THE MANY WAYS GOD IS: ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM AND TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THEISM

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Abstract. Traditional Christianity holds that God is a singular way, not dependent on the conceptual machinations of humans. I argue that God can be plural ways, different in different human conceptual schemes, all the while holding to traditional Christianity. In short, I provide a framework for an ontological pluralism that extends not just to the world being various ways but to God being various ways.

Noetic irrealism holds that the world is made or shaped in significant ways (beyond the making of artifacts or new ideas) by the noetic activity of humans. Ontological pluralism is the view that there are many ways the world is, where those ways conflict with one another when taken together. Typically ontological pluralism depends on some sort of noetic irrealism. Most commonly pluralism depends on the notion that humans have various conceptual schemes or, more generally, symbol systems in virtue of which we have distinct and conflicting ontologies.[1]

Typically traditional Christians simply reject the notion that God's being itself is in any way made by human noetic feats. In contrast, revisionist Christians often think of God as wholly noetically irreal and even radically dependent upon human noetic work.[2] Such Christians think of God in noncognitive *qua* emotivist terms, as cognitive but as a human conceptual construct or, finally, where pluralistic, as a human construct who appears in some ways the world is and not in others. Pluralists who are thinking

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[1] For recent defenses, see Michael Lynch, *Truth in Context,* Boston: MIT Press, 1998; Steven Hales, *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Boston: MIT Press, 2006; and Nelson Goodman: *Ways of Worldmaking,* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978.

[2] Here we might think of the emotivist theologies of the the 1950s or the more contemporary work of theologians such as Gordon Kaufman.

as metaphysicians rather than theologians often do not explicitly apply the claims of pluralism to God at all. When they do, typically they take the last mentioned route.[3]

God's existing in some but not all ways the world is is itself enough to cause the traditional Christian to have sleepless nights. Her concerns are cogent enough. How could the creator of all exist only in some ontologies when all the ontologies provide for true descriptions? Furthermore, when it comes to God the traditionalist typically rejects the noetic irrealism on which most pluralist accounts depend. Noetic irrealism about God is a position involving some hubris.[4]

In what follows I ask how God's being might be shaped by humans without thereby vitiating the claim that God is the creator of all. I attempt to work within the traditional Christian framework. In part, my motivation is a concern for Christian unity. Within traditional Christianity, various ways of thinking of God are supposed to be consistent with the Ecumenical creeds. For example, various proposals are made about God's relationship with time or God's knowledge of future contingents. More directly Christian concerns are the ways Christians think of the atonement or the nature of salvation. If my proposal finds success, it turns out that God is many ways and all of them are capable of being truly described even though the descriptions, taken together, are incompatible.

Pluralism: Some Terminology, Distinctions, Disclaimers

Here are my assumptions. First, there are good reasons and motivations for the claims of pluralism beside the brief one just proposed. Second, there is only one world containing various conceptual schemes eventuating in plural ways the world is. I use the term „World" (upper case) for the singular world and the term „worlds" (lower case) for the many ways the World is. Third, if things are made by human noetic feats, they are made relative to rather than in virtue of noetic frameworks.[5] What I mean is analogous (but only

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[3] Steven Hales, for example, presents three perspectives, only one of which explicitly includes God. Each perspective, however, he claims contains true propositions. See his *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Boston: MIT Press, 2006. Nelson Goodman and Michael Lynch mention God but do not deal directly with how God might be understood in their pluralisms.

[4] See Alvin Plantinga, „How to Be an Antirealist," *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association,* vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 47-70.

[5] The basic distinction of „relative to" vs. „in virtue of" is referred to by Michael Lynch. Lynch borrows it from Ernst Sosa. My way of unpacking the distinction, however, is my

analogous) to someone building a house with materials at hand (relative to) vs. someone creating, *ex nihilo*, that same house (in virtue of). That there is anything at all is not due to human creativity but to God's. God provides what we might say are the noumenal materials of the world which humans shape into various things. In answer to the question, „if there were no humans would there still be stars?" the answer is „no, there would be no stars but there would still be a World."

