IS THEISM INCOMPATIBLE WITH PATCHWORK PRINCIPLES?

ABSTRACT: Patchwork Principles say: if you have two possible regions of spacetime, there is a third possibility that contains an intrinsic duplicate of the two joined together in any geometrically coherent way. Since they were introduced and defended by David Lewis, they have been a popular approach to the question of modal plenitude: how is the space of possibility filled out? Recent work has argued that theism is incompatible with Patchwork Principles, because some of the resulting 'quilted' possibilities would be impermissible for God to create. I argue that there are three ways to resist this argument: (i) a theological meta-ethical voluntarism, which makes the meaning of terms like 'good' and 'evil' dependent on the divine will; (ii) divine normative exceptionalism, which is compatible with both moral realism and moral rationalism but insists that God is not a moral agent, and therefore has no obligations; and, (iii) a distinction between two senses of possibility, where the patchwork principles apply to possible objects of creation while divine morality applies to reality in total.

KEYWORDS: Theism, Voluntarism, Patchwork Principles, Recombination, Modal Plenitude, Divine Command Theory

I INTRODUCTION

Theories of modal plenitude tell us how to circumscribe the range of metaphysical possibilities. In the words of David Lewis, they are meant to ensure that "there are no gaps in logical space." [1986, p. 86] Lewis's precisification of this idea was the *principle of recombination*, which was designed so that "patching together parts of different possible worlds yields another possible world." [1986, p. 87-88] Lewisian 'patchwork principles' have become an important approach to filling out logical space, enjoying both intuitive support and a number of defenses and elaborations.[1] In recent work, Noah Gordon [2025] has argued that patchwork principles are inconsistent with theism. In a nutshell, Gordon claims: if modal space is characterized by patchwork principles, then some possibilities are such that a theistic God could not create them. Specifically, they contain evils without appropriately linked goods and so their creation would run afoul of some norm governing divine action. Thus, a dilemma: either the patchwork principles must go, or theism must.

The loss of patchwork principles would be a loss for theists. They feature prominently in two recent versions of arguments for the existence of God – Robert Koons's [2014] New Kalam Cosmological Argument and Daniel Rubio's [Forthcoming] presentation of Anselm's Temporal-Ontological Argument. Additionally, they provide a popular approach to modal plenitude that has considerable intuitive appeal and broad use within contemporary metaphysics. In addition to rescuing theistic use of patchwork principles, the escape routes I will propose offer theists a response to the modal problem of evil generally.

I offer three lines of response to Gordon's Dilemma on behalf of the theist. The first line of response adverts to theistic voluntarism. According to theistic voluntarists, divine volition is the

[1] Notably: Armstrong [1989], Nolan [1996], Koons [2014], Hawthorne and Russell [2018].

ultimate ground of normativity. Things are good or bad, right or wrong, according to divine fiat. As a result, Gordon's evil quilted worlds are possible so long as divine volitions in those worlds are appropriately aligned to their contents. The second line of response adverts to divine normative exceptionalism. According to divine normative exceptionalists, God is not a moral agent and therefore the norms that Gordon relies on to rule out the evil quilted worlds do not apply to the act of creation. The third line of response adverts to an ambiguity in the term 'possible world.' According to this response, patchwork principles govern not Kripkean complete possible worlds but Leibnizian "candidates for divine creation." This response preserves the logical-space-filling advantages of patchwork principles, especially as it is applied to modal epistemology, while avoiding Gordon's Dilemma. I do not choose between these three responses; all three are available to theists, depending on their taste in meta-ethics.

II GORDON'S DILEMMA

First, Gordon's Dilemma. To do that, we begin with patchwork principles. After giving a rigorously formulated patchwork principle that is less powerful than many of those discussed in the literature but that (a) those stronger patchwork principles entail and (b) is itself sufficiently powerful to get the problem started, we will see how it generates the evil quilted world that features in Gordon's Dilemma. We will then introduce the dilemma itself, including key choice points in how it develops.

II.I PATCHWORK PRINCIPLES

Koons [2014] deploys patchwork principles in his New Kalam Argument for the existence of God. To introduce the basic idea, he begins with one called BINARY PATCHWORK.

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.

The principle is complicated. We can break it down piece by piece, as a 'recipe' for generating possibilities. Step 1: find two spatiotemporal regions of possible worlds. Without non-identity clauses, this could be the same part of one world twice over. The eventual goal is to 'quilt' these together into a new possibility. But there are various reasons this may not make sense. For example, it might be that the two regions combined are "too big" to fit into a single spacetime structure. This worry comes from some of the initial debates over Lewis's Principle of Recombination, specifically an objection pressed by Forrest and Armstrong [1984]. Without getting into too many technical details, Forrest and Armstrong argue that Lewis's principle implied that a possible world could have strictly more things as parts than it has as parts.[2] Lewis [1986, § 2.2] responded by

[2] For further discussion, see Nolan [1996] and Bricker [2020].

adding a proviso to his principle: "size and space permitting." This proviso is what the clause *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 $R_{3.2}$)* enforces. So, step 2: check that quilting our two regions together will not violate size limits on spacetimes.

This brings us to step 3. There might be a 'mismatch' between our two spacetime regions that prevents us from quilting them together. Two ways of creating such a mismatch invoke the metrical and topological properties of spacetimes. The metrical features of a spacetime concern how things like *distances*, *angles*, and *curvature* behave. Two spacetimes might have incompatible metrical features – maybe one has a Euclidean geometry and another has a Riemannian geometry. The topological features of a spacetime concern how points are connected, and where/whether it has boundaries. Two spacetimes might have incompatible topological features, such as open vs. closed boundaries that don't make sense to quilt together. So, the clause *while preserving all the metrical and topological properties of the three regions* tells us to check that the technical features of our two regions are compatible, and that the resulting quilted spacetime is compatible with the technical features of spacetimes of its size.

Once we have passed all of these checks, we get our prize: *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*. This tells us that there exists a possible world with a spacetime region where the first part of that region is an exact duplicate of the first region we grabbed, and the second part of that region is an exact duplicate of the second region we grabbed.

