

Theism and Secular Modality

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I've got a lot of problems with you people, and now you're gonna hear about it!

-Frank Costanza (Seinfeld S9E10, "The Strike")

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If we go chronologically, the first person that I can clearly recognize as setting me down the path of academic philosophy is my mother. When I was twelve and preparing to become a *bar mitzvah*, she brought me a copy of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* from the library. Why she did this is still not transparent to me, but here I am 16 years later still thinking about God. My mom has always encouraged me to pursue my interests, and recommended me to go to graduate school in philosophy when I was still deliberating about it. Whoops!

I think that my dad would probably have liked it if I chose an educational field by consulting a table with employment rates. But he's been a good sport about it all. Chin up, Dad – all the jobs will be gone soon, anyway.

My undergraduate education in philosophy was at Rutgers University. It was 40 minutes from my home in Hopewell and conveniently had one of the best philosophy programs in the world. Even with New Jersey's high in-state tuition, it was a steal. The Rutgers philosophers I have the most to thank for my development are Jeff King, Sam Lebens, Dean Zimmerman, Jonathan Schaffer, Barry Loewer, and Holly Smith. Without Jeff's lucid philosophy of language course, the Soames proseminar at USC would have been an absolute nightmare for me. Also without Jeff's philosophy of language course, I might not have met my wonderful partner Le. Thanks, Jeff. Sam was the professor who most took me under his wing and showed interest in my ideas. He even showed up to an undergraduate conference on campus on a Sunday at 9 AM with his son in tow to support me. I owe him a lot for his interest and faith in me. Dean supervised my thesis, and some of the ideas we worked on back then have made it all the way into this dissertation. Jonathan, Barry, and Holly were my letter writers for my grad school applications. I thank each of them for their support and for shepherding me along the path.

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Abstract

I examine issues in the philosophy of religion at the intersection of what possibilities there are and what a God, as classically conceived in the theistic philosophical tradition, would be able to do. The discussion is centered around arguing for an incompatibility between theism and two principles about possibility and ability, and exploring what theists should say about these incompatibilities.

I argue that theism entails that certain kinds and amounts of evil are impossible. This puts theism in conflict with popular principles of modal recombination. However, theists have plausible explanations for the violations of recombination that they posit, and can suitably amend these principles without giving up their usefulness in accounting for what possibilities there are.

I also argue that despite the impossibility of these evils, God is able to bring these evils about. This puts theism in conflict with the principle that no one is able to do the impossible. However, theists can give a plausible account of why God is unique in being able to do the impossible, and have distinctive resources to address the arguments in favor of the idea that no one is able to do the impossible. And by denying this principle, theists are able to resolve several otherwise difficult puzzles, including reconciling conflicts between the divine attributes.

Introduction

This is a dissertation about God. I do not believe in God. On account of this, I feel some pressure to indicate why I have chosen this topic as my dissertation, and to indicate what value I see in the philosophy of religion, even as a non-believer.

One of the admirable qualities about philosophy as a discipline is its facility for productive engagement of radically different views. Perhaps nowhere in philosophy is this quality more readily on display than in the philosophy of religion. Theism tends to cluster with other loosely non-naturalist views in philosophy: libertarianism about free will, anti-physicalism about the mind, and robust realism about ethics.¹ Productive engagement between believers and non-believers in philosophy of religion must bridge these fundamental differences in worldview. The honest attempt to do this is difficult, but rewarding, and is something we could use more of in divisive times.

Seasoned philosophers will recognize the rarity of changing others' minds about fundamental issues. (What's that quip again about arguments not being for convincing your opponents, but being for convincing undecided graduate students?) I am a pessimist about the prospect that philosophy will one day solve all of its fundamental problems and converge on a unique set of true philosophical theses. In my view, the interesting action in philosophy is not in showing a major view like theism to be true or false, but in showing what shape it must take in response to external pressures, and thereby showing what the strongest form of that view is. Steel sharpens steel, as the saying goes. This dissertation is meant to be an exercise of philosophy done in this spirit.

More personally, I find philosophy of religion to be a fascinating area of philosophy because of the breadth of issues that it encompasses within it. Nearly every other area of philosophy finds some application within philosophy of religion. As someone with somewhat generalist tendencies, I feel like a bit of a kid in a candy store when doing philosophy of religion. Hopefully, the discussions that follow illustrate the enthralling breadth of issues that must be engaged within even a sliver of the field.

