# ANSELM'S TEMPORAL-ONTOLOGICAL PROOF

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ABSTRACT

In his *Reply to Gaunilo*, Anselm presented two additional arguments for the existence of God beyond those that appear in the *Proslogion*. In "The Logical Structure of Anselm's Argument," Robert M. Adams isolates each. One, he develops into a modal ontological argument along the lines of other 20th century ontological arguments (e.g. those of Malcolm, Hartshorne, and Plantinga). The other he sets aside with the following remark: "[this argument] turns on the philosophy of time, not the philosophy of logic." Now the argument's time has come. In this paper, I show the following: (i) this argument is valid in system K, and so requires fewer logical resources than other modal ontological arguments; (ii) its axiological premise is plausible, requiring only the judgment that a perfect being cannot begin to exist, and can be defended; (iii) its metaphysical premise follows from David Lewis's recombination approach to modal plenitude; (iv) unlike other modal ontological arguments, it requires as a premise only that a perfect being is possible, not that one is necessarily possible, and; (v) while it avoids parodies and the charge of begging the question, it does face a symmetry counterargument, although one that is more complicated than standard symmetry objections

KEYWORDS: Anselm, Ontological Argument, Existence of God, Modal Argument, Theistic Proofs, Perfect Being Theology, Principles of Recombination, Patchwork Principles, Divine Necessity

## 1: INTRODUCTION

Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* and accompanying literature introduced an enduring line of reasoning in support of the existence of a God, known as the Ontological Argument. There are at least three *loci classici* for arguments that typically fall under this banner: *Proslogion 2*, *Proslogion 3*, and the *Reply to Gaunilo*. In addition to arguments[1] found in the *Proslogion*, Robert Adams's classic (1971) study "The Logical Structure of Anselm's Argument" identifies two distinct arguments in the *Reply*. The first he explores is a plausible ancestor of 20th century Modal Ontological Arguments. The second

[1] Scholars debate whether Proslogion 2 and Proslogion 3 contain different arguments or different versions of the same argument. See Basham (1976). I take no side in this controversy.

he breaks down into four premises and then sets aside with the remark: "[this argument] turns on the philosophy of time, not the philosophy of logic.[2]" Now the argument's time has come.[3]

Adams identifies four steps in the argument: (i) that than which greater cannot be thought cannot exist except without a beginning; (ii) but whatever can be thought to exist but does not exist can be thought to exist with a beginning; (iii) therefore it is not the case that that than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought to exist and not exist; (iv) therefore if it can be thought to exist, of necessity it does exist.

Like other Anselmian arguments, this one combines metaphysics with axiology. But the metaphysics and axiology required are different and less demanding. As we shall see, this argument has defensible premises and requires the weakest logical resources of any ontological argument in the literature. Furthermore, it is immune to charges of begging the question and the prospects of a successful parody are poor. It is, however, subject to a symmetry objection in the vicinity of those other modal ontological arguments face. Nevertheless, I submit that it is one of the best arguments of its genre.

## 2: FORM OF THE ARGUMENT

We can express the argument in more updated language as follows:

(1) A perfect being cannot exist except without a beginning
(2) But whatever could exist yet does not exist could have a beginning
(3) Therefore, it is false that a perfect being both possibly exists yet fails to exist
(4) Therefore, if a perfect being could exist, then it does exist
(5) A perfect being could exist
(6) Therefore, a perfect being does exist

The substitution of 'thought to' language with modal language may not be trivial. But trading the metaphysics of predication that drive the arguments of the *Proslogion* for contemporary modal metaphysics is probably an upgrade.[4] At the very least, it makes for an intriguing argument.

### 2.1: FORMALIZATION

The first premise asserts that a perfect being can only exist without a beginning. We will discuss the justification of this premise in later sections. For now, the question is how to formalize the argument so that we can see what logical principles (if any) make it valid. To do this, we need the language of tense-modal logic. This supplements the standard language of propositional logic with a modal operator $\Diamond$ and two tense operators, F and P. These will be interpreted respectively as 'it is possible that,' 'it will be that,' and 'it was that.' Their duals, $\Box$, G, and H can be introduced as metalinguistic abbreviations for the

[2] Adams (1971) p. 40, n14
[3] Previous discussions of this argument can be found in Malcolm (1960) 48-50, Gale (1991) 201-217, and Smith (2014) ch. 6-7.
[4] For details see Adams (1971), Silvestre (2015), Leftow (2022). The metaphysics of predication Anselm actually endorses were probably quasi-Meinongian.

operator flanked by negations. If we let ϕ stand for a formula that says 'a perfect being exists,[5]' a first pass at (1) looks like (1`):

(1`) □ (ϕ → Hϕ).

We would read (1`) as something like: necessarily, if a perfect being exists, then it has always been that a perfect being exists.' However, it does not quite capture what it means for something to not have a beginning. Generally, Hϕ is true in the first moment of models that have a beginning to time. So (1`) does not quite capture the idea of a beginningless formula. We need time itself to have no beginning as well.[6] Thus, the better formalization of (1) is (1``):

(1``) □ (ϕ → (Hϕ & HPT)).

In (1``) we have conjoined the axiom for beginningless time to the consequent.[7] We would read it aloud as something like: 'necessarily, if a perfect being exists then it has always been that a perfect being exists and it has always been that the tautology was true.' This second conjunct ensures that there is always an earlier time, since the tautology is by definition true at all times. In a model with a first time, PT is false at that time, since there is no previous time at which T can be true.[8]

That brings us to (2). This premise is a conditional and says that anything that could exist but does not exist could have a beginning:

(2`) (◊ϕ & ¬ϕ) → ◊(ϕ & ¬ (Hϕ & HPT)).

(3) is the first subconclusion of the argument, inferred from (1) and (2). Its formalization is fairly simple, and is found in (3`):

(3`) ¬(◊ϕ & ¬ϕ).

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[5] We could use a quantificational formula like ∃xGx, where G is a predicate for 'perfect being,' or perhaps something even more complex to represent the modal content of 'perfect being,' but none of the inferences in the argument require that level of detail.

[6] Defenders of divine timelessness will object here. In normal models of tense logic, true formulae are true at some time. This does not play nice with the idea of a being outside of time. My examination of this argument is going to ignore the debates about divine timelessness as orthogonal to the central questions at issue. But adding the logical machinery to have timeless beings could be done and were it to be what I say would transfer over relatively seamlessly. In a similar vein, certain hybrid theories of divine eternity (Mullins, 2014) that posit both a metrical time when creation exists and a prior, undifferentiated time in which God did exist will require special machinery. But assuming these views can be represented formally, their canonical formal representation for having a beginning can be switched into (1``) logically seamlessly.

[7] Another technicality here: PT is the characteristic axiom of irreflexive frames that have no first time. There is no characteristic axioms for irreflexive frames (unless we supplement the language further with nominals and satisfaction binders to get hybrid tense logic), so there is no way to amend the formula to capture this. We will assume reflexivity of the temporal accessibility relation throughout.

[8] A referee suggests: what if the open interval (0, 1) can be a model of time? Would this satisfy 1`` while still giving ϕ a beginning? I don't share this intuition. 'Having a beginning' seems to me to be an order-theoretic property, and at any rate formulae of tense logic can only express order-theoretic properties. But (0, 1) is order-isomorphic to (-∞, 0), so if one has beginning, so does the other. But clearly (-∞, 0) has no beginning. Now, we could say that 'having a beginning' is inexpressible in tense logic. That would leave its formalization as an open question, with quite a lot of structure required (roughly: the field structure of the reals) to capture a sense in which (0, 1) is even finite. Further, I don't think this line of objection has much bearing on what will follow, so I will leave it at that.

That brings us to the argument's key sub-conclusion, which is inferred from (3) alone. Note that the sub-conclusion is a conditional. To end with the existence of a perfect being, we need a further premise that one is possible. However, we do not need the much-more-metaphysically-loaded premise that a perfect being is possibly necessary. We formalize (4) as (4`):

(4`) $\Diamond\phi \rightarrow \phi$.

