

Beyond Us

Realism, the Creation of Logic, and the Scope of Possibility

§1 The Idea of Something Beyond Us

Thinking and talking about the limits of knowledge and thought entangles itself in the well-known paradox of either missing the target, because what you can talk about cannot be ineffable, or having nothing to say. This is obvious for specific claims about some state of affairs beyond our ken. Higher-order claims need not be that paradoxical. If Socrates says “I know nothing specific about the world outside the mind” this higher-order claim is not inconsistent. Socrates knows something *about* the realm of world knowledge (concerning matters outside the mind). This he can know and say without committing himself inconsistently to knowledge of some worldly facts. His knowledge is meta-knowledge (about knowledge), and concerns the mind and its faculties. One may doubt whether he has or can have convincing reasons for his claim, but paradoxical it is not. The same holds for forms of scepticism as long as the sceptical thesis is put forth as meta-thesis concerning the issues the sceptic is sceptical about.

Applying this to the limits of thought and language, which are the same limits anyway for a rational animal, one can surmise *that* there are limits of thought, i.e. claim “There might be something beyond us”. Of course, no item beyond us can be displayed or described. The claim cannot constructively shown to be true. We are always talking from this side of supposed limits. For a robust realism, which does not identify what obtains – in a vague generic sense of “obtains” – with what can be thought or known, the idea of an epistemic gap is feasible, as abstract broad possibility.

Even the idea of an epistemic gap the realist entertains confronts problems of expressibility. Strictly speaking (i.e. this side of the supposed limits), we cannot talk about ‘something’ beyond us, as this imposes *our* (object) ontology, or ‘something obtaining’, as this imposes *our* state of affairs ontology. And the sense of “possible” in the claim concerning our limits

cannot be the concept of possibility grounded in our language. So, again, even the mere hint at something beyond us given by the realist seems inappropriately phrased.

Nonetheless, we seem despite this assessment to understand this further meta-thesis. We understand it abstractly as denying a perfect fit of knowability (mind) and what there is (reality). Our concept of ‘reality’ leaves room for entities beyond our conceptual scheme (species wide conceptual framework). The paradoxical element reduces to the use of “something” or “entity”, which are *our* expressions for *our* concepts, but concepts open enough, it seems, to talk generically about something beyond us. We can consistently claim – it seems – “If there is something beyond us, our ontology cannot capture it”, not to mention our faculties of specific knowledge. The idea of limits of thought involves a generic use of “something” (a variable) *untied* from a category or a domain. Used as a meta-variable in meta-claims on limits of thought these stay underspecified – as should be expected on pragmatic inconsistency. The realist may claim that *our* conceptual framework contains these resources to thematize the issue of its limits, with all the ontological *caveats* of not transferring our ontology beyond us.

That a gap obtains can, of course again, not be constructively shown. The claim may be motivated by analogy. We are rather certain that our access and knowledge of reality outstrip that of many – if not all – species of (non-human) animals. In their case we can ascertain, say, that there are properties (of a certain kind) present in reality while the animal lacks any representational capacity for them. One may doubt any sophisticated formal ontology and conceptual resources (like concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘belief’) in the animal kingdom. In as much as humans have an evolutionary history the idea of a partial mismatch between human minds and reality does not seem unlikely, rather its negation seems to require arguments for human epistemic exceptionalism in that respect. Humans are exceptional within the realm of living beings, but the exceptionalist will point out what makes humans exceptional (e.g. recursive thought and language). Exceptionalism of this kind can be constructively shown.

Exceptionalism concerning a cognition/reality-gap cannot be constructively shown, but not be excluded either. The idea of limits of thoughts does not require a refutation of the perfect epistemic fit of mind and reality. It suffices that the model of (other) animals makes the idea comprehensible. And in this way the realist’s idea of limits of thought can be vindicated.

Someone who does not admit this has to *assert apodictically* the perfect fit of mind and reality (i.e. completely exclude the option of a gap), strictly speaking to the extent that this fit is *guaranteed*, because deviation from the guarantee is inconsistent and inexpressible. A

consistent idealism of this kind – i.e. as a dogmatic position – seems unattractive, at least for this very dogmatism. It clashes with any conception of a (partially) naturalized epistemology. The idealist *understands* the realist’s position and so understands the generic use of “something beyond us”, a testimony to sharing a conceptual framework with the realist. [This being something like a *transcendental argument* – otherwise beloved by idealists – against this crucial type of dogmatic idealism.]