Borrowing from the pluralist work of Michael Lynch, let's say that the worlds are rooted in competing conceptual schemes embedded in competing world views.[6] The plurality of conceptual schemes *cum* worlds does not entail that we do not share the same World. Across various conceptual schemes we share the same thin concepts that are then thickened into robust concepts within specific conceptual schemes. For example, philosophers working on the nature of the human mind all share the same thin concept of the mind—they are concerned to describe the thing that thinks.[7] Materialists and dualists, however, have different thick concepts and hence the materialist's ontology is distinct from (and incompatible with) the dualist's. Lynch observes too that the relativisation of truth to conceptual schemes does not entail that there are no truths across conceptual schemes. Here Lynch introduces the notion of a virtual absolute which is one that holds across all conceptual schemes but independent of none.

A minimal realist account of truth is consistent with the pluralist structure. Shunning epistemic accounts of truth, the pluralist can maintain objectivity by holding the minimal notion that what makes some statement A true is the world and not any epistemic contribution on our part. A realist account of truth also eschews deflationary views by holding truth to be a property. Holding a realist account of truth provides a clear way for logical terms to hold across worlds. The law of noncontradiction isn't lost. The realist account of truth also meshes well with a fairly rich intensional account of modalities.

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own. See Lynch, „Pluralism, Metaphysical Realism, and Ultimate Reality," in W.P. Alston, *Realism and Antirealism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[6] The pluralism I'm using is heavily reliant on Michael Lynch's account found in *Truth in Context*, Boston: MIT Press, 1998. Lynch would not approve of my use the the term „world", although it is close the spirit of his account. He claims that there is a singular actual world with many conceptual schemes and concomitant and incompatible ontologies.

[7] This is Lynch's example. See *Truth in Context,* p. 67.

Virtual Absolutes and God

We might say that the problem for the traditional Christian who allows for God to be made by human noetic work is simply that God makes humans, not humans God. To respond, I turn to a parallel problem found in all universal pluralistic irrealisms, viz. that if the worlds are made by humans, then humans make themselves. Whence humans given irrealism? If what is depends on human noetic work, then humans themselves are irreal. This challenge is not so large once we remember that the noetic makings are „relative-to" rather than „in-virtue-of" makings. That is, it is plausible to think that there is a World and that humans, in a thin sense, are in the World and then shaped by our own noetic work into thicker versions in various worlds. Humans thus make aspects of ourselves without creating ourselves *ex nihilo*. But how did humans in the thin sense get here? The theistic answer is obvious: God.

Let's say God creates humans *ex nihilo* and places us into the World with the capacity to shape and make various things. Let's also say God makes humans with a core being (our thin sense)—with consciousness, creativity and freedom. God's having made us that way doesn't determine all the details of how those thin properties can be thickened up. As thinly conceptualized, consciousness, creativity and freedom hold across the various conceptual schemes. In this thin sense, humans—the very humans God creates and sustains—are absolutes.

Typically an absolute is thought to be a fact that holds or a proposition that is true independent of conceptual schemes. Following Lynch, in ontological pluralism absolutes can be replaced by virtual absolutes. A virtual absolute exists in every conceptual scheme or, put alternatively, is a proposition that is true in every conceptual scheme.[8] Let's say it is a virtual absolute that murder is wrong. Thus, „murder is wrong" is true in every conceptual scheme because humans conceptualize things that way. On this model, if humans began to conceptualize things in other terms, something could cease to be a virtual absolute. Virtual absolutes turn out to be contingent on human conceptual work.

While that may be acceptable for some things, on the Christian view murder should always turn out to be wrong. Hence its being wrong shouldn't depend *simply* on how we conceptualize things. Some sort of external constraint is needed. Parallel to this point about ethical realities, the traditional

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[8] Lynch says there are both factual and propositional virtual absolutes but we can safely ignore the distinction for our purposes. See *Truth in Context*, p. 24 ff.

Christian will think about humans themselves similarly. It would be odd if humans could simply cease to be by mere conceptual fiat. It appears that some things must be absolutes according to traditional Christianity and not merely virtual absolutes, at least where the latter are understood as completely dependent on human noetic work.

As it is with humans, so it is with God. God cannot be merely a virtual absolute if we preserve traditional Christianity. God will have to be an old-fashioned absolute. How then can the traditional Christian successfully propose that humans can shape God's being when that is contrary to God's being an unrestricted absolute?

First, note that pluralists have in general been concerned with human conceptual schemes and have not attempted to include God alongside human noetic world-makers. Indeed, pluralists typically overlook the idea that God's own being can be understood as relative to God's conceptual scheme. From the fact that God is not dependent on human noetic work, it doesn't follow that God's noetic work plays no role in God's being. On this suggestion, from a human point of view God is noetically real but from a divine point of view God is noetically irreal. God depends on the divine conceptual scheme.