Finally, we formalize the possibility premise and conclusion in the obvious way:

(5`) $\Diamond\phi$

(6`) $\phi$

That completes the argument's formalization. Now we will look at its inferential steps to see what background logic is required to make the argument valid. But for convenience, I summarize the formalization here:

(1``) $\Box(\phi \rightarrow (H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$

(2`) $(\Diamond\phi \,\&\, \neg\phi) \rightarrow \Diamond(\phi \,\&\, \neg(H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$

(3`) $\neg(\Diamond\phi \,\&\, \neg\phi)$

(4`) $\Diamond\phi \rightarrow \phi$

(5`) $\Diamond\phi$

(6`) $\phi$

2.2: VALIDITY

The argument contains three inferences, the first from (1) and (2) to (3), the second from (3) to (4), and the final one from (4) to theism. The first is the most complicated, although as we will see, it is not that complicated. All inferences are valid, making the argument itself valid as well. Here are derivations:

| | |
|---|---|
| (1``) $\Box(\phi \rightarrow (H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$ | PREMISE |
| (2`) $(\Diamond\phi \,\&\, \neg\phi) \rightarrow \Diamond(\phi \,\&\, \neg(H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$ | PREMISE |
| (1```) $\Box\neg(\phi \,\&\, \neg(H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$ | (1``), SUBSTITUTION |
| (1````) $\neg\Diamond\neg\neg(\phi \,\&\, \neg(H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$ | (1```), DEFINITION OF $\Box$ |
| (1`````) $\neg\Diamond(\phi \,\&\, \neg(H\phi \,\&\, HP\top))$ | (1````), DOUBLE NEGATION ELIMINATION |
| (3`) $\neg(\Diamond\phi \,\&\, \neg\phi)$ | (1`````), (2`), MODUS TOLLENS |

Next, the inference from (3) to (4):

| | |
|---|---|
| (3`) $\neg(\Diamond\phi \,\&\, \neg\phi)$ | |
| (4`) $\Diamond\phi \rightarrow \phi$ | (3`) SUBSTITUTION |

Finally, the closing *modus ponens*:

| | |
|---|---|
| (5`) $\Diamond\phi$ | PREMISE |

(6`) ϕ (4`), (5`) MODUS PONENS

As we can see, the background logic required is fairly weak. As long as it accepts classical propositional substitutions (of which double negation elimination is an instance), the standard interdefinition of the modal operators, *modus ponens*, and *modus tollens*, then it is strong enough to validate the inference. Since every normal modal logic includes these (equivalently: the argument is valid in system K), the logical assumptions of the argument are very difficult to challenge.[9] In fact, since we did not need the K axiom at all, there may be non-normal modal logics in which the argument is valid. We will set that possibility aside and proceed.

### 2.3: COMPARISON WITH OTHER ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Now that we have seen the logical resources required for this argument, we can compare them to other modal[10] ontological arguments. We will see that these are the least demanding, giving this argument a *prima facie* leg up on the competition.

#### 2.3.1: MALCOLM, HARTSHORNE, AND PLANTINGA

The first explicit application of modern modal concepts to what have come to be called "ontological arguments" was by Norman Malcolm (1960). Malcolm gave a reconstruction of Anselm's reasoning in *Proslogion* 3 that aims to prove that God's existence is either necessary or impossible.[11] Charles Hartshorne (1965) gave a similar reconstruction, building on Malcolm's work. It was Alvin Plantinga (1974) who showed that an argument like this was valid in the modal logic S5. While broadly recognized as a plausible logic for metaphysical modality, S5 is the strongest such candidate, and as a result the Plantingan modal ontological argument is one of the most logically-resource intensive versions of the argument.

#### 2.3.2: ADAMS

Contemporaneous to Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Plantinga's version of the argument is a modal reconstruction of an Anselmian argument drawn from the *Reply to Gaunilo* due to Robert M. Adams (1971). Unlike the others, who primarily draw on *Proslogion 3* (although Malcolm is aware of the passage Adams draws on), Adams draws on a revised/clarified statement of the argument that Anselm gave in response to critiques from a fellow monk. Adams's reconstruction only requires the modal logic KTB to be valid. KTB is a strictly weaker system than S5. While the accessibility relation for S5 must be reflexive, symmetric, and transitive, the one for KTB is merely reflexive and symmetric. This is a

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[9] I am assuming, not trivial in combine tense modal logic, that modal formulae (formulae with a modal operator in widest scope) do not change their truth values over time. See Matteoli (2024), Dorr and Goodman (2019), Rini and Cresswell (2012) for further discussion. However, if we replace all boxes and diamonds with A□A and S⋄S respectively (where A and S are tense operators standing for 'always' and 'sometimes') we can dispense with this assumption and still come out with a valid argument and premises that are roughly as plausible as before. Thanks to Tien-Chun Lo for discussion on this point.

[10] Arguments such as Anselm's Proslogion 2 argument, Cartesian ontological arguments, and Gödelian ontological argument do not canonically rely on modal logic and so will not feature in this comparison. See Oppy, Rasmussen, and Schmid (2024) for details.

[11] Gale (1991) reconstructs a paragraph of Malcolm's into an argument that is similar to our argument and also requires only K for its validity but makes use of quantifiers as well as extra premises. Additionally, Gale's argument uses the K axiom in several places, so the prospect for finding a non-normal modal logic in which it is valid is dim.

significant weakening, since one prominent line of criticism ((Chandler, 1976), (Salmon, 1981)) on the use of S5 for metaphysical modality targets transitivity.[12]

### 2.3.3: MAYDOLE

Robert Maydole (2009) offers two new modal ontological arguments. His first, the Argument from Perfection, is set in quantified modal logic and invokes both the Barcan Formula and the 5 axiom. If anything, this makes its logical machinery even more demanding than that of Plantinga, given the controversial status of the Barcan Formula.[13] His second is a modified version of Aquinas's Third Way. It requires weaker logical resources, needing only the quantified version of S4 (p. 585, n38), which is an alternative weakening of S5 to the KTB system Adams's argument required. In this case the accessibility relation is reflexive and transitive but need not be symmetrical.

### 2.3.4: BIŁAT

Using what Malcolm identified as the key thing Anselm proved, that God's existence is either necessary or impossible, as a premise, Andrzej Biłat (2021) presents a modal ontological argument that requires only system KT for its validity. Although the premise is more demanding than the previous arguments, the logical resources are strictly weaker. Nevertheless, even KT has been criticized as the appropriate logic of metaphysical modality.[14]

### 2.3.5: HAUSMANN

A final recent modal ontological argument to note has been offered by Marco Hausmann (2022). Hausmann's version of the argument, like the one we are considering, only requires modal system K. However, it also requires additional logical resources, namely an 'actuality' operator. Although the logic of actuality this argument uses is fairly standard, it is nonetheless disputed,[15] and an additional commitment that our argument need not make.

## 3: DEFENSE OF THE PREMISES

With the argument's validity on solid ground, we now turn to the defense of its premises. The argument has three key premises: (1), (2), and (5). The first is axiological and makes a claim about what a perfect being must be like. Namely: without a beginning. The second is metaphysical and makes a claim about modal plenitude. It is an instance of a general rule for plenitude. Namely: if something could exist and does not, it could have a beginning. The third is the familiar 'possibility premise,' which I am not going to discuss because even getting into the relevant issues would require a second paper.

### 3.1: THE AXIOLOGICAL PREMISE

The axiological premise claims that a perfect being must not have a beginning. The traditional way this type of thing gets defended is through the method of *perfect being theology*. Perfect being theologians tend to operate in the following way: first, they introduce some intuitively good property. Power, say.

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[12] Not that while Salmon (1989) also expresses skepticism of the B axiom, it does not present a counterexample akin to the one alleged against the 4 axiom.
[13] See Williamson (2013), Menzel (2024).
[14] Cowling (2011).
[15] Yalcin (2015).

Then they argue that it possesses what Alvin Plantinga called an *intrinsic maximum*. So, for example, they will argue that for some power level, that power level is the greatest level of power it is possible to have.[16] All-powerful, say. From these, they infer that a perfect being possesses that level.

There have been various critiques of this method. As Paul Griffiths notes, the concept of 'perfection' has significant variety across different cultural-religious traditions.[17] As Jeff Speaks notes, spelling out the perfect being theologian's inferences with precision is non-trivial.[18] I will set these aside for now in order to see what kind of case a perfect being theologian can make for (1), assuming the method is on good footing.