So, given all this, the idea of something beyond us can be entertained. And given that we have to avoid the paradoxes of looking at the other side of the limits of thought, that something beyond us – if existing (employing here our concept or ‘existence’) – has to be *conceptually foreign*. ‘Conceptually foreign’ expresses *via negativa* what cannot be part of our conceptual framework. The *via negativa* stays consistent as meta-attitude: a denial of any specific one of our concepts is within our reach, be it by (predicate) negation. ‘Conceptually foreign’, again, captures the idea that our conceptual framework and reality need not match. The region of a mismatch has, then, to be conceptually foreign to us. If there is no gap between knowability and reality, our conceptual framework is universal (at least completable in principle). We can neither justify nor refute this constructively.

‘Conceptually foreign to us’ has to imply ‘in contrast and in difference to our logic’ (as included within our conceptual framework). We cannot step out of our logical ways. We can grasp the idea, however, that logic could be or could have been different. This is a broad conception of possibility of what could be or could have been, because what is possible in this sense cannot be elucidated using our logical ways, as are our systematic conceptions of possibility. Using this, of course vague and generic, concept of ‘possible’ what is necessary for us need not be necessary in the broad sense. Iterations of modality can, now, receive an internal and an external reading. On the internal reading we meet our well-known S4- or S5-like modalities. On the external reading all iteration principles seem to be just *false*, because there is always *broader scope* for deviation: in the range of the conceptually foreign we cannot assume limits of deviation.

This can be illustrated by reflecting on God’s power. Shouldn’t He be able to have created logic (for us) otherwise? This leads to the questions of God’s Nature and the creation of logic.

§2 God's Nature and The Creation of Logic

An old objection to cosmological arguments, named “the Carriage Objection” by Arthur Schopenhauer, charges them as being arbitrary: the arguments are employed to carry you to the existence of God, but no further (as the carriage carries you to some destination to be dismissed then, therefore the name of the objection). A simple cosmological argument claims the existence of the universe to require explanation, and offers God as the cause of the universe. The Carriage Objection now asks why the principle of *sufficient explanation* that carried the argument forth to God will not carry us on to a sufficient explanation of God, and then on – *ad infinitum*. The regress is considered to be vicious. If one was to accept some brute fact (like the existence of God) then why not stop with the brute fact of the existence of the universe?

The objection has several weaknesses, as has been pointed out several times. For example, cosmological arguments from fine-tuning argue that the values of the natural constants are still in need of explanation, even if one takes the existence of the universe as a brute fact. As for the application of the principle of sufficient explanation some philosophers have claimed that it does not carry us any further, since God as *metaphysically necessary* is – in contrast to the universe as *metaphysically contingent* – not the type of entity which stands in need of explanation.

Whether these are good replies to the Carriage Objection will not concern us here in detail, what they presuppose, however, is a commitment to assumptions about *God's Nature* – as do several other arguments in the philosophy of religion (like God being wholly good, being outside space, knowing the past completely etc.).

With respect to God's Nature a problem arises that resembles the Carriage Objection. God's Nature seems to be *something* – a structure? – that is *given* even to Him. In the middle ages philosophers argued that God's inability to create the impossible (like a stone that not even He could lift or a proof of squaring the circle) is no objection to His omnipotence, since one must not demand breaking the laws of logic.

Where then do the laws of logic come from?

A dilemma raises its head:

The one horn sees the laws of logic as necessary in the strictest sense (i.e. at least metaphysically necessary or logically necessary in a sense even beyond that) and given with God's Nature. Arguments against God's omnipotence (because of the inability to create an

unliftable stone etc.) do not go through then. Now, however, God seems to be limited by His nature (i.e. by finding Himself possessing this nature and not another). Further on, once we allow for God having just *this* nature to be a brute fact, we are again allowing for brute facts, and adherents of the Carriage Objection may stop somewhat earlier then.

The other horn sees God's Nature as being under His control. Some philosopher argue with respect to time that God committed Himself to be changeable by the creation of beings with free will (and thus unforeseeable actions), and thus changed one of His attributes. One may ask whether immutability was *essential* to Him in the first place then.

Rene Descartes toyed with the idea that whereas logic is necessary for our minds even logic is not beyond God's control. This immediately undermines substantial iterative alethic modalities: even what for us is necessarily necessary isn't necessarily necessary from God's point of view. Proofs of God's existence committed to modal logic and assumptions of their ('metaphysical') immutability are undermined in consequence. One option in face of the Carriage Objections, thus, may be to adopt Descartes' position and to deal with the creation of logic in the manner one deals with the creation of time.

In any case, however, a major problem remains: Even if He committed Himself to, say, *tertium non datur* by creating logic, there supposedly have to be some lawlike mechanisms by which He operates, even if His operations concern changing His own nature. And then *these* mechanisms are beyond His control. The whole argument starts all over again, a vicious regress seems to loom here. If anyone goes along this path God's Nature seems to dissolve: One approaches some being (whatever that now may mean) with undifferentiated structure or nature, one departs from the God of Theism, not to speak of the Christian God.