It is important to note that, while objects duplicate seamlessly into quilted worlds, extrinsic properties and relations do not. Only intrinsic properties are preserved by quilting. Thus, properties like 'being the first star' and 'being the furthest star from Sol' will generally speaking not survive the transfer, because they can divide duplicates. However, properties like 'being star-shaped' will survive the transfer, since shape is an intrinsic property.

II.II GORDON'S EVIL QUILTED WORLD

In brief, here is Gordon's argument that theism and BINARY PATCHWORK are incompatible: Theism has rules for which worlds God, who is omnibenevolent, can create. These might be axiological rules, so that the creation can never drop beneath a certain threshold of value. These might be deontological rules, so that certain patterns like gratuitous suffering never appear, even in worlds that are on-balance very good. In either case, there are rules. But the only constraints on 'quilting' worlds are logical/coherence based. Consequently, we might be able to patch together bad events, but not the good events that are so connected to them that allowing them does not break the rules for creating.

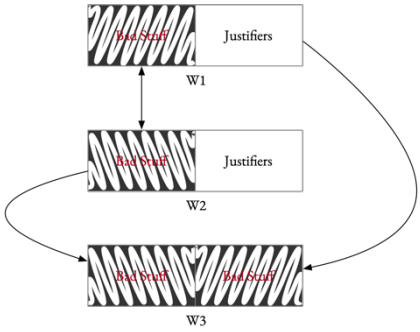
The simplest attempt at an evil quilted world would simply stack 'bad' regions of spacetime to the maximum allowed under the relevant patchwork principle. Here the objective is to squeeze as much evil as possible into the world, in hopes of running afoul of some axiological limit. Patchwork principles such as Koons's [2014] INFINITARY PATCHWORK and Nolan's [1996] UNBOUND PRINCIPLE OF RECOMBINATION, which allow for the creation of very big worlds from a

single small spacetime region, are most vulnerable to this approach. More limited principles such as BINARY PATCHWORK require a more robust stock of starting possibilities to yield similar results.

However, it is unclear that the axiological strategy has much bite against theism. If all that matters is how valuable actuality is after creation, then God's value is fair game when reckoning the value of a world. Theists typically assign God a very high value. *A fortiori*, some theists assign God the only intrinsic value (e.g. Murphy [2017], see Wielenberg [2014] and Rubio [2025a] for further discussion) or a value so great that it 'absorbs' all other value-quantities (e.g. Johnston [2019]). In these cases, it is unlikely that even an arbitrarily large world filled with evil would balance off the goodness of God to make reality as a whole run afoul of some axiological requirement. We might try restricting axiological requirements to the creation alone, rather than reality as a whole. It is more challenging to motivate these kinds of rules. They have been most thoroughly discussed in the literature on Rowe's [2003] improvability argument (see Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder [1994], Leftow [2005a], [2005b], and Zimmerman [2019]). But the greater threat comes from the spectre of violating deontic requirements.

Deontic requirements on the goodness of creation, or the relationship between created evils and other possible goods or evils, are commonly endorsed by atheists and theists alike. J.L. Mackie [1955] thought that any created evil whatsoever was impermissible. More common, though, are constraints that link created evils to created goods or potential evils in various ways. Both Alvin Plantinga [1974] and Nelson Pike [1963] endorsed a formula like: 'God is justified in permitting evil if it is logically required for some greater good or to prevent some greater evil.' Roderick Chisholm [1968] introduced the idea of 'defeat.' Some created evil is defeated if there exists a good such that (i) the goodness of the good balances off the badness of the evil, and (ii) the evil is necessary for not merely the existence, but the goodness of the defeating good. These principles lend themselves much more to conflict with evil quilted worlds.

All that is required to create the conflict is an initial stock of worlds that fulfill the creatability constraint, but that locate the goods that redeem the created evils in different spacetime regions.[3] Figure 1 illustrates the situation, where the patchwork principle allows us to create a world that violates the constraint from two worlds that do not.



1 Gordon's Evil Quilted World

[3] This proviso applies mainly to formulations of patchwork principles, like BINARY PATCHWORK, that talk about regions of spacetime. It is not applicable to recombination-type principles that merely talk about duplicates of things. Since the construction is more difficult when forced to work with entire spacetime regions, I will cast the argument in those terms with the application to recombination-type principles left *mutatis mutandis* to the reader.

Given the possibilities of W1 and W2, each of which has some bad stuff which is then justified later (perhaps some lives with suffering that is redeemed in an afterlife), patchwork principles deliver the possibility of W3, which has bad stuff but no justifier. Since W3 is an unjustified world, God cannot create it. Since W3 is possible, God must not exist at W3. Given standard theistic commitments to divine necessity,[4] this means that theism is false. Any theistic escape from Gordon's Dilemma must either deny the possibility of W3 or argue that W3 is in fact creatable.

III THREE THEISTIC ESCAPE ROUTES

To maintain both theism and the patchwork principles, something must give. To see our options, we lay out a Gordon-style argument:

(1) If the patchwork principles hold, then an evil quilted world is possible
(2) If God exists, then an evil quilted world is uncreatable
(3) If an evil quilted world is uncreatable, then it is impossible

Therefore

(4) If God exists, then the patchwork principles do not hold

As stated, the argument is valid. Thus, to resist it, a premise must go. As figure 1 illustrates, even for the simplest patchwork principle, resisting (1) is a challenge. Some kind of rule on justifiers for evils that have to be collocated with the evil could, in theory, provide a route to its denial, but that does not seem promising. For instance, many theodicies rely heavily on the afterlife to provide compensation, redemption, defeat, or some other justifying payoff for evils in this life. All of these would fall afoul of this rule. Consequently, we turn our attention to (2) and (3). Within the theistic traditions, there are two ways of denying (2) that present themselves. Denial of (3) is much trickier, but there is one route we shall explore. In all, this gives us three ways for the theist to preserve patchwork principles. Which is best depends on which of various other ancillary assumptions or commitments she is willing to abandon.[5]