At first blush, beginninglessness is not a promising great-making property. There's not an obvious correlation between greatness and things without beginning. This may be that there are not many such things, but a few candidates include: fundamental particles, abstract objects, and the universe as a whole. Most things, including many of the best ones (e.g. people, relationships, works of art), begin to exist.

And yet. There is a sense of wonder that comes from being in the presence of very old things – whether these be museum pieces, or ancient buildings of long-gone civilizations, or natural landmarks, such as the mountains, or even the stars. This axiological intuition forms the basis of an argument for naming beginninglessness among the great-making properties. For beginninglessness is the limit case of age.

Going beyond intuition, Gottfried Leibniz provided a test for when something counts as a pure perfection.[19] For Leibniz, a pure perfection is a quality that is positive (e.g. does not involve negating any other quality), simple (e.g. is not to be analyzed as a Boolean combination of more basic qualities), and without limit.[20] Beginninglessness fits this bill. Age is the kind of quality that Leibniz had in mind when thinking about pure perfections. Beginninglessness seems simple to me; there are not obviously-more-fundamental qualities that combine to define age. This does not mean that we cannot give necessary and sufficient conditions for having a beginning; we may well be able to give those in terms of relations between the times at which something does and does not exist. The important thing is that we are not able to analyze it in terms of some more fundamental quality, the way we can define weight in terms of mass or temperature in terms of mean molecular motion.

That leaves only positivity. As expressed, beginninglessness involves a negation. It is expressed as the lack of a beginning. But there is another term for the quality we are discussing – *eternity*. Syntactically, one is positive, and the other is negative. Which is a more apt expression for the relevant feature? Conceived of as the limit case of age, the feature is more aptly regarded as 'positive,' since it is describing not the lack of some other quality (a limit is not a quality) but the possession of existence without temporal limit.[21]

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[16] Even this process is somewhat nuanced. See Zimmerman (2015) for a close discussion of omnipotence in particular but method adjacent to perfect being theology in general.
[17] Griffiths (1989).
[18] Speak (2018).
[19] I am in debt to Todd DeRose for this point.
[20] Adams (1994), 113-114 explicates Leibniz on this.
[21] As a referee notes, similar reasoning may yield the divine attribute of omnipresence. See the essays in Marmodoro, Migliorini, and Page (2025) for the most up to date discussion of this topic.

However, the main route from perfect being theology to beginninglessness passes through *aseity*.[22] While *aseity* is a relatively philosophically underdeveloped[23] divine attribute, it has an excellent pedigree. Most traditional theologies include it, and contemporary debates center not around whether God is *a se*, but what exactly the contours of *aseity* are/should be.[24] However, the path from *aseity* to beginninglessness is not entirely clear.

*Aseity* itself is a kind of metaphysical independence. At minimum, *a se* beings are metaphysically fundamental. They do not depend on anything else for their existence or any of their other important properties. I will leave 'important' here undefined but will note that it is not co-extensive with more familiar classes of properties such as 'intrinsic' or 'essential.' Minimally, we might think of God's important properties as the ones necessary for God to play the metaphysical and religious roles a God must occupy, including things like creation, preservation, and providence.[25] Thus 'creator' is an important divine property. But it passes neither the independence nor the duplication test for intrinsicality.[26] Likewise, if we are to take plausibly the traditional claim that the decision to create anything at all was contingent, we should not regard it as essential. Nevertheless, an *a se* being should not depend on anything else to be a creator.

More expansive definitions of aseity require not just fundamentality and self-sufficiency for their important properties, but something like responsibility for everything else. Craig (2017, 70-72) argues that it is an auxiliary of omnipotence: if something else could exist independent of an omnipotent being, that being "lacks the power to annihilate it or to create it." (70) It's not clear to me that this holds – I surely possess the power to annihilate or create things I did not actually create and that would have existed regardless of whether I had existed – but how plausible this principle is will depend on how we spell out 'independent of.'

However, for something to have a beginning, one of two options is unavoidable. Either it was caused to begin by something else, or it began without a cause. *Aseity* is incompatible with the first option. Causal dependence is a kind of dependence, and as such an *a se* thing cannot be caused to exist. That leaves only the option for it to begin without a cause.

Beginning to exist without being caused to begin to exist may itself be metaphysically impossible. There has been a robust discussion of this issue in the literature on the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and I have nothing (more or less) to add to that literature.[27] So, without conceding the principle, we will

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[22] A very traditional route goes through simplicity, as in e.g. Aquinas's *Summa* and Maimonides *Guide for the Perplexed*. But simplicity is controversial, and anything to say on its behalf will be more controversial than the bare premise it is meant to be supporting. Those interested in this route may find general defenses in Wolterstorff (1991) Rogers (2019), and Kelleher (2022). Contemporary critics include Plantinga (1980), Mullins and Byrd (2022), and Schmid and Mullins (2022).

[23] Its most notable recent explorations may be found in Adams and Robson (2020) and Brower (2009).

[24] See, e.g., Morris and Menzel (1986), van Inwagen (2009), and Craig (2017).

[25] For further discussion of what the "positive content" of divine *aseity* might be, see Leftow (Ms c).

[26] See Marshall (2012) and Marshall (2013) for details. Although both of these tests are fallible, a dual failure is suggestive, and there is not an obvious theory of intrinsicality out there that makes 'creator' plausibly intrinsic.

[27] Those in favor include Anscombe (1974), Craig (2006), Craig and Sinclair (2009), Loke (2012), and Case (2017). Critics include Hume (1739-40/2011) book I: part II: section III, Morriston (2002a), Sobel (2003) ch. V: appendix B, Oppy (2006) section 3.8, and (qualifiedly) Bobier (2013).

proceed on the assumption that beginning to exist without being caused to begin to exist is metaphysically possible to see what there is to say if we do.

This leaves two options again. Either something that begins without a cause is assembled (e.g. standing in a building relation ala Bennett (2017) to other things) from pre-existing things (including emergence (e.g. via grounding laws) from more fundamental things), or it comes from nothing (*nota bene*: something that is not assembled from but is grounded in some more fundamental reality falls under this option; we will discuss this further anon). Being assembled from pre-existing things (even, somehow, acausally) still implies a substantial metaphysical dependence. What Aristotle would have called 'material causation.' *Aseity* rules this option out. An *a se* being cannot be built out of other things.

This leaves the option of our being appearing out of nothing. The classic dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit* would rule this option out.[28] Again, this principle has received significant discussion in the general case, to which I have (more or less) nothing to add.[29] It will be helpful here to note that in the dictum nothing means *no thing(s)*. It does not mean a lack of material objects, but the presence of relativistic quantum fields or other exotic entities that might defy the everyday conception of a thing but nonetheless count as ontology in Quine's sense.[30] As before, I will concede this principle to its most interesting challengers for the sake of argument to see if we can defend the premise without it while not conceding it full stop.

An intriguing challenge to the principle (and potential examples of something 'coming from nothing' in the sense of being grounded in a non-ontological more fundamental reality) comes from recent work on fundamentality. *Ontological Nihilism* is the position that there are no objects. Turner (2011) gives a rigorous approach to theorizing about the world in such a way that there is no commitment to the existence of any *thing*, and Westerhoff (2020) provides the position a defense. In Quinean terminology, the view he explores trades in all ontology for ideology. A pair of recent papers defend different kinds of views where there is nothing fundamental, and all of the derivative objects are grounded somehow else.

Chen (2021) defends a view where the fundamental facts are nomic facts. There is a void at the fundamental level, with nothing material or matter-like in spacetime. There are then strongly deterministic laws (that is, laws that allow for only one universe-history) which metaphysically explain the world's manifest image. Chen's view is only viable in certain types of physics, and so is not a fully general explanation of how to get something (derivative) from nothing (fundamental). Crucially, Chen's objects do not lack an explanation for their existence.

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[28] A more expansive characterization of *aseity*, such as one that requires omnifundamentality, see e.g. Rubio (2024), would come close to ruling out this case as well, since it would prohibit an *a se* being from appearing "partway through the show," so to speak. It would not, however, rule out the appearance *ex nihilo* of an *a se* being who then explains everything else.