The same can be said of humans. We are (thinly) noetically real from the point of view of human noetic feats but noetically irreal from the point of view of God. Our irreality, however, is not just a „relative-to" but also an „in-virtue-of" irreality. God creates us *ex nihilo* and sustains our thin being. How we are thickly in various worlds is up to us. We take the thin, core way God makes us and thicken it up in different ways in different worlds. In contrast, God doesn't create God's self in virtue of God's conceptual scheme, that is, *ex nihilo.* Instead, God's being is merely relative to the divine conceptual scheme. Let me propose also that the way in which God is relative to God's conceptual scheme applies primarily to God's thin or core being. Just as humans are made conscious and free (if thinly so), I propose that God has a core being as well (let's say, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent). So both the human and the divine core are what they are because of a relationship to God's conceptual work; the former created *ex nihilo* via God's thoughts, the latter not created but shaped relative to God's thoughts.

In the end everything is irreal without undercutting the essential point that God is the fundamental source of all that is and without making God dependent on humans. Some new terminology is helpful. If to be noetically real is simply to be independent of human noetic work, then both humans and God are noetically real at their core being. But we can distinguish between human irrealism and divine irrealism. Typically the irrealism phi-

losophers consider is human irrealism, that is, that things are what they are relative to human conceptual schemes. On those terms God and humans are real. But on divine irrealism, things are what they are (thinly) relative to God's conceptual scheme. Thus if we claim that everything is divinely noetically irreal, including God and humans, we need not claim that God or humans are dependent upon human noetic work itself, at least at their core. Furthermore, humans are what they are at their core by God's noetic work but contingently so, while God is what God is at the divine core by divine noetic work but necessarily so.

A deep sense of mystery surrounds God, but not so much that we understand nothing. Our understanding of God is fundamentally reliant on God's working in us. What this might come to for the traditional Christian who wants to be a pluralist can be put simply. Our understanding of God is heavily embedded in the ontology of the divine being. Indeed, the Christian worldview suggests that God provides the means via which humans can understand the divine. God is as God is revealed to humans. But one aspect of that revelation is the human contribution to how God is. That, in fact, is how we can understand God at all. God's being is shaped by us and therefore we can grasp it comparatively readily. We have an accurate, if incomplete, divine story.

From one point of view, I'm saying nothing novel in talking of God's revelation to us. Even when theologians are noetic realists (both human and divine) about God and the World, God is taken to be understandable to humans because of God's role. That is not to say we understand God's ultimate nature. We see God's effects but not God's essence; we see through a glass darkly. God is beyond human conceptual schemes and yet in them.

Two important questions arise here. First, what is the relationship between God's conceptual scheme and human schemes? Second, how do human conceptual schemes shape the proposed various ways God is?

Conceptual Schemes: Human and Divine

I've said that God is beyond human conceptual schemes not in the sense that God exists completely outside of them but in a sense similar (but not identical) to how humans exist outside human conceptual schemes. How is this to be fleshed out?

First note that we do not create ourselves but with our coming to be, human conceptual schemes are made. There is a dependency and a necessary order at work here. Human conceptual schemes do not exist independent of

human persons. The scheme depends on the human. This logical order need not be either temporal or causal. Humans are not placed in the World first and then at some later time made the source of their conceptual schemes. Humans are essentially rational and hence cannot be human without a conceptual scheme. Yet although humans do not cause the existence of their conceptual schemes they can cause some of its structure, its thickenings. This is because humans are free.

Since humans and their conceptual schemes come as a bundle, it is true to say that humans always exist within their conceptual schemes. This can sound truistic, coming to nothing more than the claim that to be human is to have a human conceptual scheme. I mean to claim more than that. No matter what conceptual scheme a human works within, she cannot bring about the nonexistence of human persons (by conceptual fiat alone) even though we recognize human contingency. This contrasts with other things, some of which exist in some schemes and some of which do not. Humans can bring about the stars, so to speak, but they cannot bring about themselves. Theoretically, at least, humans can bring about the demise of stars by losing the concept „star" but humans can never lose the concept „human." Although humans always exist within their conceptual schemes, the latter do not cause the former to exist or vice versa. Humans are found in every human conceptual scheme but not caused by them. Humans do not create themselves. Similarly, the divine conceptual scheme does not exist independent of God nor vice versa. This does not entail that the divine conceptual scheme creates God nor even that God creates the divine conceptual scheme in the sense that it is voluntaristic, although again, the structure or details can, I propose, be determined by God.