§3 Everything is Possible

Starting from the idea of a human conceptual framework (be it in natural languages or cognition in general) human thought has its limits at the boundaries of this framework.

These borders are drawn contingently in the conventions of individual languages as to how to use words or to conceive of some entity ("a vixen is a female fox"). Some of these conventions (the 'vixen' and the 'bachelor') may change if that serves some purpose, others (supposedly the core rules of logic, broadly taken) are presupposed even in setting up an account of the framework and making changes concerning the 'bachelor'-type conventions –

so that we seem to meet conceptual bedrock here, a limit of thought and revisability. The limits of revision are the more obvious in case of the universal framework of a natural language as enforcing changes of logic cannot use the old form of the logic in some meta-theory. A universal framework has to contain its own meta-theory. If you need a certain concept of conditional to revise that very conditional (i.e. its conceptual basis and logic) the revision typically (except mere extensions of a concept) undermines itself: its success testifies to its failure. Even to ‘just adopt’ some new conventions for a fundamental logical concept presupposes a background of presuppositions of ‘adopting’ that will involve some of the core logic used in all this type of reasoning.

So, we have reasons to believe that we cannot transcend the core of the human conceptual system – whatever may belong to that core. We also have reason to believe that mostly this should not bother us as our success in life (be it in individual coping or as a species) can best be explained as some sufficient fit between our conceptual system and our environment. These limits become relevant, though, when considering modal questions. Our conceptual system by its borders sets up limits of what we can think possibly to be the case.

As our core logic is human core logic, we can at least come up with the general idea that this core logic could be different for some other intelligent being – if not in the real universe, then maybe in some universe which is not possible given our conceptual system, but which may be possible in an absolute sense, a sense of ‘possibility’ decoupled from modal statements of our natural languages. The involved concept of ‘possibility’ in this idea is vague and self-undermining in the sense that we cannot specify it further without collapsing it to our common conception of ‘possibility’.

One may best think of this idea as doubting – at least for the sake of the argument – that

$$“\Diamond\alpha \supset \Box\Diamond\alpha” \quad \text{or} \quad “\Box\alpha \supset \Box\Box\alpha”$$

hold, or similar modal reduction principles of trivial modality iteration.

Distinguishing an inner and outer perspective one may say that our modal concepts internally support trivial S5-type iteration, but trying to take an external perspective our languages and conceptual system might (in the external sense) have been different, so what is necessary for us is not absolutely necessary. Letting go of our limits of (modal) thought we might suppose: Everything is possible.

We cannot cash in anything as possible that we have not already taken as possible by the logic of limits of thoughts (otherwise they would not be limits), but the idea of such an external

perspective seems to be available. We cannot assert of any state of affairs α that α is possible in the external sense only.

This perspective – not by accident – resembles a ‘view from nowhere’, a God’s eye view. Assuming that God laid down the laws of core logic and Him being absolutely free in that crafting (i.e. not already being limited by some logic in force or some ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ pregiven even to Him) He could have (in that external sense) laid down different laws of core logic. [Descartes surmised as much in his letters.] Even if the universe God created is bound to the created logic – among other laws – He could supplant it by another universe following different core logical principles. For Him everything is possible. “With God all things are possible”, Jesus said, according to Matthew.

God committed Himself in this universe to a logic which prevents Him from creating a stone He cannot lift, but as He could have created another universe with other core logical laws this is just a regional limitation. [One may wonder why He created this very core logic, but this is certainly beyond not just our – and any Gnostic’s – ken but beyond our mind, as we cannot even comprehend the alternatives, thus the whole question is moot for us. A trusting Catholic like Leibniz may just assume that this is the best world possible. In “best world possible”, however, the “possible” has to be taken in the external sense!]

Even if we do not know the alternatives to our conceptual system the very (vague) idea of an external alternative has consequences for our modal reasoning. Modal arguments what is possible (beyond what is sensibly imaginable) inherit the limits of our core conceptual system. It might (in the external sense) be the case that we cannot imagine how some state of affairs α might be possible, but (externally) possible it is. Given a strong enough commitment to almighty God He might accomplish what for us seems impossible.

Thus, all modal arguments are up for grabs. Especially, there are no modal knock down arguments anymore. [The repercussions in metaphysics and the philosophy of religion should be obvious, and are left as an exercise to the reader.]

This whole line of reasoning depends on whether we can come up with this idea of an external perspective which is understandable enough. It seems we can. We do not cross the borders of our conceptual system, but given the concept of such borders we can conceptualize a realm beyond them. We can imagine such borders of our general conceptual system by extrapolating the idea of conceptual borders we encounter with simpler linguistic systems or older world views with their transcended conceptual resources.