III.I ESCAPE ROUTE ONE: META-ETHICAL THEOLOGICAL VOLUNTARISM

Theological voluntarism about a domain is the view that key facts about that domain are fixed by divine volition. So meta-ethical theological voluntarism is the view that key meta-ethical facts are fixed by divine volition. There are several variations available, depending on which key meta-ethical facts divine volition fixes.[6] Some strains, for example, let terms like 'good' or 'evil' have non-voluntaristic referents, but obtain their normativity from divine volition.[7] But the strain of

[4] See Leftow [2010], [2022]; for dissent, see Swinburne [1994].
[5] A referee asks: is skeptical theism a viable response, as in other cases of the problem of evil? The answer, I think is a clear 'no.' Skeptical theism relies on a lack of knowledge to block otherwise tempting inferences. In evil quilted worlds, there are not connections between goods and evils that we do not know. We know exactly what those worlds are like intrinsically. So the skeptical theist must rely on the appearance of some extrinsic justifier for the evils involved. The supposition that such a justifier must appear outstrips the kind of epistemic caution that usually motivates skeptical theistic concerns, so I set it aside as a non-viable escape route.
[6] Murphy [2025] gives a good survey.
[7] Adams [1999] and Quinn [1978] both defend views like this.

interest to us lets 'good' and 'evil' themselves take their identities from divine volition. A clear statement of the relevant view comes from William of Ockham, one of its most noteworthy defenders:

> 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).[8]

According to theological voluntarists of this variety, divine volitions explain why good and evil things are good and evil. Often, this is motivated by a desire to preserve divine omnipotence, freedom, or aseity. Our objective is not to argue for (or against) theological meta-ethical voluntarism. It is merely to point that theists who accept it can also accept the patchwork principles.

In fact, meta-ethical theological voluntarism has a rich history in theistic thought. While Ockham represents its most developed form in the Latin west, it had if anything a more pronounced presence in Islamic thought. Several early traditions of thought in Islam embraced voluntarism,[9] but it finds its clearest and most developed form in the Ash'arite school.[10] A particularly vivid statement of the voluntarist position comes from Al-Ghazali:

> It is proven that the command does not indicate goodness nor does the prohibition indicate evil. There is no meaning for good and evil related to the entity of things. The good is what He [Allah] commanded and the evil is what He prohibited.[11]

Additional statements and descriptions of Ash'arite voluntarism with similar content may be found in texts translated in Adamson & Benevich [2023] ch. 12, from Muhammed Al-Shahrastani (T27), Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi (T36), Sayf Al-Din Al-Amidi (T50), Nasr Al-Din Al-Tusi (T58), and Shams Al-Din Al-Samarqandi (T73). Geffel [1983] provides a further systematic study of Ash'arite meta-ethics, which he characterizes as "a very pure kind of voluntaristic occasionalism." The characteristic feature of Ash'arite voluntarism is a semantic thesis: the terms 'good' and 'evil' are only meaningful in the presence of divine commands/volitions, at least in their moral sense.[12] Voluntarism is by no means the only approach to meta-ethics in Islamic thought. But it represents a significant aspect of the majority report.

Interestingly, there does not appear to be much of a tradition of meta-ethical theological voluntarism in Jewish thought, as Sagi and Statman [1995] indirectly show when they argue that Judaism does not have a tradition of divine command ethics more generally.

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[8] Ockham *Reportatio* q. 15. Translated by Eric Hagerdorn [2021].
[9] See al-Attar [2010], ch. 2.
[10] Adamson & Benevich [2023], p. 642 contains a brief informative summary.
[11] Quoted in al-Attar [2010], p. 167n62.
[12] As Adamson & Benevich [2023], p. 642-643 observes, the Ash'arites acknowledged a sense of good and evil in which acts good acts further the aims of the agent while bad acts hinder them, but they associated this with instrumental rationality, not the distinctively moral sense we are interested in here, to which justified praise and blame attach themselves.

If theological meta-ethical voluntarism is true, then the goodness or badness of an act/event is not intrinsic to it. One and the same spacetime region and its duplicate may be filled with good things or with bad things depending on the divine will. But crucially, patchwork principles conserve only the intrinsic features of the spacetime regions they quilt into new possibilities. Thus, as long as the divine volition that determines what is good and what is bad are not themselves part of the regions quilted into the "evil" world, the meta-ethical voluntarist can say: perhaps the "evil" quilted world may contain pain, suffering, and what is actually ill-being, in that world the divine volition makes pain, suffering, and actual ill-being good and therefore creatable.

The simplest way to secure this result is to deny that God inhabits any region of spacetime, say by being eternal.[13] There is however a more complicated way, in case it is of use to subject God, too, to recombination.[14] The more complicated way relies on the idea that God's intrinsic features are modally invariant. Traditional doctrines such as immutability and simplicity have historically motivated this thought. However, this creates an immediate problem: if God cannot vary intrinsically, and divine volitions have their content intrinsically, then divine volitions cannot vary. So ends any interesting voluntarism and perhaps any interesting contingency writ large (but see § III.III).[15]

Partisans of divine simplicity are, of course, aware of this problem, and have offered a solution in the form of radical content externalism. Following O'Connor [1999], they offer an analogy that begins with libertarian agent-causation. Let *t* be the moment a libertarian causal agent makes a decision. At *t*, following the usual condition on libertarian leeway (see Lewis [1981]), consistent with the laws of nature and history of the world up to *t* (inclusive), the decision could go one way or another. In the worlds where the agent chooses A/B, she is at-*t* an intrinsic duplicate of her counterpart in the other world. If she were not, the leeway condition would not be fulfilled and contrary-to-supposition she would not be a libertarian agent. If so, then the content of the intention formed when she decides is radically external. The content of her intention just is its product.