Second, if we are to build an irrealism consistent with traditional Christianity, we must maintain that humans do not make God in God's core being, anymore than humans can make themselves in their core being. At the end of the ontological day, both God and humans are required to be causally independent of human noetic work for there to be a World or worlds.[9] Humans cannot create themselves or God on the traditional Christian model but both humans and God can fall within the sphere of God's irrealistic focus. Note that if a noetically real God in a noetically real universe can support a noetically real human who (pro-)creates things like tables and chairs, then a God who is necessarily embedded in the divine conceptual scheme

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[9] I do not mean to deny here that some worlds are purely divine, that is, made completely by God without human aid. I mean only to speak of worlds in which the human mind has a creative role.

(but not caused by it) can support a human who is necessarily embedded in her conceptual scheme (but not caused by it) who then (pro-)creates things (such as stars) in her world. In short, the logic of God's creation and human pro-creation for the theistic irrealist is no more difficult than the logic of God's creation and human pro-creation for the theistic realist. When we say that God makes everything we don't deny that daddy makes dinner, on either model.

Of course, on the Christian story, God's ontic role is more primary than humanity's ontic role in that God is the fundamental creator. Humans are contingent at their core; God is not. God has being without humans whereas humans do not have being without God. Yet both are ontological givens (at their core) in world-making. We are humanly noetically real in that we do not create our core selves via our conceptual schemes. But we are the noetic creations of God and thus divinely irreal.

Third, no amount of divine conceptual work will do away with God. I've noted that no amount of human conceptual work (alone) will do away with humans. That would be to suggest that in the case of humans, human conceptual schemes causally bring about humans. I've denied this. What of God's case? It is a little different. To suggest that God can do away with God by divine noetic fiat is to suggest that the divine conceptual scheme causally brings about God. I've affirmed instead that the notion that God is part and parcel with certain aspects of God's conceptual scheme. These are logical and necessary connections and not causal.

Fourth, human conceptual schemes are socially rooted, dependent upon the social nature of humans. God too is social, being both a Trinity of Persons and, once humans are made, inextricably bound up with human social life. God's creation of humans entails a new set of relationships for God, relationships in which humans and God together shape the ways things are, including humans and God. This sociality is shared across conceptual schemes. This is a central point, for not only are human conceptual schemes involved, but the divine as well. Here is the key to understanding how God can be outside human conceptual schemes and yet in them. God is self-existent. Humans are contingent. But insofar as God's conceptual framework overlaps with ours, which I think it must once God creates us, God's being is in our frameworks. God makes us in the divine image. We share God's creativity, reasonableness, emotional capacity and sociality. God is transcendent, that is, not dependent on our conceptual schemes for existence at God's core being. God is, in short, beyond us. But God is also immanent with us. Just as humans show up in all the worlds, so does God. But God and humans are made immanent by our social sharing of the means

of making the rest of the things in the various worlds there are. Looked at from the „outside," God and humans are absolutes, not dependent on human conceptual schemes. Without God and humans there would simply be nothing at all. But because God and humans bring conceptual schemes into being (logically), neither God nor humans can be without being virtual absolutes, both human or divine.

Some clarification is needed. God and humans, in their core natures, are virtual absolutes who, of necessity, exist within the conceptual schemes we humans have. And that makes God and humans human virtual absolutes, that is, things that are relative to (but not in virtue of) every human conceptual scheme, at least so far as core being is concerned. There cannot be a human conceptual scheme without God—a new twist on Anselm's take on the psalmist's fool. But God is also relative to the divine conceptual scheme and hence God is not merely a human virtual absolute but a divine one. Humans are not virtually absolute outside the human conceptual schemes, however, for we are contingent. Hence, there need be no human conceptual schemes and thus no humans.

Fifth and finally, I noted above that humans cannot do away with themselves or God conceptually. It might be thought, however, that God can do away with humans and our conceptual schemes. Yet moral obligations come into play here and so although it seems that God can simply 'undo" the worlds, emptying the World of humans from a logical point of view, from a moral point of view God cannot. Once having made humans, God is stuck with us. It follows that God, insofar as God is shaped by humans in the various worlds we make, is dependent on our conceptual schemes, that is, is relative to our conceptual schemes. Once God makes us, God cannot be free of us. Since God always reveals the divine being to us, we always have God in our conceptual schemes.

