maximal-God approach, maximal-panentheists sidestep the modal problem of evil as traditional theists do the problem of evil – that is to say, rather than being a reason to reject modal panentheism, the modal problem of evil becomes a means of understanding God’s attributes. Responding to the modal problem of evil, panentheists are able to amend their understanding of God’s properties in one of two ways. First, modal panentheists may claim that the greatest metaphysical being does not encompass evil worlds, as encompassing evil worlds decreases God’s overall greatness. Second, modal panentheists may claim that encompassing evil worlds increases God’s overall greatness (in virtue of God’s greater encompassment) and, therefore, the greatest metaphysical being is not perfectly good. In both cases, modal

panentheists need not abandon their position but refine their understanding of God's attributes.

The first premise of the modal problem of evil (1b) states that, according to modal panentheism, God is perfectly good and identical to all possible worlds. However, as we have seen, modal maximal-panentheists are justified in offering an alternative interpretation of the perfect-being thesis: premise 1b\* and not premise 1b.

1b\*. According to modal panentheism, God possesses the best combination of goodness and encompassment. (Premise)

By introducing our amended premise (1b\*) in place of the original (1b), the modal problem of evil loses its validity. The strongest conclusion one may draw from a modal problem of evil (1b\*–6b) is that God cannot be *both* perfectly good and encompass every possible world.

I end this section by considering an objection to the maximal-panentheism solution. The objection claims that limiting God's attributes gives rise to a dilemma: whether modal panentheists ought to limit God's goodness or God's encompassment. On the one hand, restricting God's encompassment may result in God not encompassing all possible worlds and, consequently, God's existence being contingent. If God exists contingently (does not exist across all possible worlds), then modal panentheism (where God constitutes all possible worlds) may be incoherent. On the other hand, limiting God's goodness – that is, accepting that God is identical to evil worlds – may result in God falling below the threshold for goodness. By encompassing both good and evil worlds, God may be better described as *evil or good and evil*. As the perfect-being thesis specifies that God must possess all great-making properties and no bad-making properties, limiting God's goodness might also result in the incoherence of modal panentheism.

I respond to the dilemma directly: maximal-panentheists ought to limit God's encompassment and not God's goodness. There are three reasons for this. First, perfect-being theology seems to favour goodness over encompassment. Recycling Pike's game, choosing between the entity behind the *good* door and the *encompassing* door, the intuitive value judgement seems to be that one ought to preserve the *good* entity over the *encompassing* entity. (This is one reason why Christians take goodness to be God's most important attribute.) Second, limitations on God's goodness are more likely to undermine the perfect-being thesis than limitations on God's encompassment. The perfect-being thesis maintains that God must possess all great-making properties and no bad-making properties. However, there is a higher threshold for goodness than there is for encompassment. In order to be *good*, one needs to be significantly more good than they are evil. In contrast, something that *encompasses* need not exist across large swathes of space or time – that is, a minimally encompassing entity is still an encompassing entity. Therefore, limiting goodness and not encompassment risks God falling below the threshold for goodness and, consequently, failing to possess all great-making properties. Third, restricting God's encompassment does not undermine the coherence – that is, our definition of – modal panentheism. Within the dilemma, God is defined as the being who encompasses every possible world (1b). However, on maximal-panentheism, God is said to be the being who possesses the greatest combination of goodness and encompassment (1b\*). Therefore, properly understood, maximal-panentheism is not threatened by our proposed dilemma. Our definition does give rise to a further question: if God does not constitute the ontological foundation of evil worlds, then what does? Response: the question of what grounds evil worlds is a hypothetical for those who claim that evil worlds exist. If the opponent of maximal-panentheism were to offer independent reasons for the existence of evil worlds, then it is modal realists and not modal panentheists who are required to explain the nature and foundations

of such worlds. Alternatively, as modal panentheists posit the existence of possible worlds by way of the perfect-being thesis, they may claim that evil worlds do not exist (see *no evil worlds*). So long as evil worlds are not partly identical to God, modal panentheism remains coherent.