If this can be the relationship between a decision and its contents for relatively mundane things like intentions formed by libertarian agent-causes, then perhaps it can provide a model for divine volitions to create. On this account, the content of God's creative will simply is its product, with no intervening intention.[16] Likewise, we can make the content of the divine meta-ethical volitions dependent on the product of the divine act of creation. Since we're not defending simplicity here, we need not make them identical to the creative volition. The key point is that the divine meta-

[13] Stump and Kretzmann [1981] and Leftow [1991] are the most artful contemporary defenders of this view. Views that place God in time but not in spacetime often appeal to a distinction between 'physical' and 'metaphysical' times (e.g. Craig [2001], Mullins [2016]). As long as the patchwork principle applies to the physical spacetime rather than the metaphysical time-series, these views are also adequate to task. Views that place God in spacetime are rarer, and their ability to execute the escape depends on whether the contents of divine volitions are intrinsic to them. Deng [2024] provides a good overview of this literature.

[14] The version of the Ontological Argument in Rubio [Forthcoming] does this and therefore would provide one motivation for it.

[15] This has occasioned a lengthy debate over 'modal collapse,' the highlights of which include Oppy [2003], Mullins [2013], Saenz [2014], Mullins & Byrd [2022], Schmid [2022a], and Waldrop [2022] broadly defending the modal collapse objection while Brower [2009], Pruss [2008], Tomaszewski [2019], Rogers [2020], Sijuwadi [2021], Lenow [2021], Schmid [2022b], and Huneeus [2024] argue that it does not work. Fakhri [2021] splits the difference, arguing that the modal collapse argument fails but then posing a problem for the O'Connor model's indeterministic understanding of creation.

[16] This account is not without its detractors, most notably Leftow [2015].

ethical volition has an extrinsic component that is filled in by creative context. The way they are intrinsically simply is to be filled in by the product of the creative act.

There remains a residual puzzle about the creative volition.[17] Intuitively, creation is the way that it is because of the content of the creative volition. But in this model, all contingency in reality is a result of contingency in the content of the creative volition, a content which the reality itself has supplied. Any attempt to make this content intrinsic would raise a different puzzle about God and patchwork principles, wherein God would have a creative volition with an intrinsic character that differs from the actual creation. A mismatch threatens. In its worst form, we are threatened with an explanatory cycle: reality is the way it is because of the contents of the creative volition, and the content of the creative volition is what it is because of the way reality is.

As a mere puzzle, this may be an okay bullet to bite. The inner workings of the divine will are infamously mysterious. But an explanatory cycle is not a mere puzzle. It is an incoherence, and if we could just posit mystery to escape incoherence, this paper would be significantly shorter. Using the ideology of metaphysical ground and the tool of directed acyclic graphs, I will offer a model that escapes the cycle, although perhaps not the full puzzling effect.

Directed acyclic graphs are constructed out of *nodes* and *arrows*. In our use, the arrows represent explanations – what in the literature are called grounding relations.[18] These grounds relate nodes. I take no stand on what the nodes are – facts, entities, propositions, etc. They are whatever needs explanation and/or does the explaining, but in the model will be labelled ovals. I will use solid arrows to represent *full ground* and dotted arrows to represent *partial ground*. A full ground provides a complete explanation, and every full ground entails (or entailment's category-appropriate analog, if things like entities can stand in grounding relations) its explanandum. Full grounds are not unique. Full ground is transitive and asymmetric. It does not tolerate cycles. Full ground can be one-one or many-one. Partial ground shares the formal properties of full ground, but partial grounds do not entail explananda. In a case of many-one full ground, each of the many is a partial ground. When several nodes are jointly a full ground of another node, they will be encased in a colored rectangle and the rectangle will link to the grounded node with a filled arrow. These are contested but standard characterizations. The graph will be our argument that we can assign both the divine creative volition and the divine meta-ethical volition content extrinsically, provided by the creation, without getting into explanatory cycles.

[17] Thanks to Joe Schmid for raising this point.
[18] For details, see Schaffer [2009], Schaffer [2016], and Fine [2012].

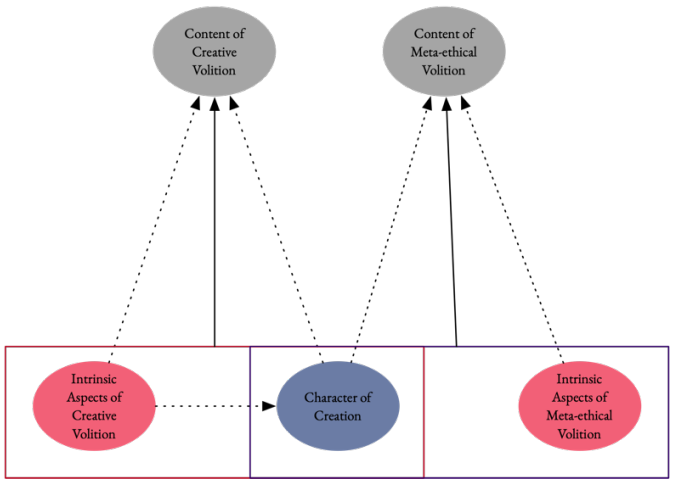

Figure 2: A Graph of the Explanatory Relations Between Creation and Divine Volitions in the O'Connor Model

Here is what the graph says: the intrinsic aspects of God's creative volition partly explain the character of creation. More specifically, they provide the oomph that makes it real. But they only partially explain it. Were they to provide a full explanation, they would eliminate contingency. The difference between partial and full explanation is the difference between a necessary and a contingent creation. Where is the rest of the explanation? Missing. Nothing entails that reality be as it is in full detail. These intrinsic aspects and the character of creation each partially explain the full content of the creative volition, and jointly fully explain it. In like manner, the intrinsic aspects of God's meta-ethical volition (whatever in meta-ethics is necessary) combine with the character of creation to fully explain the content of God's meta-ethical volition. This allows us to freely recombine God without creating any creative or meta-ethical incoherences.

The key to the graph is the separation of the intrinsic aspects of divine volitions from their full contents. This may be less than helpful to the simplicity partisans we began with, since they abhor distinguishing aspects of God. Since our project is not to defend simplicity, I leave it to them to see what help if any they can find here. For our purposes, the graph need only be something a theist could support. And to that, I see no decisive obstacle.