God's Freedom and Divine Necessities

Some more detail on God's conceptual scheme and how it relates to God's being may be helpful. The first thing to note is that God's conceptual scheme should be thought to include what we typically think of as necessities. A goodly number of abstract entities are thought of as necessities, including properties, numbers, propositions, and possible worlds.[10] Since these

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[10] The status of propositions, given the way I've proposed we think about truth, may need to be considered in detail, but that is best taken up in a separate project.

things are necessities, they, like God, always exist. I already indicated that the divine conceptual scheme is logically dependent upon God and hence although created by God, they are created in a special sort of way, flowing out of God's being rather than out of God's free choice and causality. Thus, God's conceptual scheme can't be other than the way it is, at least insofar as we are considering necessities.

Second, theologically Christians say that God made the World and, as such, the World is contingent in contrast to God who is necessary. It is an easy move from this theological talk to the philosophical description that the actual world is identical to the causally created world. It is not. The created order is typically thought of as contingent whereas the actual world contains lots of necessities besides God. God accomplishes two kinds of creation. First is the freely chosen creation containing things that could have been otherwise. Second is the necessitated creation containing things that could not have been otherwise. Humans need not have been actualized. Numbers, on the other hand, are necessities. So in addition to God creating necessities, it looks like aspects of God's conceptual scheme are in some respects freely created—made out of nothing. While God must think of numbers (because of God's nature) and in God's thinking of them they are what they are, God need not think of humans or, more circumspectly, God may think of humans without instantiating them.

Taking a slightly more detailed look at the necessary aspects of creation we note that numbers, along with properties, propositions, possible worlds and, of course, God, are necessities. Of this list, only God is concrete; the others are abstract. Abstract entities are sometimes thought to have a sort of „in-between" status, being neither contingent nor necessary. Consider numbers. Typically it is denied that numbers are human mental entities. It is also typically denied that they are material objects or some feature of material objects. How should the Christian think of numbers?

On the Christian worldview, God creates all the non-divine necessities. Numbers, propositions, and properties thus exist independent of contingent beings such as humans. Whence the necessity of numbers (or propositions or properties)? Three suggestions are typically made about this from within theism. First, necessities might be thoughts in the mind of God generated by God's will (a sort of Cartesian approach). Second, they might be identical to God as the Medievals might have suggested following their doctrine of simplicity. A third possibility—sometimes called „theistic activism"—is that abstracta are simply God's thoughts and given God's nature, some thoughts flow automatically from God's being. So when God thinks, God

thinks about necessities, that is, about numbers, propositions, and possible worlds.

Without exploring details, I'll just note my inclination to think theistic activism the superior of the three. Given God's necessary but concrete existence, as well as God's rational nature, some things other than God exist necessarily simply because God thinks them. Alvin Plantinga, Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris[11] all suggest that abstract objects are „in the mind of God." Plantinga suggests that propositions do not exist independent of God's noetic activity—they are God's thoughts. Menzel and Morris claim that in theistic activism[12] „all properties and relations are God's concepts, the products, or perhaps better, the contents of a divine intellective activity, a causally efficacious or productive sort of divine conceiving."[13] If these philosophers are correct, then the non-divine necessities are best thought of as aspects of God's conceptual scheme.

What status does the actual world have: necessary, contingent, abstract, concrete? Care is called for here because in some sense, God doesn't create (*ex nihilo*) the actual world unless God creates God. I want to note the oddity, from one point of view, of talking as if God can select or chose from among possible worlds in terms of which to instantiate. Since the actual world necessarily contains God, it is curious to talk as if God were outside the actual world choosing among possible worlds to instantiate. While God is a necessary being and no matter what possible world is instantiated God will be in it, the actual world, although containing contingencies, has never (so to speak) not been. The actual world always contains God and the other necessities, independent of whatever contingencies it contains.

The actual world, I propose, is best understood as the thoughts of God. Not only are abstract entities God's concepts but the actual world itself is a set of God's thoughts. While God does not depend (causally) upon the actual world, it is still true to say that there would be no God without an actual world. It seems fair to say that God's conceptual scheme includes, thus, the way the actual world is. Where the actual world is necessarily the way it is, it is because of God's necessary thoughts. Where the actual world is contingent, God's free will enters the picture. But in either case, the actual world is the result of God's conceptual scheme.

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[11] See Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature*?, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980 and „How to be an Antirealist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56; Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris, „Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (October 1986).