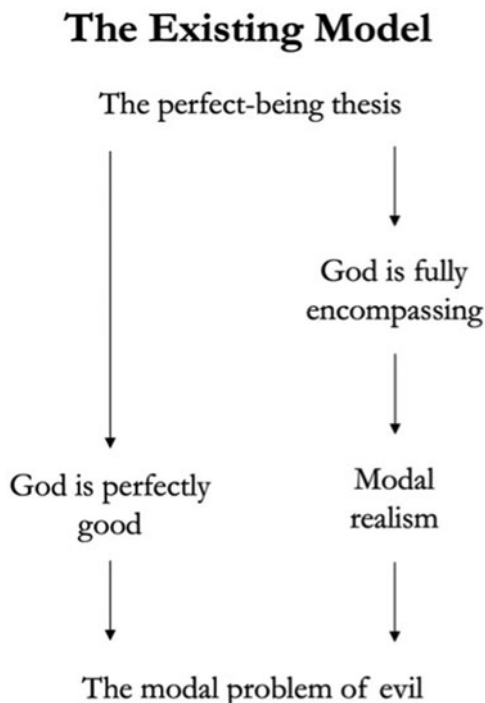
### No evil worlds

In this section, I outline a second solution to the modal problem of evil, which claims that evil worlds are not possible worlds. It is worth noting that this approach does not rely on the maximal-God thesis; however, the argument developed in this section is wholly compatible with maximal-panentheism – that is, maximal-panentheists that take God to be necessary can make use of the no evil worlds response in the same way as omni-panentheists. The argument states that God's necessity, essential goodness, and essential encompassment rule out the possibility of evil worlds, for if God did encompass evil worlds, then this would bring about a contradictory state of affairs. Therefore, according to the no evil worlds response, modal panentheists ought to deny the existence of evil worlds (3b) – that is to say, according to the no evil worlds solution, all possible worlds must, by definition, reflect God's perfect goodness.

The no evil worlds solution is analogous to other arguments in the philosophy of religion, including responses to the multiverse problem of evil and the dilemma of God's sinning. The problem of God's sinning asks whether God could exercise the power to sin or whether God is incapable of sinning. If God has the power to sin, then perfect goodness cannot be an essential property of God; however, if God lacks the power to sin, then God cannot be all-powerful. In response to the dilemma, traditional theists have claimed that perfect goodness is an essential property of God, which means that it is logically impossible for God to sin (Swinburne 2024, 14). Others have argued that God possesses the power to sin but that it is metaphysically necessary that in no possible world God could perform any act that is incompatible with God's perfect goodness (Goff 2020, 11). The same approach may be adopted by the modal panentheism: evil worlds are logically or metaphysically impossible by virtue of God's perfect goodness.<sup>7</sup>

A comparable discussion is taking place in the theistic multiverse literature. Theistic multiverse theorists maintain that only our actual world exists, that God is not partly or wholly identical to our world, and that our universe exists as part of a multiverse (Doko 2024; Forrest 1981; Kraay 2010; Turner 2014). While modal panentheists must address the modal problem of evil, multiverse theists face their own version of the argument: the multiverse problem of evil. According to the multiverse problem of evil, if there are a substantial number of concrete universes that contradict God's perfect goodness, then it is highly unlikely that God created a multiverse. Responding to the multiverse problem of evil, multiverse theists such as Klaas Kraay have denied the existence of universes that are unworthy of God's creation (2010, 362). For Kraay, a being who creates evil universes would be surpassed by a being who would not create evil universes and, therefore – as God is the greatest metaphysically possible being – God would not allow for evil universes (2010, 362). Kraay's solution is similar to our no evil worlds solution. However, modal panentheism has some notable advantages. Once sympathetic to Kraay's view (Almeida 2017b, 6), Almeida has argued that if God must create the multiverse by *necessity* (as held by Kraay), then God is unable to choose between universes that are characterised by good or evil (2017c). Almeida writes:

Divine creation could not be – as the multiverse theorist envisions it – a moral decision reflecting the perfect goodness of a creator. That is not at all what transpires



**Figure 1.** The existing model

during creation. The necessarily actualised multiverse – for all multiverse theorists can coherently tell us – might include nothing but intrinsically bad universes. (2017c, 10)