Since it is undeniable, however we assess the quality of their meta-ethical arguments, that Ockham, the Ash'arites, and other historical voluntarists were theists,[19] I conclude that meta-ethical voluntarism provides one way to hold onto theism and patchwork principles. However, given the array of objections against it, it would be nice to find an escape route with fewer commitments.[20]

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[19] There was also an active voluntarist school in early modern Britain. See Schneewind [1996] and Darr [2023] ch. 1.

[20] Perhaps most pressing are the 'divine arbitrariness' objection, see Carson [2012], and the 'evil commands' objection, see Morriston [2009] and Choo [2023], both of which are most pressing for the expansive voluntarist position we require. For an argument that even unrestricted voluntarism should have non-logical constraints, see Callahan [2021]. Some may also worry that expansive voluntarism may undermine important theistic arguments, such as those from Cosmological Fine-Tuning, that rely on premises according to which God is more likely to do good things. This concern seems too fast. Once God's will settles what is good, God is naturally more likely to further it. We learn what is good in all sorts of ways, some of which may not require knowing whether God exists. Voluntarism is a thesis about the nature of the good, not about the epistemology of axiology.

III.II ESCAPE ROUTE TWO: DIVINE NORMATIVE EXCEPTIONALISM

For those who find meta-ethical theological voluntarism impalatable – either out of a desire to preserve moral rationalism, or because they think the only way around the main objections to voluntarism forces them to take a more moderate voluntarist stance – there is still space to deny (2), which deems the evil quilted world uncreatable. This route we will call *divine normative exceptionalism*.[21] According to divine normative exceptionalists, while there are (or at least, may be) realist/rationalist norms in place, they do not apply to God. God is not a moral agent. Divine normative exceptionalism has a long history in medieval thought, and recent work has seen a variety of arguments for divine normative exceptionalisms of varying austerity.[22] It has been wielded against the problem of evil in several prominent accounts, and has been used to dissolve puzzles around the improvability of creation and the problem of no best world.

Mark Murphy [2017] appeals to the distinction (due to Gert [2007]; see also Tucker [2024]) between justifying and requiring reasons (or a reason's justifying/requiring weight). Roughly: justifying reasons are those that count in favor of an option's permissibility or choiceworthiness, while requiring reasons count in favor of a permissible option's obligation. Murphy takes the position that creaturely welfare may generate justifying reasons for divine action, but that it cannot generate requiring reasons. Thus, reasons stemming from created well-being cannot make any course of divine action obligatory. Murphy defends his view with a survey of meta-ethical accounts for why concerns about well-being might generate requiring reasons and concludes that none of these accounts include God among those for whom creaturely welfare generates obligations. Thus, on Murphy's account, while the evil quilted world may not have much in the way of creaturely welfare to recommend it for creation, the fact that it is full of creaturely ill-being does not create a reason obligating God not to create it. Yet, because God is a somewhat unique person, these concerns do not extend to created persons. For them, created welfare still generates requiring reasons.

Marilyn McCord Adams [1999], in her version of divine normative exceptionalism, does not appeal to meta-ethics but to metaphysics. On her view, the most significant feature of the God-creature relationship is the "metaphysical size gap" between the two. Just as the difference in kind between humans and various life forms (e.g. bacteria and archaea) render those life forms non-entities in the human moral economy, the relative significance of God to creatures renders God without obligations to creatures (p. 158). Whether God is good to creatures is, for Adams, a contingent question. In worlds like the evil quilted world, God would *not* fulfill her conditions for being good to the creation. But since it is contingent whether this occurs, this does not threaten its status *as a possibility*, albeit a dark one.

Daniel Rubio [2018] makes a case for divine normative exceptionalism from a decision-theoretic analysis of the act of creation. His argument depends on three assumptions: there is no unsurpassable world;[23] in a decision problem where at least one option is better than another option

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[21] This is roughly the view that Reilly [2022] labels 'no-norms theism.' To emphasize that there *are* norms on this view, they simply do not apply to God, I am insisting on a different label.

[22] Most notably: Adams [1999], Davies [2011], Murphy [2017], Rubio [2018], and Rubio [2023].

[23] For further discussion, see Kraay [2010], Pruss [2016], Climenhaga [2018] and [2025] making the case for an unsurpassable world with Rubio [2020] and [2025b] making the case against.

(e.g. there is not a single option, or a single indifference class of options), it is impermissible to take the worst option; and, the independence of irrelevant alternatives (which says roughly: if option A is better than option B, then adding some other options C… to a decision problem does not change this relation).[24] He then proves that these three together with the proposition that some option for creation is impermissible for God to choose entail that the creation decision problem is empty (equivalently: that every option is impermissible). The upshot: if the evil quilted world is impermissible for God to create, so is every other option.

Each of these arguments has points of rational resistance, although the fact that three very different arguments converge on the same conclusion has some force over and above the sum of the independent forces of the three arguments. But once again: for our purposes, we do not need divine normative exceptionalism to be true. We only need it to be genuinely theistic and given the detailed motivations from within theism that these arguments provide, this is difficult to contest. Thus, for theists for whom full-blown meta-ethical voluntarism is too far, we have a second escape: accept whatever rationalist meta-ethics seems best, but exempt God from at least the requiring force of moral reasons.

III.III ESCAPE ROUTE THREE: TWO SENSES OF POSSIBILITY

Still, divine normative exceptionalism is a hard pill for many theists to swallow. So, it is worth asking: is there a theistic view that maintains God's status as a full moral agent while remaining compatible with the patchwork principles? Here we too must turn from meta-ethics to metaphysics to answer the question 'yes.'

We have become accustomed to thinking of possibility in terms of possible worlds. The core of this custom is the relational model theory of modal logic, which requires points (commonly called 'worlds') at which every sentence of the logical language receives an evaluation. In the simplest (bivalent) case, that evaluation is either 'true' or 'false,' and the Leibnizian Biconditionals: ϕ is possible iff ϕ is true at some world, and ϕ is necessary iff ϕ is true at every world. This is largely due to the work of Saul Kripke [1963]. We can then say that a 'Kripkean Possibility' is a device that provides an exhaustive characterization of reality, specifying whether ϕ for every proposition ϕ. This Kripkean sense of modality has become the standard conceptualization in contemporary metaphysics.[25] It is not, however, how the creator of the term 'possible world' used the term.