[12] They originated the term „theistic activism."

[13] Menzel and Morris, p. 355.

I now want to connect some of these reflections with an earlier point. God and humans are both social and that sociality is shared. Divine and human conceptual schemes overlap which allows for the World to be fixed in certain ways (the necessities) and yet allows the World to be made into different worlds by human noetic work. This allows for an intensional account of necessity and possibility (the necessities and the possibilities exist in God's infinite mind and are not dependent strictly on what actually exists—an extensionalist account). Yet humans can think about these things as well.[14] The pluralist says that what is depends on the conceptual scheme in play and this extends to necessities and possibilities.

The divine conceptual scheme certainly includes God. Furthermore, since God always exists, the actual world always is.[15] The actual world contains many necessary beings which nonetheless depend on God in ways similar to how the actual world depends on God. Numbers, logical relations and so forth may all be necessities. Those flow automatically from God's nature as correlates to God's being. So the actual world contains a good many things independent of the creation of the contingent order. The actual world independent of the creation of contingent entities just is the necessary contents of the mind of God and those contents are not separable from God although not identical to God. In a sense, they make up the World in which God dwells, independent of humans coming on the scene.

What about contingent beings? Again, God creates some concepts freely and the actual world now contains beings that don't have to be. God's contingently thinking certain propositions to be true simply brings with it the creation of the contingent world. The World is thus irrealist, for nothing would be were it not for the thoughts of God. According to my broader proposal, however, the worlds are due to human conceptualizing. Yet that is only after God's creative work. God creates humans *ex nihilo* by a free act of will. God makes humans and thus we are in the actual world. Once humans are made, however, the actual world changes in significant ways. Not only are there contingencies whereas before there were not but if the proposed pluralism is correct, then there are many worlds in the World. The worlds humans create by their noetic feats are humanly irreal (as opposed to divinely irreal alone).

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[14] An intensional account of modalities is what is needed, it seems to me, to get a strong enough account of possibilities and necessities off the ground to allow for Michael Lynch's solution to the challenge of consistency that is sometimes laid at the feet of ontological pluralism.

[15] I do not mean by this language to beg any questions about God's relationship to time.

God through Thin and Thick

I turn now to how God can be ontologically different across worlds. There are at least two ways, one concerned with external relations and one with the nature of God within a given world. First, suppose God in world A were related to Aristotelian realities and in world B to Whiteheadian realities. God, therefore, both has and does not have the property of being related to enduring entities. Second, suppose God in world A were an Aristotelean entity, the unmoved mover, and in world B a Whiteheadian entity, a dipolar God. In the first of these scenarios, God is merely related to different things in worlds that are distinct from one another while in the second God is different in God's own being across the worlds.

So far as the external relations in conflicting worlds go, it seems clear enough that God's relation to each world can be indexed to that world. That is, God's relationships to the salient and incompatible features of each world are contingent upon those worlds, in a manner parallel to that of a singular being existing in different possible worlds. The relationships holding between God and items in the various worlds do not reflect anything necessary about God's own being. In world A God deals with Aristotelean entities while in world B God deals with Whiteheadian events. There is no problem, for God engages in the supposedly incompatible relational properties only within a given world and not within God's self. God doesn't, so to speak, carry these contingent relationships from one way the world is to another.

What happens when God's own self is caught up in the Aristotelean or the Whiteheadian world and not merely related contingently to things within various worlds? Let's consider the parallel with humans first. We are created beings. Our natures, although essential to us, are, so to speak, essential *after the fact*. We are contingent. Yet surely there are different ways of being free or creative or conscious that are cogent and self-consistent. All we need to consider is the possibility that God could make us free or creative or conscious in lots of different ways. I'm simply suggesting that God passes that ability on to us in actuality and thus there is quite a lot of play in how we can be-in-a-world. We could be enduring Aristotelean substances or we could be Whiteheadian events. So long as we are free, conscious, and creative, there should be no problem, and God can bless or not bless our created worlds on the basis of how the suggested world fits with our created natures and/or God's necessary nature and the divine conceptual scheme.