[29] This principle was originally formulated by Parmenides (see Coxon (2009)) and Lucretius (see Stallings (2007)). Davidson (1987) outlines the medieval case in favor of it among Jewish and Islamic thinkers. For contemporary discussion see Knight (1956), Morriston (2002b), Lebens (2020) ch. 2, and Leon (Forthcoming). It's worth noting that while Leon's position does not rule out a being appearing out of nothing for no reason (in his language: without an efficient cause or a material cause), its causal principles do provide a secondary route to ruling out a being appearing out of pre-existing things for no reason (in his language: without an efficient cause but with a material cause).

[30] Kraus (2012) illustrates how certain philosophically naïve thinkers get confused on this issue, although Albert (2012) does an excellent job sorting it out.

Priest (2021) also defends a view on which nothing is the ground of reality. For Priest, "(Nothing) is...what remains when everything has been removed, and by 'everything', here, I mean absolutely *everything*, *all* things." (p. 17) On Priest's view, nothing both is and is not an object, and both is and is not effable. He relies on his dialethic logical views to make sense of this. He then gives the following definition of dependence: A depends on B just in case if B were not the case, then A would not be the case (p. 18). Several examples of this kind of dependence: the shadow of a tree is not the shadow of *a tree* if the tree is not a tree; a hill is not a hill without the plains from which it rises. Both cases exhibit a kind of required contrast. Without the plain to contrast against, there is no hill. For Priest, every object exhibits this kind of dependence on Nothing. They are only objects with Nothing as the contrast case. It's worth noting that Priest's view does not rule out other things being fundamental, since logics of ground usually don't rule out partial grounding relationships between fundamentalia.

The views of Priest and Chen are, nevertheless, inconsistent with an *a se* being. Both require a kind of dependence, although not a dependence on ontology. Dependence on other categories (including paradoxical ones) is still disallowed by the condition of *aseity*. In particular, dependence on Nothing is still a kind of dependence. Chen's view could probably be modified to allow an *a se* being that is not physical, since it arises in the particular context of physical theories that purport to describe the physical universe, but only have something to say about everything else if we add some philosophical stipulation about what everything else is (or is not). Priest's view, on the other hand, can probably only allow an *a se* being if that *a se* being is the paradoxical Nothing. There are both movements in theology to conceive of a perfect being as not a being,[31] and as paradoxical.[32] But I'm not sure how easily they will combine.

Nevertheless, the suggestion that Nothing or the void may feature in explanatory or grounding relations is helpful to have in mind. For it suggests that explications of *aseity* that are overly focused on ontology may miss something important. It would certainly not do for a perfect being to have power, e.g., only because some law of nature says that it does. This suggests an aspect of self-sufficiency that will be helpful here.[33]

*Aseity* requires that a being's existence and the fact that it possesses its key properties be fundamental facts. Whether the world contains an *a se* being is part of its basic structure. And basic structure should not come and go on a whim. This is the temporal analog of a commonplace in metaphysics: metaphysical truths are necessary iff true. Metaphysical truths are eternal iff true. Imagine a world that could change its basic structure without explanation. One day, the mereological laws include tables. The next, they do not. One day, brains ground minds. The next day, they do not. One day, time has an eternalist, 4D structure. The next day, it does not. Allowing possibilities of this type runs contrary to decades of practice in metaphysics. Perhaps someone has a good argument in defense of them, but it's reasonable for a proponent of this argument to dismiss until it is forthcoming.

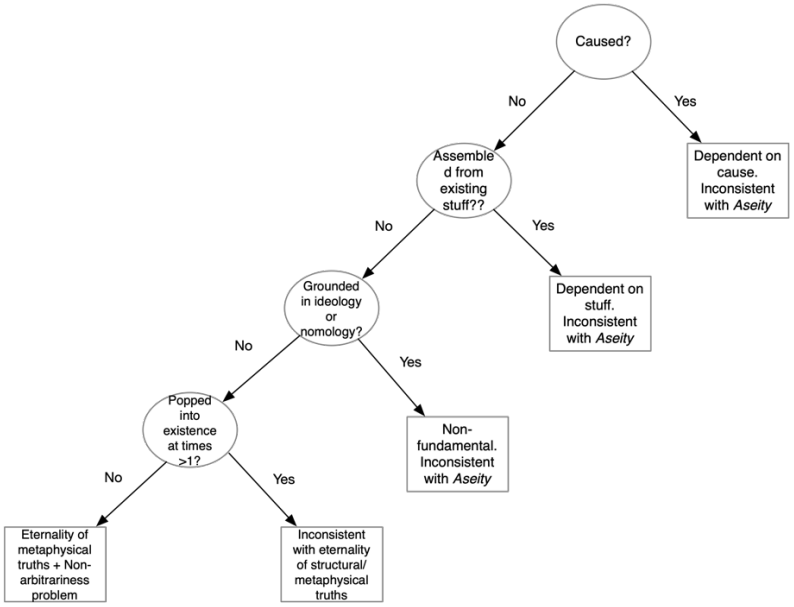
Since an *a se* being's sudden appearance would drastically alter the world's grounding structure, displacing the fundamental level, the eternality of metaphysical truths rules out one's appearance mid-

[31] See Pseudo-Dionysius (5th century/1987) and followers in their tradition, e.g. Davies (1997).
[32] Beall (2023).
[33] Reflection on Litland (2017)'s distinction between the ungrounded and the 0-grounded yields a similar need to pay attention to more than just things, although in a somewhat more abstruse way.

history. The critic has one more card to play. Perhaps an *a se* being cannot appear mid-history without explanation. But could it just happen to exist from the beginning of the universe, and therefore have a beginning? This would preserve the eternality of metaphysical structure.

Still, I think, we have something to say. If an *a se* being could just begin to exist without explanation, it seems like it could begin to exist without explanation at times other than the first. Whereas if it could not simply begin to exist without explanation, this would explain why it cannot begin to exist without existing at prior times. It seems arbitrary to allow an *a se* being to just begin at time 1 but not at times 2+.[34] I'm not sure this should persuade the dedicated critic, but I'm not sure persuading the dedicated critic is the standard for philosophical argumentation. It seems a reasonable place for the theist to start after already conceding a pair of metaphysical principles that have traditionally been important pieces of theistic metaphysics.

This completes the *aseity*-based defense of the axiological premise. A gentle reminder that I only conceded the 'everything that begins to exist must have a cause of its beginning to exist' and '*ex nihilo nihil fit*' principles in the name of exploring how the premise fares without them. A more full-throated defense of the premise may terminate the argument with either of them. What we learned may be summarized as a tree:




We have, then, three *aseity*-based routes to premise 1. (1) If the causal principle of sufficient reason is true, then we have an argument: anything that begins to exist has a cause of its beginning to exist; an *a se* being cannot be caused to begin to exist; therefore, an *a se* being cannot begin to exist. So, if a perfect being is *a se*, then it cannot exist except without a beginning. (2) If *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, then even if an *a se* being could begin to exist without a cause, it would have to be assembled out of something or grounded somehow. These options are both incompatible with *aseity*, so once again an *a se* being could

[34] There could be a theoretically motivated reason to make this distinction, such as a particular theory of modality combined with views about things like anti-retrocausation (a referee suggests that branching actualists might see a real difference here). But without committing to a firm modal metaphysics, the point stands.

not begin to exist. (3) Even if '*ex nihilo, nihil fit*' is false, the appearance of an *a se* being would represent a radical unexplained change in the world's structure. Such radical unexplained changes are the stuff of impossibility. They violate the eternality of metaphysical truths, which is the temporal analog of a common methodological assumption in metaphysics. The impossibility of changes like this also suggests that an *a se* being couldn't just happen to begin to exist, since if it could do that at time 1, why not at times 2+? If even one of these arguments works, the premise is successfully defended. If taken together there's a decent probability that one of these arguments works, the premise is plausible.

### 3.2: DEFENSE OF THE METAPHYSICAL PREMISE

The argument's second premise says: if it were the case that a perfect being was possible but non-actual, then it would be the case that a perfect being could begin to exist. Previous accounts of this argument, such as Smith (2014) and Gale (1991), identify this premise as the weak link in the argument, so its defense is of special interest.[35] Since the premise is about the space of possibilities, the natural way to argue for it would be from principles of modal plenitude.

One common way of thinking about plenitude follows the Principle of Recombination.[36] The very rough idea behind the principle is that, given some possibilities and a coherent way of putting them together, there exists a further possibility that is that way. Nolan (1996) states the principle as such:

UNRESTRICTED RECOMBINATION: for any objects in any worlds, there exists a world that contains any number of duplicates of all of those objects.