Gottfried Leibniz is usually credited with introducing the term 'possible world' into the modern philosophical lexicon. As a theological determinist, Leibniz believed that everything happened according to the will of God. Following the Principle of Sufficient Reason and his best-world theodicy, Leibniz believed that there was one unique course of events that God could will. In Kripkean terms, Leibniz only believed that there is only one possible world. Leibniz was not, however, a necessitarian (Adams [1994] pp. 9-12 discusses a brief interlude in his thought where he flirted with the idea but ultimately rejected it). Ironically, he rejected the 'Leibnizian Biconditionals' in favor of an analysis of contingency that invoked a different concept of 'possible world.'

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[24] This principle is also known as Sen's α, see Sen [1970].

[25] See, for instance, how a standard reference (Kment [2021]) introduces the topic: "Maximally specific ways the world could have been are commonly called 'possible worlds.'"

We can think of Leibnizian possible worlds as something like "coherent objects of divine creation." They do not make mention of other possibilities, or even of God. The standards for inclusion are primarily formal: as long as they wouldn't bring about a contradiction or some other kind of incoherency (e.g. Chomsky's [1957] colorless green ideas sleeping furiously) if created, they count. As Adams explains:

> What is important for Leibniz's treatment of contingency is that the basic concepts of possible worlds do not include God's choice among possible worlds. In order to exclude it, they must exclude some information either about God or about other possible worlds. And it is not clear that excluding information about other worlds will always be enough. If "the damnation of an innocent is ... possible in itself," and does not "imply a contradiction in terms," as Leibniz wrote in texts dating from 1677 and the early 1680s, the basic concept of such a thing may very well have to exclude information about God's justice, for Leibniz does not seem to think one has to compare possible worlds in order to determine that a just God would not choose such a state of affairs. (Adams [1994] p. 16)

With both the Leibnizian and the Kripkean conceptions of possibility in hand, it is possible to revisit (1)-(3) and posit an ambiguity in the term 'possible.'

Premise (1) tells us that if the patchwork principles hold, the evil quilted world is possible. Because the patchwork principles' primary function is fill out logical space, they should attach to the concept of possibility that is required to secure contingency. This is the Leibnizian conception.

Premise (3) tells us that if the evil quilted world is uncreatable, it is impossible. It is impossible not because of some intrinsic feature of it qua world, but because its creation would conflict with some aspect of the divine nature. This is the kind of impossibility-reason that Leibniz explicitly excluded from his possible world concept, in contrast to things like contradictions and material incoherencies. It thus seems more appropriate to read the 'impossibility' in (3) as a Kripkean impossibility.

This renders the argument formally invalid. If the consequents of (1) and (2) can both be true, then the conflict evaporates.

This third route leaves the theist with no constraints on her meta-ethics. For those who are particularly taken with certain meta-ethical positions, that will be attractive. Of course, given standard treatments of the semantics of modals (e.g. Kratzer [1977]), it is easy (almost trivial) to create different senses of possibility. This may raise the suspicion that the move is undermotivated. However, this suspicion strikes me as itself suspect. The distinction invoked is present implicitly in the work of Leibniz, as he tries to square his rationalist determinism with the fact of contingency. Moreover, philosophers already recognize any number of different 'kinds' of alethic possibility with distinct theoretical roles: 'narrow' logical possibility, metaphysical possibility, nomic possibility, historical possibility, etc. Distinguishing between a sense of possibility that is intrinsic to spacetimes from a sense of possibility that includes things like divine reasons and motivations seems fairly natural in such an environment.[26]

In fact, we can think of these two senses of possibility as expressing an absolute metaphysical modality (Kripkean) and a modality of creatability (Leibnizian) with references only to the pure productive capacity of the creator, without reference to its standards in creation. Formally,

[26] Natural, but not cost-free. While the use of patchwork principles in Koons [2014] can probably survive the introduction of this distinction unscathed, the use in Rubio [Forthcoming] cannot. For those who want a patchwork-fueled ontological argument, the path lies through meta-ethics.

Leibnizian possibilities just are situations.[27] A situation is a 'part of' or 'partial' possible world, which settles the truth value of some propositions, but not others. In this setting, a Kripkean possible world is a maximal situation. This distinction has other potential theological uses. For instance, it is fairly natural to think that the tension between omnipotence and impeccability might be resolved by appeal to ambiguity. An omnipotent being can create any of the Leibnizian possibilities. Impeccability means that the ones that involve sin are not included in any Kripkean possibilities.

What we have said so far means that the proper logical setting for the resulting bimodal logic (a modal logic with two distinct necessity/possibility modal pairs) is not Kripke's relational ('possible worlds') semantics, but Humberstone's 'possibility semantics,' which shares many features with relational semantics (including the eponymous accessibility relation) but differs in interesting and potentially significant ways.[28] The following details are intended for readers interested in the technical details of the proposal; those who are not so interested could skip to the conclusion without missing significant parts of the argument. The key point is simply that a suitable logical setting to make this proposal rigorous exists and has been independently motivated.

Humberstone's semantics, in brief, work like this. We start with a *signature*, that is, the basic language of our logic. Since we are going for a bimodal logic (and for now have no need go beyond the propositional), our signature will be as follows: countably many propositional variables *A, B, C…*, conjunction ∧, negation ¬, and two necessity modals: $\Box_L$ and $\Box_K$. We will go on to define the other familiar devices of propositional modal logic after we have discussed models. Their truth-conditions are not exactly the usual ones, although the logics they yield will be the usual classical (bi)-modal logics.

Our models will have five components: A set of points, W; three binary relations over W: $\succcurlyeq$, R_L, and R_K; and a partial function V from point-proposition pairs to the truth values (T and F or 1 and 0 as desired). We discuss each in turn.