What happens when God is theorized about as an unmoved mover in the Aristotelean instance and a dipolar being with a concrete changing nature and an absolute fixed nature in the Whiteheadian instance? Do the extreme

differences between an Aristotelean type of God and a Whiteheadian type deny that both accounts could truly describe how God is in two different worlds? Perhaps. But the problem here doesn't seem to be with the basic pluralist suggestion that God is different across human conceptual schemes but rather that there are *limits* on how God can be across different worlds. Maybe the ontological contrast between the Whiteheadian and Aristotelean worlds is too great. In reply to this concern, my suggestion is simply that where God's core being leaves off and God's being-in-a-world picks up is a matter of debate. But the pluralist account can't be ruled out on that basis alone.

The absolutist drive is very strong for the traditional Christian. It typically includes the notion that there is a way things are free of any and all human conceptual frameworks. In response, I'm simply suggesting that what is really important for the traditional Christian notion of God is simply that God is free of human conceptual influence *at God's core*. Traditional Christianity need not claim that God is free of the divine conceptual scheme, nor need it claim that there is a singular way God is independent of the various ontologies suggested by the pluralist. If God is to reveal the divine self to us, then what better way than to let God's being be shaped by human theorizing? As a traditional Christian I must agree that humans do not make God. But that God's core is a singular way and that no human contribution is possible to God's core does not entail that *nothing* about God changes when God interacts with events in the World or worlds. The only question is, how much of God can vary world to world. Maybe the change from Aristotelean to Whiteheadian is too much.

The notion that God is changed by humans is true, even on a global realism. For example, even if global realism about God and the World were true, nevertheless, when humans sin, God responds. God enters the world and surely God is changed by such an experience and that change is not simply a relational change. The Son takes on a human nature and that is no mere relational change. But humans didn't have to sin and God would have, presumably, interacted with us differently had we not. But the global realist doesn't thereby admit that God changes in the divine core when God responds to our failures.

The same is true when God moves between one irrealist world and another. God's being need not change at its core, but some features of God change from one world to the next. Parallel to how Susan's freedom is construed along libertarian lines in one possible world and along compatibilist lines in another, and we still have Susan in both worlds, God might be conceptualized as the unmoved mover in one irrealist world and as dipolar

in the next and we would still have God in both worlds. These changes are outside God's core, in a manner similar to how changes in the worlds don't affect humans in their core. The irrealist Christian need not claim that God is a certain singular way, independent of any and all ontologies, or even that God is a singular way within all ontologies, except at God's core nature.

Here the traditional Christian ontologist will surely balk. First, doesn't traditional Christianity simply demand that God be fixed, unchanging, and not dependent upon human thought or creativity? Second, don't at least the Ecumenical creeds have to be true, and true not just in one world but in all the worlds? Third, haven't I slipped up by claiming that the essential property of freedom can be different in distinct worlds? My answer to the first two questions, as a traditional Christian, is a broad yes, but with caveats. To the first question, we must note that even on realism as applied to God and the World, the traditional theist must deal with God's interaction with humans. The problems generated by God's interaction with the World are not made significantly more difficult by God having to deal with many worlds instead of just one World. So yes, God in God's core is not dependent on humans but God is changed by us, at least as we interact with God.

Before moving to the creedal question, I'll consider the third, namely, haven't I slipped up by claiming that the essential property of freedom can be different in distinct worlds? The critic might say that Susan's being free in one sense in one possible world and in a second sense in another surely is a change in essential properties. But why say that? I think what is at stake here is not a change from one essential property to another but rather *how we have* an essential property or *how it works.* While it is essential that humans be conscious, is it essential to humans that consciousness arises out of the particular kind of brain material that we have or could it occur some other way? It seems that God could make a stone to be conscious and that could be our brain. Or surely we don't have to have a brain at all. The angels or humans in heaven may not have materiality as we understand it. Can one be said to be essentially A when A is taken thickly toward B in one world and thickly toward C in another? This issue turns out to be the important one.

Return to the creeds. Two issues arise here. First is that the Ecumenical creeds are full of metaphorical description. Metaphors are context-dependent but arguably no less rigorously applied than literal terms. Metaphorical truth is a kind of rightness of rendering (to use Nelson Goodman's phrase), just as literal truth is, and as such has its limits. The creeds are context-dependent accounts of God stated largely in metaphorical terms. These terms are rooted in human history and experience. Human history and experience is where, of course, God reveals the divine self to us. Is God literally Fa-

ther? No, but God is personal. The second issue is that the very properties we consider essential can be understood in various ways in terms of their actual workings. The creeds can be taken in a variety of ways across worlds without denying that God is at core the creating, personal, omnipotent, loving savior of humankind.