This may be a problem for theistic multiverse theorists, but it is not a problem for modal panentheists. Modal panentheists accept that God cannot choose between worlds that are worthy or unworthy of creation; after all, unlike proponents of the theistic multiverse, which sees God as the creator of the multiverse, modal panentheists understand God to be identical to the totality of possible worlds. Nagasawa construes this as a problem: ‘multiverse pantheists cannot appeal to a similar idea [(that is, God as a creator)] to exclude universes that are not overall good because they do not view God as such a being’ (2024, 89). In contrast, I take modal panentheism’s lack of a creator to be a strength. On modal panentheism, the reason why evil worlds are impossible worlds is not that God chooses which worlds to create; rather, if God encompasses all possible worlds, they must be good in virtue of God’s necessity and essential goodness. Opponents of modal panentheism appear to overlook this detail. I suggest they do so because they assume God encompasses every world that is identified by non-theistic modal realism. I illustrate below how the existing model (Figure 1), endorsed (*mutatis mutandis*) by Almeida and Nagasawa, differs from my own (Figure 2).

The existing model fails to establish modal panentheism – instead, it results in the modal problem of evil – as it takes modal realism to be the consequence of God’s encompassment. In contrast, the alternative model proposes that one ought to derive a type of *theistic* modal realism from the perfect-being thesis, which defines modal space (God’s nature) in accordance with God’s other properties, including goodness. See Figure 2.

## The Alternative Model

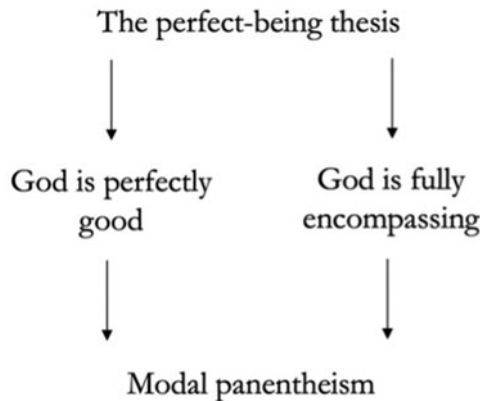


Figure 2. The alternative model

Like traditional theologians, modal panentheists may claim that perfect goodness is an essential property of God. Therefore, as God encompasses every possible world, it is logically (or metaphysically) impossible for there to be a concrete world that contradicts God's perfect goodness. Similarly, like proponents of the theistic multiverse, modal panentheists may deny the existence of evil worlds; however, unlike theistic multiverse theorists, they do so because the totality of possible worlds is necessarily identical to God.

I end this section by developing and responding to three objections to the no evil worlds solution. The first objection states that, according to modal realism, evil worlds are possible worlds. Therefore, by denying the existence of evil worlds, modal panentheism fails to be a form of modal realism. In other words, given the severe limitations that modal panentheism places on modal space, panentheists are unjustified in understanding modal panentheism as a type (or endorsement) of modal realism. I respond to the first objection as follows. In the case of limiting modal space, one ought to accept that modal panentheism is significantly more limiting of logical and metaphysical possibilities than secular forms of modal realism. Moreover, one should accept that modal panentheism is not the same as unqualified modal realism. To be clear: modal panentheism is not an endorsement of unqualified modal realism (see Figure 2). The objection – that modal panentheism is not modal realism – is only directed at those who take modal panentheism to be synonymous with, rather than a type of, modal realism.

The second objection claims that evil worlds are both negatively conceivable (they are *a priori* coherent) and positively conceivable (roughly, that we can imagine their existence) and, therefore, modal panentheists are unjustified in restricting their understanding of modal possibility. An analogous objection is offered in another of Almeida's papers against the theistic multiverse (2020). Responding to Plantinga (1977, 21) and Keith Yandell (1989, 17), Almeida argues that God could not guarantee the impossibility of gratuitous evil. Almeida writes: 'Here we arrive at the central problem. No one could bring it about that S [(S being a state of affairs that is gratuitously evil)] is impossible since S is necessarily possible. It is necessarily true that S obtains somewhere in metaphysical space, no matter what God does' (2020, 132).