Our modal arguments go as far as they go. We have reason to deem something impossible, and it may be so, at least in this universe, and this is good enough for our knowledge and collective self-knowledge. It might (in the external sense) even be so, since God had enough reasons to never opt for an alternative core logic. That is close to absolute impossibility [α never being the case in any universe], but not strictly absolute impossibility, as in God's mind the option is live.

There are, therefore, no absolute metaphysical or modal truth for us to be justifiably certain of.

At least if we assume an almighty Creator who can change even core logic. In fact, the whole argument need not assume that God exists. It is undermined only if such a Creator cannot exist (in both the internal and external sense), factual non-existence being not enough in modal contexts. There are corresponding external absolute modal truths about supernatural beings and their properties – alas, beyond our ken. We, therefore, cannot know whether the core laws of logic could not be changed.

Modal absolutism remains questionable. What reasons should we have to proclaim it? We might better accept the lesson that – finally/ultimately – we should not take any idea of what is impossible too serious. Our modal arguments do not carry us so far. “You are welcome”, the Logical Empiricist says.

§4 Mysticism of the Beyond?

A philosophical consideration of the limits of thought may leave it at that. For a depotentiation of metaphysics this suffices. Within a reflection on religion or the philosophy of religion one may reflect a bit more on the comprehensibility – if not merits – of mysticism.

He who is master of possibility in the broad sense of the beyond us has to be conceptually foreign to us in His nature. Corresponding strong conceptions of His powers, therefore, have to lean to Negative Theology (from Moses Maimonides to Jean-Luc Marion). He is ‘without all attributes’, because our scheme of substance and attribute cannot be simply carried over to Him. He cannot even have Being, as we know it. Negative Theology in this fashion straight gets entangled in paradoxes of the inexpressible. The meta-statement “God has no attributes” (i.e. 1st order attributes) may be consistent, but speaking of ‘God’ as a ‘person’ violates the

placement of Him – ‘Him’? – out of conceptual reach. Further on, even if God could be described as a person, one is far off from the God of the Bible, or any other specific religious conception. So, talking of God creating logic uses a language that is inappropriate to the topic at hand. The idea of broad possibility can be understood, but neither is its scope nor the determination of one logic out of many.

In this respect versions of Kabbalist mysticism try to circumvent the paradoxes of Negative Theology. They distinguish the God as He has revealed himself in his creation and history from what was (before creation) beyond. The concept of God gains a dual character: the revealed God emanated from that beyond which Negative Theology classified as beyond expression, attributes, and even Being. This original really is ‘nothing’ in relation to our conceptual framework. Thus, the mystic continues, we have ‘creation out of nothing’. Mystic imagination, then, describes a duality in which the conceptually foreign God creates also his emanations in the created world. [Kabbalist mysticism of the ‘Tree of Life’ resembles the *Rig Veda* in Hinduist mysticism in this.]

Nonetheless, the God beyond and the God of the world are considered and said to be – originally and ultimately – the same, thus employing our concept of ‘identity’ and at the same time refusing to substitute the identicals in statements on God. Maybe, conceptions of relative sortal identity can help out here: they are identical as entities (taking “entity” to be the broadest generic term to talk about something at all), but not as persons or whatever categories are used for the revealed God. Even if such relativized identity statements could help for the identity issue, one cannot attempt, as does the mystic, to experience the beyond in God, because what is beyond should stay beyond. Even if the revealed God can/could be experienced, and so by entity identity the God beyond, the experiences will/would all be of this world, respectively of God as revealed.

Kabbalist mysticism of this sort, thus, gets – as was to be expected – bogged down in paradoxes of going beyond what was said to be beyond. The merits of these musings, however, cannot be neglected, up to a point: the distinction between the ‘original’ God or God beyond (the En Sof) and the revealed God (the Sefirot), whom we encounter in the world as conceptualized by us, and who speaks to us in our language, has to be made if God has power over logic, and we can at least think that he has, so the *conceptual* distinction at least. If He has not, and logic and His nature are pre-given, then not only is His power limited, but (religious) cosmologists face the new and harder problem to account for the origin and

determination of logic and His nature, this being at least as hard as accounting for the creation of the universe.

One may have little sympathy with Negative Theology or other forms of mysticism, but their comprehensibility – marginal as one may take it to be – shows again that our conceptual framework allows for the crucial broad concepts of ‘something’ or ‘possible’.

Whether there *is* anything beyond us is, of course, beyond us.

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Cf. *Against Metaphysical Necessity*. Modality and Belief Revision in Updated Logical Empirism. Berlin, 2025.