To explore a little more thoroughly how God can be different in different worlds, I return briefly to the nature of virtual absolutes and the notion of thin vs. thick concepts. A virtually absolute proposition is true across all the worlds. On human irrealism, such propositions will depend on the fact that the proposition is built up from the same concepts in every world. But what kind of concepts: thin or thick? I think the typical intuition might be that the concepts will be fairly thick. Otherwise, the absolute nature of the proposition might not have much bite. For example, suppose it were a virtual absolute that there are objects. If this is understood thinly—let's say by thinking of objects as things that are—there isn't much to be gained by claiming that „there are objects" is virtually absolute. But if the notion of object were thickened up as the notion that objects are always and everywhere physical and that was claimed as a virtual absolute, there might be some point.

I think context may make all the difference. Suppose the proposition „there are minds" is proposed as a virtual absolute where the mind is understood strictly as a thin concept. Suppose, for example, the mind is understood as the thing that thinks. That claim, it seems, has some import for if irrealism (whether divine or human) holds, then the presence of minds in every world is very important. But notice that the virtually absolute nature of „there are minds" does not rule out there being thicker accounts of what a mind is where those accounts vary across worlds. One might suggest a purely spiritual account of minds whereas another suggests a more physicalist-emergentist account. Furthermore, the truth of the thin virtually absolute proposition about minds might tell us, with some additional considerations (such as that minds cannot simply „conceptualize away" other minds), that the minds that there are (however they might be filled out in various worlds) total to the same number in each world.

Finally, if we consider God's role as I've proposed it, some virtual absolutes will be necessities (that do not depend on humans *per se*). Numbers, the laws of logic, and possible worlds are virtual absolutes because God makes them so. Insofar as we share (as we must) aspects of God's conceptual scheme, then we participate in the virtually absolute nature of these necessities. These virtual absolutes might be based in quite thick concepts.

The point I wish to make is that some virtual absolutes are thinly based and others perhaps more thickly based. Now we need to apply this claim to God. The first thing to note is that God can be considered in a thin manner as well as in thicker manners. The thin nature of God will be fairly thick, however. God might be thought of thinly, for example, as omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, free, conscious, creative and triune. The relative thickness of the thin notions of God does not remove the possibility of the thin concepts being thickened up in alternative ways in various worlds.

So, a Christian irrealist who understands God as independent of human noetic contribution in regard to God's core being might want to say that the thin concepts relevant to God are thicker than some other basic concepts (such as say, the concept mind or tree) but not so thick that they are completely fixed or definitive across all the worlds (such as abstract entities like numbers), that is, such that God has all and only the same properties in all the worlds. That would demand a kind of radical essentialism for God where not only does God have certain essential properties but where those properties are already so thick that no room is left for thickening them any further. That would close off any possibility of pluralism. Instead, I suggest that there can be some variation in how God is in various worlds without giving up (thin) essential properties of God. The thin concept of God is a minimal concept in which God has certain properties (the omni-properties or God's triune nature) but that those are (and must be) filled out according to our various theoretical constructions and thus how God is omnipotent in one world may not be the same as how God is omnipotent in another. The fact of God's existence holds across worlds, and the thin concept of God is the same across worlds. In this way God is virtually absolute both from a human and a divine point of view.

The contrast between absolutes and virtual absolutes is the contrast between facts that hold independent of any and all conceptual schemes or worlds and facts that hold in each and every conceptual scheme or world but independent of none. God is a divine virtual absolute whereby there is no God independent of God's World. But God, because the divine is social, has given us the ability to interact with God, revealing the divine self in such a way that we can grasp a great deal about God. However, it is important to note that God is a contributor to the worlds (along with us) and shows up in each world not simply because *we* can't do without God but rather because *the worlds themselves* cannot do without God. Here the Christian irrealist theory preserves the traditional Christian claim that God makes the World. It goes along with this notion that wherever there is a thinker, there is also a world. This is not less true with God than with human thinkers. So, while

it is clearly true that wherever there is a world, there is God, it is equally true that wherever God is, there is a world.

In sum, it is important to recognize that there are clear limits on how God can be in various worlds, along with limits on how humans can be. A world in which humans are not free would be a world that construes humans in a way contrary to God's creative will for us. God thus, in creating human essences, creates limits on the worlds. A world in which God is evil is not a world that humans can create either, for that would be contrary to God's presence in the worlds. In each case, there are limits on what humans can do and those limits ultimately rest in God. God, rather than truth, provides the objectivity and hence the limits on world-making.