The points are our possibilities, both situations and possible worlds. These are distinguished by the fact that possible worlds are maximal situations. While situations only assign truth values to some of the propositions (settling only some things), possible worlds assign truth values to all of them (settling everything, as usual). This is why V is only partial (in contrast to the usual relational semantics).

The first binary relation, $\succcurlyeq$, is the true newcomer. Humberstone calls it *refinement*. The idea behind refinement is this: if w is a refinement of v, then w agrees with v on everything that v settles and perhaps settles other things as well. It is a weak partial order on W. In the strict version of $\succcurlyeq$, defined in the usual way (w is a strict refinement, indicated by $>$, of v iff $w \succcurlyeq v$ and not vice versa), it always settles other things as well. In addition, $\succcurlyeq$ meets the following conditions:

PERSISTENCE: for any proposition φ and all $w, v \in W$, if $w \succcurlyeq v$, and $V(v, \varphi)$ is defined, then $V(w, \varphi) = V(v, \varphi)$.

[27] For details on situation semantics, see Barwise & Perry [1983].

[28] The key figure for this is Humberstone [1981], but van Benthem [1981], [2016] and Holliday [2014], [2025] are both significant as well.

REFINABILITY: for any proposition φ and $w \in W$, if $V(w, \varphi)$ is undefined, then there exist $v, u \in W$ s.t. $v, u \succcurlyeq w$, $V(v, \varphi) = \text{T}$, and $V(u, \varphi) = \text{F}$.

The justification of these conditions is fairly straightforward. The first, PERSISTENCE, codifies that a refinement does not *change* truth values, it merely has the potential to *make more truth-values settle*. The second, REFINABILITY, is a kind of comprehension principle. It tells us that you can always get more precise up to maximality. It does not, pointedly, tell us that there are maximal possible worlds. Gunkish models with infinite refinability-chains are not off the table, although for our intended model they will be.

Since this is all we need in the model to give the truth-conditions for the classical fragment of the signature, I will do that before moving on to the modal part. As is usual in modal logic, truth is defined at a point w in a model M. The base case is easy and normal, with φ as a propositional metavariable: $M, w \vDash \varphi$ iff $V(\text{w}, \varphi) = \text{T}$. Conjunction ∧ is similarly easy and normal: $M, w \vDash \varphi \wedge \psi$ iff $M, w \vDash \varphi$ and $M, w \vDash \psi$. Negation, however, is where things differ. The usual definition will not work for situations, because M, w may fail to make φ true for two reasons: because they make it false, or because w is a situation that leaves φ unsettled. Here refinements step in, and we can get a classical negation by taking a page out of the playbook for relational models of intuitionistic logic and saying: $M, w \vDash \neg\varphi$ iff for all $v \succcurlyeq w$, $M, v \nvDash \varphi$. In other words, ¬φ is true at a point if none of that point's refinements make φ true.

With these definitions in hand, we can define $\varphi \vee \psi$ as $\neg (\neg\varphi \wedge \neg \psi)$ and $\varphi \supset \psi$ as $\neg (\varphi \wedge \neg\psi)$ in standard fashion. Humberstone [1981] proves that these definitions secure us classical logic (with an enlightening discussion of the defined connectives on pp. 320-323), and van Benthem [2016] extends these results to first order logic using somewhat standard approaches to quantification.

This brings us to the modal part. The other binary relations, R_L and R_K, are standard accessibility relations. They are intended to express our two senses of possibility (we can think of the subscript K as indicating the Kripkean elements and L the Leibnizian). We use them to give the truth-conditions for $\Box_K$ and $\Box_L$ in the normal way: $M, w \vDash \Box_K \varphi$ iff for all v s.t. $R_K wv$, $M, v \vDash \varphi$ and $M, w \vDash \Box_L \varphi$ iff for all v s.t. $R_L wv$, $M, v \vDash \varphi$. In possibility semantics, the following conditions also hold, relating accessibility relations to the refinement relation. Because they apply to all accessibility relations, subscripts have been omitted in their statement.

CONDITION ONE: for all $w, v, u \in W$, if $w \succcurlyeq v$ and Rwu, then Rvu.

CONDITION TWO: for all $w, v, u \in W$, if $w \succcurlyeq v$ and Ruv, then Ruw.

CONDITION THREE: for all $w, v \in \text{W}$, if Rwv, then for some $u \succcurlyeq w$: for all t s.t. $t \succcurlyeq u$, Rtv

The first two conditions resemble the 'mirror' accessibility conditions in tense logic and are there to ensure that necessities at a point hold in all of its refinements. The third condition is more complicated but can be guaranteed by construction and is necessary for key metalogical results. Humberstone [1981] discusses these in more detail on p. 325.

What we have seen so far is enough to give us normality for the box operators (that is, modal system K). If we want any of the other modal systems, we must restrict the accessibility relation. Some of these restrictions are straightforward: for T require reflexivity, for 4 require transitivity. But the case of B is interestingly different. We do not obtain System B for a modal operator by imposing the requirement of symmetry on the accessibility relation (and in fact we probably do

not want symmetrical accessibility, as Humberstone [1981] shows on p. 329). Instead, to get System B (and so in conjunction with our rules for T and 4 to get S5), we must impose the following restriction:

CONDITION FOUR: for all w, v, u, $t \in W$, if $w \succcurlyeq v$, $t > u$, and Rwu then Rtv

The condition itself is somewhat involved, but it boils down to the following: if all refinements of one point can see a specific other point, then all strict refinements of that other point can see the original point. This corresponds to the B axiom: $\varphi \rightarrow \Box \Diamond \varphi$.