We saw a similar argument from Almeida in response to Kraay's defence of the theistic multiverse. For Almeida, gratuitous evil is a necessary feature of modal space and, therefore,

gratuitous evil must be possible. The same argument can be used against our no evil worlds response: if modal realism is true, then gratuitous evil is necessarily possible, and, therefore, it must exist somewhere in the pluriverse. I offer the following response. In addressing the claim that modal space includes the necessary possibility of gratuitous evil, I maintain that the objection misinterprets the project of modal perfect-being panentheism. Almeida's understanding of modal space is based on a secular understanding of modal rationalism, in which possibilities across modal space are non-identical to God. However, modal panentheists derive their understanding of modal space from the perfect-being thesis and not through independent (secular) arguments for modal realism. In other words, panentheists posit modal space as the consequence of God's encompassment and, furthermore, posit that modal space is overall good in virtue of God's perfect goodness. If one's motivation for believing in concrete possible worlds comes from the perfect-being thesis, then evil worlds are not negatively conceivable, as they contain *a priori* contradictions: that is, evil worlds would be both perfectly good (God) and gratuitously evil (not-God).

The third and final objection states that our actual world is an evil world. The objection begins by identifying the existence of some actual evil – a significant amount of, type of, or gratuitous evil – which is said to contradict God's perfect goodness. According to the critic, as our world meets our definition of what it is to be an evil world (one that contradicts God's goodness), evil worlds are possible worlds and, therefore, the no evil worlds solution fails to address the modal problem of evil. I offer the following reply. The central claim of this article is that the modal problem of evil is no more of a challenge for modal panentheists than the problem of evil is for traditional theists. As the problem of actual evil is no more of a problem for modal panentheism than it is for traditional theism, the objection fails to undermine our central thesis: that the modal problem of evil is no more dangerous than the traditional problem of evil. It is worth noting that, taken in isolation, actual evil may constitute a reason for adopting maximal-panentheism or some alternative worldview, such as secular modal realism or modal panentheism *simpliciter*. At the same time, modal panentheists may offer adapted versions of traditional theodicies and defences that could resolve the problem of actual evil. Alas, such considerations take us too far afield. Still, they are worthy of further investigation, as the modal problem of evil appears to be no more dangerous than the traditional problem of evil.

## Conclusion

In this article, I responded to the modal problem of evil on behalf of modal panentheism. I began by outlining an argument for modal panentheism from perfect-being theology. I claimed that it is no less reasonable to believe that encompassment is a great-making property than God's traditional attributes. I proceeded to clarify the nature of modal panentheism before outlining the modal problem of evil. Following Nagasawa, we saw why the modal problem of evil might be considered more intractable for modal panentheists than the problem of evil for traditional theists. Rejecting Nagasawa's claim, I developed two solutions to the modal problem of evil. The first solution drew from the maximal-God thesis; on maximal-panentheism, we saw how refining our understanding of God's encompassment allows modal panentheists to avoid the modal problem of evil. The second solution proposed that evil worlds are not possible worlds; we saw that no possible worlds (that is, part of God) could fail to reflect God's perfect goodness by virtue of God's necessity and essential encompassment. In the light of the proposed solutions, I maintain that there is no significant asymmetry between the efficacy of the modal problem of evil against modal panentheism and the problem of evil against traditional theism. For these reasons, I contend that modal panentheism is a promising worldview that warrants further scholarly attention.

## Notes

1. I extend my gratitude to all who contributed to this project, especially Ellie Palmer (University of Edinburgh) and Matthew Robson (Durham University) for organizing workshops on the paper. Special thanks to Philip Goff, Paul Taylor, Emily Thomas, Matthew Tugby, and the anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* for their invaluable feedback.
2. Nagasawa calls this *the problem of evil for modal panentheism* (2016). Given my focus on modal panentheism, to be concise, I refer to this same problem as *the modal problem of evil*.
3. Rogers maintains that the same is true of process theologians, who believe ‘God is best in virtue of being engage with the created universe and capable of becoming better than He is’ (2000, 2).
4. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who raised this important point of clarification.
5. My emphasis.
6. In two of these papers (2014, 2024), Nagasawa discusses the multiverse pantheism and not modal panentheism; I discuss them as a collective, however, as Nagasawa takes their differences to be ‘mostly terminological’ (2024, 76).
7. A similar argument, in defence of traditional theism, is proposed by Morris (1987, 48–56).

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