While UNRESTRICTED COMBINATION is a powerful principle, there are important things that it does not say. As Nolan himself points out, it is logically weaker than the STRONGER PRINCIPLE OF RECOMBINATION:

STRONGER PRINCIPLE OF RECOMBINATION: for any objects in any worlds, there exists a world that contains any number of distinct duplicates of all of those objects.

This stronger principle is used as a premise in the Forrest-Armstrong argument that motivated Lewis to qualify UNRESTRICTED RECOMBINATION with the proviso 'size and space permitting,' although Nolan has shown that this argument is not successful and so the proviso is not necessary to avoid paradox.

Both UNRESTRICTED RECOMBINATION and the STRONGER PRINCIPLE OF RECOMBINATION leave other things unsaid about the possibilities they postulate. For instance, while they say that arbitrary numbers

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[35] Smith confines his space of possible defenses of the premise to Anselm's corpus and finds nothing plausible, while Gale charges the premise with vulnerability to parody and with begging the question. We will take up Gale's criticism in section 4.

[36] Lewis (1986), section 1.8. Note that the principle of recombination as usually stated presumes that the objects to recombine are spatiotemporally located. Rather than try to reformulate everything to accommodate the possibility of a timeless being, I am setting timeless beings aside as before to be dealt with once the work of translating/reformulating all relevant machinery is done.

of duplicates (or distinct duplicates) can co-exist, they say nothing about how those duplicates may be arranged. More informative in that direction is Lewis's 'patchwork principle:[37]'

PATCHWORK: if it is possible that X happen intrinsically in a spatiotemporal region, and if it is likewise possible that Y happen intrinsically in a region, then also it is possible that X and Y happen intrinsically in two distinct but adjacent regions.

The patchwork principle differs from the recombination principles in several ways. First of all, it concerns events, not objects, although it is motivated by the same 'no necessary connections between existences' idea that guided Lewis's approach to modal epistemology. Second of all, it stipulates that the events be intrinsic to the regions that are being 'patched' together. Something like 'the biggest battle of 1863' won't count, since 'biggest' is extrinsic. But a different description of Gettysburg like 'a battle involving 150,000+ soldiers at a town intrinsically like Gettysburg' would count. However, Lewis's principle still has a weak point. While it stipulates that any events characterized intrinsically could obtain in adjacent regions, it does not say anything about the order. A logical space where X only ever precedes Y will witness the claim about adjacent regions, but still contain the kind of gap that patchwork principles are meant to avoid.

This problem is solved by a more detailed principle from Koons (2014):

BINARY PATCHWORK: If possible world $W_1$ includes spatiotemporal region $R_1$, possible world $W_2$ includes region $R_2$, and possible world $W_3$ includes $R_3$, and $R_1$ and $R_2$ can be mapped onto non-overlapping parts of $R_3$ ($R_{3.1}$ and $R_{3.2}$) while preserving all the metrical and topological properties of the three regions, then there is a world $W_4$ and region $R_4$ such that $R_3$ and $R_4$ are isomorphic, the part of $W_4$ within $R_{4.1}$ exactly duplicates the part of $W_1$ within $R_1$, and the part of $W_4$ within $R_{4.2}$ exactly duplicates the part of $W_2$ within $R_2$.

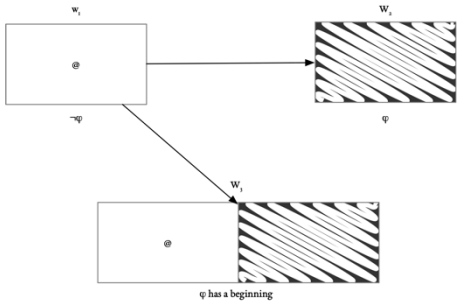
Although he later explores other principles that allow intrinsic duplicates of more than two regions to recombine freely, BINARY PATCHWORK is all we need for our purposes.

While the statement of the principle is somewhat involved, the motivating idea is fairly simple. Suppose we have some worlds. For any two regions in any of those worlds, so long as there is a third region in those worlds that can fit the two regions inside of it and the metrical and topological properties of the regions harmonize (a mostly technical requirement that won't be at play in this debate), there is a world that 'quilts' those regions together. Harmonizing the metrical and topological properties means, roughly, that the region's spacetime structures make sense together as parts of a larger spacetime

[37] Lewis (1983), p. 77.

structure. In picture thinking: as long as something in the relevant spacetime structures doesn't stop us, we can 'cut out' any two regions of our possibilities, 'quilt' them together, and thereby have a possibility so long as it's possible to have a spacetime that big. This possibility preserves the intrinsic features of those two regions.

Assuming that the actual world is possible, the antecedent of (2`) mentions two possibilities: a ϕ-possibility and a ¬ϕ-possibility.[38] The consequent asserts the existence of a third possibility: one where ϕ begins to be true. The patchwork principle tells us that we get a possibility like that by having a duplicate of the ¬ϕ-possibility followed by a duplicate of the ϕ-possibility. We can illustrate this with a diagram. Note that the arrows represent accessibility relations, and take ϕ as the proposition that a perfect being exists.




There are four ways the patchwork principle could fail. There could be some metrical or topological mismatch between $W_1$ and $W_2$ so that they do not 'quilt' together into $W_3$. The fact that the two halves of $W_3$ only duplicate the intrinsic features of $W_1$ and $W_2$ could interfere with our claim that in $W_3$ ϕ begins to be true. Or the two regions could be so big that 'quilting' them together would create a spacetime that's too big to exist, assuming something like Lewis's "size and shape permitting" proviso on possible spacetimes holds.

We have no reason to think that any of these features must be present in this case. Consider a simple model. $W_1$ is a world that contains a particle and nothing else, with a timeline with the structure of the reals (or integers, if we don't want dense time). $W_2$ is a world that contains a perfect being and nothing else, with a timeline with the structure of the reals (or integers, if we don't want dense time). $W_3$ is a world with a timeline with the structure of two copies of the reals (or integers) side by side. We can divide $W_3$ into two regions, $R_{3.1}$ and $R_{3.2}$, each of which has the structure of the reals (or integers). This

[38] A referee suggests: Is the assumption that the actual world is a possible world a problem, given that our argument doesn't require the T-axiom of modal logic? No. Some metaphysicians (Adams, 2021) think it is analytic that the actual world is possible, an assumption strictly weaker than T's claim that $\phi \rightarrow \Diamond\phi$ is valid. Moreover, while T is a pretty popular axiom for alethic modal logics, it is not without its detractors. Notably, David Lewis's Concrete Realism included impossible individuals (Lewis confirmed this in correspondence with Hud Hudson, see Hudson (1997) 79n3 and 80n5 for details) and therefore instances of $\phi \,\&\, \neg\Diamond\phi$. Furthermore, in Cowling's (2011) amodalist attack on T, he does not deny that the actual world is a possibility. So, the principled attempts to deny T do not bleed over into denying that the actual world is a possible world, and our assumption does not covertly appeal to a stronger modal logic than we required for validity of the argument. The intuition that the actual is possible stands on its own. And that is enough for our purposes. A proponent of modal realism should read the claim that '¬ϕ' in the antecedent of (2`) as restricted to actuality, since a claim that the entire pluriverse lacks perfect beings would contradict its conjunct and trivialize the premise.

gives our quilted world, $W_4$, which has a region intrinsically like $W_1$ and a region intrinsically like $W_2$ with an overall temporal structure like $W_3$. This will fulfill the requirements of metrical and topological preservation. $W_4$ will contain a region like $W_1$ followed by a region like $W_2$, and the joint region will be isomorphic to $W_3$.

This raises a question about the temporal structure of $W_3/W_4$. Models of time with two copies of the reals (or integers) next to each other are trivial in tense logic; we can construct them by making the set of times $\mathbb{R} \times \{0\} \cup \mathbb{R} \times \{1\}$ with the 0/1 providing a lexicographic order for the two copies and the usual order taking over otherwise (for the integers, use $\mathbb{Z}$ instead of $\mathbb{R}$). Cosmologists have provided models of the universe that use spacetimes with the structure of two adjacent copies of $\mathbb{R}$.[39] These facts provide a strong presumption of possibility for worlds with temporal structures like this, despite potential concerns about "gaps" in time that might naturally arise.