Before we talk about the specifics of the bimodal logic we are interested in, a quick remark on the truth conditions for $\Diamond\varphi$ are in order. Officially, it is defined as a metalinguistic abbreviation for $\neg\Box\neg\varphi$. This might lead one to think that it has the usual truth condition where $M, w \vDash \Diamond\varphi$ iff there is some v s.t. Rwv and $M, v \vDash \varphi$. This is false. An operator with those truth conditions would not yield persistent formulae. Instead, the condition is the more complex: $M, w \vDash \Diamond\varphi$ iff for all v s.t. $v \succcurlyeq w$ there is a u s.t. Rvu and there is a t s.t. $t \succcurlyeq u$ and $M, t \vDash \varphi$. This is logically stronger than the typical truth condition (formulae under a modal operator with these truth conditions imply formulae under an operator with the more usual one, but not vice-versa), but yields persistent formulae and the logical dual of the necessity operator.

We conclude our discussion of the bimodal logical system for our two senses of possibility with crossmodal axioms. I am not here taking a stand on which normal modal logics the two necessities ought to obey – this will doubtless be controversial, and since it is generally known how to make the possibility semantics framework yield all normal modal logics that are serious candidates for the logic of metaphysical modality, there's no need for the sake of framework viability to resolve that controversy. There are eight basic crossmodal inferences to consider: (i) $\Box_K \varphi \vDash \Box_L \varphi$, (ii) $\Box_K \varphi \vDash \Diamond_L \varphi$, (iii) $\Box_L \varphi \vDash \Box_K \varphi$, (iv) $\Box_L \varphi \vDash \Diamond_K \varphi$, (v) $\Diamond_K \varphi \vDash \Box_L \varphi$, (vi) $\Diamond_K \varphi \vDash \Diamond_L \varphi$, (vii) $\Diamond_L \varphi \vDash \Box_K \varphi$, and (viii) $\Diamond_L \varphi \vDash \Diamond_K \varphi$. We will consider each in turn.

The first one says roughly: if it must be that φ, then it must be created that φ. This seems undesirable – theists typical want to say that God must exist, but not that it must be created that God exist.[29] The second one says: if it must be that φ, then it must be creatable that φ. For the same reason, this also seems undesirable. The third says: if it must be created that φ, then it must be that φ. Since most theists endorse the contingency of creation, most theists will want to reject this inference. Those who do not – usually some kind of emanationist – may enforce it with the following condition on accessibility relations: if $R_L wv$, then $R_K wv$. The fourth says: if it must be created that φ, then it could be that φ. This is more promising, it does seem that if something must be part of a creation, it should be metaphysically possible, even if creation itself is contingent. We enforce this inference with the following condition: if $R_L wv$, then for all u s.t. $u \succcurlyeq w$, $R_K uv$. To see why, let us suppose what would have to be the case for it to be that $M, w \vDash \Box_L \varphi$ but not $\Diamond_K \varphi$. This would require that all points that it stands in the L-accessibility relation to be φ-points, but that none of the points to which all of its refinements stand in the K-accessibility relation has a refinement that is a φ-point. By requiring that all of w's refinements stand in the K-accessibility relation to a point to which w stands in the L-accessibility relation, we guarantee that they bear the K-accessibility relation to a point that has a φ-point as a refinement (namely, itself; since $\succcurlyeq$ is a weak partial order, every world is a refinement of itself).

[29] See Pruss [2016], Amijee [2022], Pearce [2024], and Pearce [2025] for up-to-date discussions.

The fifth inference says roughly: if it could be that φ, then it must be created that φ. God's existence will again be a convenient theistic counterexample. The sixth inference says: if it could be that φ, then it is creatable that φ. The same counterexample will apply here. The seventh inference says: if it is creatable that φ, then it must be that φ. This is not credible. Finally, the eighth inference says: if it is creatable that φ, then it could be that φ. To accept this inference would be to undermine our entire exercise, since the whole goal of distinguishing a Kripkean from a Leibnizian modality is to have some "possible creations" that are not, all things considered, metaphysically possible. Thus, to handle crossmodal inferences in our intended usage, we need only one extra condition on accessibility relations.

This concludes our development of Route 3. This also gives us a "fully metaphysical" escape from Gordon's Dilemma, of independent interest and of use to those with pronounced meta-ethical scruples. While there remain more questions to answer about this proposal, perhaps most notably which modal logics we want for each modality, they are too big for the current essay.

IV CONCLUSION

We have assessed a putative conflict between patchwork principles on the one hand and theism on the other. The conflict is meant to work like this: patchwork principles tell us that we can 'quilt' together pieces of possibilities to get new possibilities, thereby ensuring that there are not gaps in logical space and giving us our modal plenitude. But theism says that there are gaps in logical space, wherever the worlds that God could not create for some reason or other ought to be. These evil quilted worlds falsify the patchwork principles. This is a *prima facie* problem for theism on two counts. First: it requires theists to give an alternative account of modal plenitude. If it is worse than the patchwork account, this could even constitute an anti-theistic argument. Second: theists have employed patchwork principles in some of the most up to date arguments for theism. If the conflict is real, these arguments are self-consuming.

I have outlined three potential routes for theists to dissolve the conflict. The first two come from meta-ethics. Certain robust kinds of meta-ethical theological voluntarism render the evil quilted worlds possible, because 'good' and 'evil' have different meanings in those worlds from their actual meanings and what counts as good and evil in voluntaristic meta-ethics is an extrinsic fact, the kind of thing that quilting does not preserve. However, if voluntarism is a bridge too far, the meta-ethically inclined theist has another solution: divine normative exceptionalism, which denies that God is a moral agent and therefore is under any obligation to create or not create anything. We have seen three independent lines of argument for this conclusion.

The final escape route is from metaphysics. Revisiting Leibniz's account of contingency, we find a concept of possible world that differs from the standard Kripkean concept. If patchwork principles apply to the Leibnizian concept while divine morality filters the Kripkean one, then the conflict is based on an ambiguity, and appropriate disambiguation renders theism and patchwork principles compatible. This route has some drawbacks, since adopting it is not consonant with every use theists have come up with for patchwork principles. But for those with very strong intellectualist meta-ethical scruples, it may seem more promising. We have shown how it can be incorporated unproblematically into normal classical modal logic.

Of course, none of this means that certain theists or kinds of theists may not still be barred from using patchwork principles. One escape or other must be taken, or the conflict persists. I do not here recommend one path over the others.[30]

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