By iteration, we can scale this simple model up to include more and more complicated objects, properties, and relations in the worlds until we get something realistic. This shows that there's nothing inherent to worlds with perfect beings and worlds without perfect beings that would prevent their quilting. So, if BINARY PATCHWORK or something like it is true, we have a defense of (2`).

Finally, we may consider the question: does the back part of W3 still witness ϕ by having a perfect being in it? It is an intrinsic duplicate of a region of a world with a perfect being in it. But that being begins, which by premise (1`) is adequate to show that it is not perfect. There is, then, of course, something defective about W3. The argument turns on this point. What can we say in favor of W3 containing a perfect being?

Well, it *is* an intrinsic duplicate of a perfect being. By standard criteria of identity across worlds (e.g. Lewis's (1968) counterpart theory, cf. Wang (2015) for application to actualism), W3 or an intrinsic duplicate of it should contain the same being as W2. And it is fairly standard to assume that essential perfection is itself a perfection, so we should expect the being of W2 to be a perfect being in every world in which it exists. This exposes an additional commitment of the argument (to the essentiality of perfection), but one that theists have long been content to take on.[40]

Before departing, we should pause to consider an objection to (2`) from an alleged conflict between patchwork principles and theism. Gordon (2025) argues that if theism is true, certain worlds are

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[39] Some examples: "mirror" universes along the lines of Boyle, Finn, & Turok (2018), (2019) and Boyle & Turok (2021). More exotically, if we have two spacetimes joined at the '0 point' by an Einstein-Rosen Bridge, the negative times of one spacetime will precede the positive times of the other. See Carroll (2019), Nobo (2017) for overviews of the technical details on joining spacetimes with an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. There are not comparable examples that use time with the structure of the integers, because cosmologists generally take time to have the structure of the reals. Thanks to Isaac Wilhelm and Eddy Chen for discussion on this point.

[40] A referee objects: since W2 is not accessible from W3, the perfect being in W3 may be the same being as the one in W2 while having a different essence. W3 would then fail to witness ϕ. Two lines of response. First: if our operative theory of essence is Finean-Aristotelian (Fine, 1994) then it is plausible that essence is not merely intensional, as Plantinga supposed, but hyperintensional, and accompanies identity even into impossible worlds. Second: it is true in W1 that the perfect being of W2 does not exist. So on standard Plantingan approaches to modality *de re*, it is true in W1 that the being in W2 is essentially perfect. But since W1 accesses W3, it must be true in W3 that the being in question has the same essence as it has in W2, even though W2 and W3 do not access each other. Thus, on either of contemporary metaphysics's primary ways of thinking about essence, it is plausible that W3 witnesses ϕ in its latter region.

impossible but if patchwork principles are true, then those worlds are possible. Consequently, we get a conflict.

Gordon argues thus: even if theism is true, there will be some worlds with regions where events of suffering intrinsically occur, but where events that are required for God to allow that suffering do not. But if there are such regions, then they can be quilted together into worlds where events of great suffering occur and God exists, but nothing that would allow God to permit that suffering occurs. These 'evil quilted worlds' are uncreatable and so are not possible. But this gives a counterexample to patchwork principles.

Gordon's argument relies on a universalist, intellectualist meta-ethics. Deny either of these features, and it no longer works. Thus, the theist has two meta-ethical routes to the preservation of patchwork principles. Since theism does not come with a built-in meta-ethics, it's fair to answer a charge of incompatibility between the conclusion of a theistic argument for God's existence and the motivation for one of its premises by pointing out the meta-ethical assumptions on which the charge of incompatibility is based. Of course, the opponent of the argument may always insist on this or that meta-ethics and remain unconvinced, but since the two meta-ethical views I am about to deploy have deep roots in Abrahamic monotheism, there is no space to charge the advocate of the argument with some sort of dialectical error.

The first meta-ethical response to Gordon's argument invokes what Reilly (2023) calls "no-norms theism." This view has roots in the Middle Ages but has found a string of contemporary defenders in Marilyn McCord Adams (1999, 2006), Brian Davies (2011), Mark Murphy (2017), and Daniel Rubio (2018). Each author implements it in different ways and for different reasons, but all share a common core: God is not subject to the same kinds of moral terms that creatures are. In particular, courses of action for which we would have no moral justification are open to God.

Murphy summarizes his application of the view thus:

> So here is a model for the consistency of the existence of evil with the existence of the Anselmian being. Consider some evil, say, the pointless suffering of a deer in a forest fire (Rowe 1990 (1979), pp. 129–30). The Anselmian being might fail to prevent this evil, for no reason at all, because acting so as to prevent that suffering provides the Anselmian being only justifying reasons for acting. Note also that this account of why the Anselmian being's existence is compatible with the existence of creaturely evil is obviously generalizable to any particular evil that one might wish to invoke against the existence of the Anselmian being. (2017, p. 105)

This is applicable to whatever quilted world the objector comes up with. And recall, to defeat the inconsistency, we don't need Murphy to be *right*. We just need him to *be a theist*.

Operating from a different line of argument, Rubio (2018, p. 2988) summarizes his conclusion thus: "I argue that the theist has one viable escape: granting that no world would be irrational or immoral for God to create. Even arbitrarily bad ones." Similar remarks may be found in Davies and Adams. As long as these authors count as theists, we have a defeater for Gordon's claim that theism and the patchwork principles are inconsistent.

The "no norms" theist escape route denied the universal ethic that Gordon assumes. But there is another route, which denies its intellectualist character. Meta-ethical intellectualists hold that important moral properties like goodness and obligation gain their content independently of any agent. Within the realist camp, its historical opponents are the voluntarists. Voluntarists about a meta-ethical property hold that it is rooted at least partly in an agent's will.

Theological voluntarists hold that the relevant agent is God. Because there are many meta-ethically relevant properties, there are many different forms of voluntarism. The strongest forms of voluntarism hold that 'good' and 'bad' are themselves determined by the divine will. Historically, this view has found supporters in Islam, most notably in the Ash'arite school and its precursors,[41] as well as in the high Middle Ages, with William of Ockham and his successors the clearest advocates. Ockham gives a clear statement of it thus:

> I say that although hatred, stealing, committing adultery, and similar acts have a bad circumstance attached to them by common law (insofar as they are done by some-one who is obligated by divine command to do the contrary), never-theless with respect to every absolute item in these acts they could be brought about by God without any bad circumstance attached to them. They could even be done meritoriously by someone in this life, if these acts were to fall under a divine command (in the way in which their opposites do fall under such a command, as a matter of fact).[42]

Thus, the strong voluntarist has a response to Gordon as well. In worlds that are intrinsically like repeated patterns of suffering without any of the 'justifiers' present in our starting possibilities, God wills the meta-ethical properties appropriately so that these worlds come out as good, or their creation comes out as permissible.

Of course, there are many objections to strong theological voluntarism. The point again is not that Ockham and the Ash'arites are *right*. It's that they are theists.

The voluntarist solution to Gordon's argument suggests a further objection.[43] Suppose we quilt together part of a world where God believes, say, that there will be a sea battle tomorrow with a part of a world where there is no sea battle? This should be unproblematic from the point of view of patchwork principles but is in conflict with divine omniscience. This sort of problem will generalize to any divine mental state that is plausibly contingent, e.g. intentions or volitions.

The objection makes an important presupposition. It presupposes that God has contingent intrinsic properties. This is a theologically controversial presupposition. Going back at least to Plotinus, the classical conception of God has been as incapable of intrinsic difference. We find this view in such luminaries as Avicenna, Aquinas, and Maimonides. Often it gets associated with the doctrines of divine simplicity and immutability. In answer, then, we can start by pointing out that if classical models of God are any good, then there is no inherent conflict between theism and patchwork principles.

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[41] See, for instance, the discussion in al-Attar (2010), ch. 2 and many quotations translated in Adamson & Benevich (2023) ch. 12.

[42] Ockham *Reportatio* q. 15. Translated by Eric Hagerdorn (2021).

[43] Thanks to a referee for this journal for raising this objection to me.

But we can go a little further. The best defense of the conception of God as intrinsically immutable within contemporary analytic philosophy is from O'Connor (1999). Contemplating a parallel problem – how to have contingent divine mental states without contingent divine intrinsic difference – O'Conner turns to a radical content externalism. O'Conner uses an analogy to the products of agent-causal acts. These, he argues, also involve the exercise of capacities with contingent outcomes but without intrinsic difference in the antecedent states of the agent. Suppose I face a free libertarian choice. In $W_1$ I choose A, in $W_2$ I choose ¬A. By standard libertarian lights, $W_1$ and $W_2$ must be the same up until the point of my choice. Which means I must be intrinsically the same when choosing A as when choosing ¬A. The content of my volition must be external, and it must be the product of the choice itself.

So likewise for God's other contingent mental features like what to believe, what to intend, and what to will. The very act of creating provides the external (that is, the contingent) content of these states, which do not have contingent internal content.

Where does that leave us? There are certainly ways of putting together a model of God that is incompatible with patchwork principles.[44] Some of them popular. But as we have seen, there are ways of putting together a model of God that is compatible with patchwork principles. These ways are not *ad hoc* creatures of necessity invented to save an argument. We could restrict ourselves to pre-Anselmian sources and still find them well-represented among theists. I conclude, then, that while the objection has some bite, it ultimately fails. And I remind the reader that even if we lose patchwork principles, we may yet find another way of justifying the argument's second premise. In fact, another one will come up in § 4.3.

## 4: OBJECTIONS

We now have a valid argument with three premises, all of which are philosophically defensible (while we have not examined it, the possibility premise in its unnecessitated form is not typically an object of controversy). Nevertheless, ontological arguments have traditionally faced a fierce array of objections. As a final step in the exploration of the argument, we will see how it fares against them.

### 4.1: QUESTION-BEGGING

One prominent, general-purpose critique of ontological arguments alleges that they beg the question.[45] Begging the question is not a formal defect in an argument; rather, it is a dialectical error. $P \rightarrow P$ is valid and sound when P is true. In general, question-begging arguments employ premises that would not be acceptable by anyone who does not already accept the conclusion. Does our argument do that?

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[44] I will mention one common way of putting together a model of God that is not in conflict with BINARY PATCHWORK but does conflict with other ideas in the recombination tradition of modal plenitude: models where God is necessary. Because binary patchwork tells us how to "make" possibilities out of some background stock of possibilities, as long as all of our starting possibilities have an eternal God, none of the quilted worlds will lack one. It will take much stronger principles, along the lines of the strongest discussed in Nolan (1996), to create a conflict. And we might find principles like BINARY PATCHWORK useful and intuitive without committing to stronger principles in the same intellectual tradition.

[45] Rowe (1989), McGrath (1994).

Not obviously. Premise (1) is an axiological premise about what makes a being great. An atheist might easily endorse it while holding that there is in fact no perfect being. Premise (2) is a metaphysical premise about how the space of possibilities works. It follows from general and fairly neutral principles of plenitude that atheists can and often do accept. In his discussion of ontological arguments, Richard Gale charges Norman Malcolm with begging the question in employing a premise like (2). However, Malcolm's hypothetical dialectical context is very different from our own. Malcolm is very explicitly considering an opponent who thinks that a perfect being might just happen not to exist. In our context, the opponent is an atheist. Further, Gale does not consider arguments for his (2)-like premises. We have already provided an argument with motivations that atheists generally do not consider question-begging.

The final premise required to get to theism, that a perfect being is possible, is parallel to a premise often indicted as question-begging in other modal ontological arguments. However, there is a crucial difference. Standard (e.g. S5 and KTB) modal ontological arguments need the premise that possibly necessarily there exists a perfect being. Our argument only needs it to be possible that there is a perfect being. This difference is crucial. Any theistic argument must presuppose that a perfect being is possible. As a premise it can and should be disputed but using it should not be a dialectical crime. Of course, there will always be auxiliary assumptions some discussant may accept, and even find overwhelmingly plausible, that could make the premise inappropriate in a particular context. Such is true of any premise. But this will not support a general charge of question-begging.

### 4.2: PARODY

Another classic objection to ontological arguments appeals to parody. A parody argument aims to show that the structure of the argument must be flawed, because when applied to subjects that are not perfect beings, it yields absurd conclusions. One of the earliest responses to Anselm's *Proslogion*, from the monk Gaunilo, employed this tactic. Gaunilo aimed to[46] replace every occurrence of 'perfect being' in Anselm's argument with 'perfect island,' and gave Anselm a dilemma: accept the existence of a perfect island or abandon his argument. While Gaunilo's parody of Anselm has been hotly debated, parody arguments do sometimes succeed. Caterus's parody of Descartes's ontological argument is widely accepted as showing the original to be fatally flawed.

A well-constructed parody inherits the logical status and apparatus (e.g. fully general and/or domain neutral premises) of its target argument, so two questions control how successful a parody argument is: how plausible are the new premises, and how bad is the new conclusion? If the new premises are implausible, and this implausibility does not alone undermine the plausibility of the original argument's premises, the parody fails. If the new conclusion is palatable, the parody becomes a discovery.

In our case, the defense we used for premise (2) is very general. This means that parody premises of (2) are likely to be as plausible as (2). Consequently, the fate of parody arguments will largely depend on the plausibility of parodies of (1) by things that are plausibly possible. There are things other than a perfect being that plausibly only exist without a beginning. Numbers, for example. Or properties. But

[46] As Leftow (Ms. b) argues, Guanilo had the right idea but executed it poorly.

concluding that these exist does not embarrass the argument. For classic parody objects, like islands or lions, the analog of (1) will not be very plausible.[47]

Gale considers the argument vulnerable to a parody from the Greatest Possible Cad, a being that possesses all of the divine attributes except replacing omnibenevolence with omnimalificence.[48] There is considerable question as to whether this being is possible. For instance, if anything like the Guise of the Good thesis in moral psychology holds, then omnimalificence is incompatible with omniscience.[49] An omniscient being will know the actual Good, and so will it. But setting aside conceptual difficulties like this, the actuality (and so by reverse reasoning of this argument the possibility) of a perfect cad is thrown greatly into question by the good things in this world, in exactly the same way that a perfect being's actuality (and so by reverse reasoning of this its possibility) is called into question by the bad things in this world. And here, Anselmians have a move that undermines the parody. They can contend that a perfect being has no obligations – to morality or to immorality. This takes both omnibenevolence and omnimalificence off the table and converges the being to be proved with the parody being. This was a common position in the Middle Ages and has enjoyed a string of recent defenses.[50]

### 4.3: SYMMETRY

A final major objection to ontological arguments appeals to a symmetry between the possibility premise and its denial.[51] In both S5 and KTB, just as the possibility of a necessary being implies that there is a necessary being, so the possibility that there is no necessary being implies that there is no necessary being. Many of the same tools that can be employed to defend the possibility of a necessary being can also be used to defend the possibility of there not being a necessary being.[52]

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[47] A referee wonders: maybe *islands* are not essentially beginningless, but couldn't a particular island be essentially beginningless? They find it plausible. I do not. A thing's essence is what makes it the kind of thing that it is (see Fine (1994) for the classic contemporary statement). So, a particular "island" with an essence that differs from the standard island essence is not an island, it is some other thing. I don't see why the theist would admit these stipulatively-beginningless not-islands as possible. The parodist cannot prove their possibility by pointing to Hawaii like she could with an island. Of course, the parodist may insist that their intuition is not of a kind "beginningless island," but of an island whose modal profile *de re* excludes a beginning. A Plantingan, rather than a Finean, essentially beginningless island. This, I think, is illicit in the current dialectic. An advantage of this argument's possibility premise is that it requires only the possibility of a perfect being, not the possibility of a necessary perfect being. To intuit the possibility of a necessarily beginningless island (rather than the possibility of an instance of a kind that is essentially beginningless) breaks the parallel that the parodist needs. In a parody, the parodist does not get to import her own logic and metaphysics; she is constrained to the resources that the original argument deploys.

[48] In discussion, Matthew Adelstein suggested a similar parody. More generally, this an instance of the evil God challenge; for discussion, see Lancaster-Thomas (2018a, 2018b). On an Plotinian-Augustinian/privation theory of evil (cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.8, Augustine, *De Natura Boni*, and Evans (1982)), such a being may not be possible. But we will proceed if it is to see what else can be said.

[49] Orsi (2023) gives a thorough treatment.

[50] Rubio (2023) summarizes the recent case, with Rubio (2018), Murphy (2017), Davies (2011), and Adams (1999) presenting different arguments that converge on more or less the same conclusion.

[51] Schrader (1991), Schmid (2023).

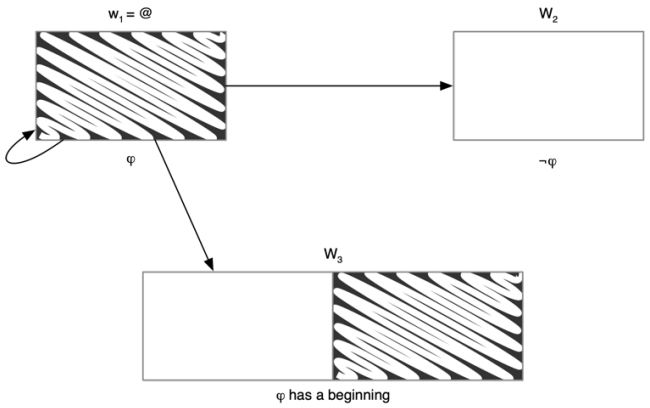
[52] Schmid (Ms.) gives a thorough catalog. Fritz, Lo, and Schmid (Forthcoming) contains an excellent discussion of "reverse ontological arguments" and the potential to break the symmetry not by choosing one possibility claim, but by choosing a weaker modal logic. Since we need only K, which reach only under the assumption that the theist's equivalence between God existing and God necessarily existing is not itself necessary, the viability of this approach to breaking symmetry will depend upon results in non-normal modal logics. But I'm not sure how promising this route is, since both arguments require duality of the modal operators as well as classical components like *modus tollens*.

This argument is not vulnerable to a standard symmetry response. Because its possibility premise says only that a perfect being is possible, not that a perfect being is necessarily possible, the symmetrical premise asserts that there it is possible that there is not a perfect being. Because its background modal logic is only K, it does not follow from the possibility that there is not a perfect being that there is not a perfect being.[53]

Nevertheless, there is an objection to the argument in the vicinity of symmetry arguments that probably constitutes the atheist's best reply. It relies not on the possibility that there is not a perfect being, but on a slight rearrangement of the antecedent of (2`).

$(2^{\dagger})\ (\phi\ \&\ \Diamond\neg\phi) \rightarrow \Diamond(\phi\ \&\ \neg(H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$

$(2^{\dagger})$ roughly reads: if there were a perfect being and it were possible that there were not a perfect being, then it would be possible that a perfect being begins to exist. It can be motivated by BINARY PATCHWORK in the same way that (2`) can be.




Placing $(2^{\dagger})$ into the argument, we now have an argument for the conclusion $\phi \rightarrow \Box\phi$:

| | |
|---|---|
| $(1\text{`})\ \Box(\phi \rightarrow (H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$ | PREMISE |
| $(2^{\dagger})\ (\phi\ \&\ \Diamond\neg\phi) \rightarrow \Diamond(\phi\ \&\ \neg(H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$ | PREMISE |
| $(1\text{```})\ \Box\neg(\phi\ \&\ \neg(H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$ | (1`), SUBSTITUTION |
| $(1\text{````})\ \neg\Diamond\neg\neg(\phi\ \&\ \neg(H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$ | (1```), DEFINITION OF $\Box$ |
| $(1\text{`````})\ \neg\Diamond(\phi\ \&\ \neg(H\phi\ \&\ HPT))$ | (1````), DOUBLE NEGATION ELIMINATION |
| $(3^{\dagger})\ \neg(\phi\ \&\ \Diamond\neg\phi)$ | (1`````), $(2^{\dagger})$, MODUS TOLLENS |
| $(4^{\dagger})\ \phi \rightarrow \neg\Diamond\neg\phi$ | $(3^{\dagger})$, SUBSTITUTION |

[53] Strengthening the modal logic to T and adding the premise that a perfect being is a necessary being will restore the equivalence between the possibility of a perfect being and the possibility of a necessary perfect being. But these assumptions, especially the second one, are non-trivial.

| | |
|---|---|
| $(5^{\dagger})\ \phi \rightarrow \Box\phi$ | $(4^{\dagger})$, DEFINITION OF $\Box$ |
| $(6^{\dagger})\ \Diamond\neg\phi$ | REVERSE POSSIBILITY PREMISE |
| $(7^{\dagger})\ \neg\phi$ | $(5^{\dagger})$, $(6^{\dagger})$ MODUS TOLLENS |

The situation with $(5^{\dagger})$ is a little more complicated than with standard symmetry arguments. The conditional $\phi\rightarrow\Box\phi$ has often been defended by theists, sometimes at great length (e.g. Leftow (2012), (2022); Adams (1983)). Thus, while it opens the argument up to a symmetrical response, for those who do accept that a perfect being is possible and wish to inquire further into the nature of a perfect being, it is good news.

Another difference from standard symmetry arguments is that two symmetrical premises are required to argue that there is no perfect being. The usual symmetrical possibility premise is joined by $(2^{\dagger})$. And while (2`) and $(2^{\dagger})$ are both similar in content and both equally well motivated by BINARY PATCHWORK, the need for a second symmetrical premise opens up the space of possible symmetry-breakers. If theists cannot find a way to break the symmetry between the possibility of a perfect being and the possibility of no perfect being, perhaps they can break the symmetry between (2`) and $(2^{\dagger})$. This would require appealing to a principle of plenitude which is quite different from BINARY PATCHWORK, but modal epistemology is notoriously heterogenous.[54]

An example of how a shift in modal theory could break the symmetry: one rival to the patchwork/Lewisian approach to modality that we used to defend (2`) is called *branching actualism*. The key attribute of branching actualist theories of modality assigns all possibilities some shared initial history.[55] We can picture the possibilities as forming a tree structure, with a (perhaps minimal) trunk and a branchpoint where every mere possibility departs from actuality. Now consider (2`), which roughly says: if there is no perfect being but there could have been one, then it could have a beginning. In branching actualism, anything that does not exist but could exist must exist 'downstream' on some branch that isn't (settled as) actual. If we assume that it is sufficient for something to have a beginning that it exists at a time and does not exist at all times before that time, then it follows on branching actualism that anything that is merely possible could begin to exist. By contrast, consider $(2^{\dagger})$, which says: if something exists but could fail to exist, then it could exist with a beginning. This does not follow. Suppose branching actualism is true, there is no first time, and there is a perfect being that could die tomorrow. This will witness the antecedent of $(2^{\dagger})$, but the consequent will be false.

SECTION: CONCLUSION

This concludes our preliminary look at the argument. From it, we draw the following conclusions: (i) the argument is valid in system K, with no other machinery required (although we did need standard tense operators to express the premises); (ii) the argument's axiological premise is plausible and may be motivated by direct argument or by appeal to divine *aseity*; (iii) the argument's metaphysical premise is plausible and may be motivated by appeal to a weak combinatorial approach to modal plenitude, namely

[54] Mallozi, Vaidya, and Wallner (2023) provide an overview. Leftow (Ms. a), working on a different argument in the *Reply*, motivates a premise very similar to (2`) in ways that do not appeal to BINARY PATCHWORK.
[55] Schmid and Malpass (2023) section 3 gives a helpful summary of how these views work.

Koons's BINARY PATCHWORK principle; (iv) while the argument must appeal to the possibility of a perfect being as a premise, it need not appeal to the possibility of a necessary perfect being or even to the necessary possibility of a perfect being, and; (v) the argument is in good shape against charges of question-begging and not especially vulnerable to parodies, but faces a symmetry counterargument similar to those other modal ontological arguments face, although the counterargument is a little more complicated than standard symmetry counterarguments.

The following questions were raised but not resolved. (i) is there a non-normal modal logic in which the argument is valid? (ii) do we have a definitive reason to prefer the possibility of a perfect being to the possibility of no perfect being? (iii) can premise (2`) be given an alternative motivation that does not serve equally well to motivate ($2^{\dagger}$) and/or is compatible with more models of God than the patchwork principles are? (iv) how does the argument, and its various objections and potential parodies, fare when transposed into a logico-metaphysical setting built for timeless entities? These remain for future work.[56]

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