Finally, the question of God is a question that matters, even to non-philosophers. I despair of the prospect of even explaining, to a non-philosopher, what is at issue in some of the abstract

¹ The data in Bourget and Chalmers (2014) confirms this intuitive impression.

questions of metaphysics that I find fascinating. I doubt that more than a handful of human beings have a view on whether dispositional essentialism about properties is true. While the theistic views I examine here are probably more accurately viewed as philosophically refined versions of ordinary religious views, it is nice that they have some contact with matters that everyday people care deeply about.

So much for this brief *apologia*. I turn now to explaining these theistic views at the center of this dissertation, and to overviewing the chapters to come.

0.1 Theism and Metaphysical Necessity

According to theism, there is a being, God, and God is perfect. Moreover, it is not just contingently true that God exists and is perfect, rather, it is metaphysically necessary that God exists and is perfect. What God's perfection involves is a difficult question, but for my purposes I assume that God's perfection entails at least that God is perfectly powerful (omnipotent), perfectly knowledgeable (omniscient), perfectly free, perfectly good, and perfectly rational. Putting this together, theism is the view that there is a being, God, such that it is metaphysically necessary that God exists and that God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good, and perfectly rational.

Let me say just a little more about the notions of metaphysical necessity and the divine attributes. The question of what metaphysical necessity is would be an appropriate question for an entire other dissertation. Still, I can say at least enough to give an intuitive picture of it. Metaphysical necessity is an objective modality. Unlike what's epistemically possible, for example, what's metaphysically necessary is determined independently of anything about us.² Metaphysical modality concerns what could really be true, in the broadest sense.³ To say that P is metaphysically necessary is to say that P could not really have failed to be true. The following

² I talk about *us* deliberately. Later in the dissertation I will argue that the scope of metaphysical possibility is not independent of *all agents* if you believe in God.

³ Does this mean that metaphysical modality is appropriately categorized as the broadest objective modality? Not necessarily. I'm open to the idea that there are some objective modalities that are broader than metaphysical modality, but which include things that couldn't *really* be true. My point here is that metaphysical modality concerns what could really be true, in the broadest sense, not that it is the broadest objective modality.

are some examples of purported metaphysically necessary truths (note that most of these are controversial):

$2 + 2 = 4$.

There are no married bachelors.

A person couldn't have been a number.

For any two objects, there exists a fusion of those objects.

It lies in the essence of the property *mass* that any objects with mass attract each other.

No object is both entirely red and entirely green.

If A is overall better than B, and B is overall better than C, then A is overall better than C.

Theists say that the existence and perfection of God is *like that* – it couldn't really have failed to be true.

What the divine attributes amount to is another topic that could be an entire other dissertation. In this dissertation, I provide no analysis or definition of these attributes. I do, however, say quite a bit about some things that I take to follow from these attributes, and weigh in on several debates about these attributes.⁴ For now, perhaps it suffices to say that we have some ordinary intuitive conception of knowledge, power, freedom, goodness, and rationality. What theism says, roughly, is that God has these to the maximum degree. To the maximum degree possible? Well, yes, but we should be careful not to assume that this is sufficient for possession of the relevant properties. As Murphy (2017: sec 1.3) and Speaks (2018: 117-124) argue, our conceptions of these properties do not seem to be neutral with respect to the scope of metaphysical possibility – they “press outward” in Murphy’s words. If for example, the most powerful possible being were just the most powerful human that exists, that human would not automatically be omnipotent. Thus, we also need some substantive conception of these attributes, so that they imply that, absolutely speaking, God is very, very (very!) powerful, knowledgeable, free, good, and rational.

⁴ For example, chapters 3 and 4 take up the question of whether an omnipotent God would be able to do certain things even though it is metaphysically impossible that God does them.

0.1.1 Why Think that a Perfect God is Metaphysically Necessary?

I take it that the existence of a God that is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good, and perfectly rational is at least close to some common religious beliefs. And the kinds of reasons people might have for thinking this are familiar. But the view that these truths are metaphysically necessary might seem like an odd, artificial philosopher's invention. Let me therefore give some quick motivations for taking this view seriously, so that the discussion to come does not seem quixotic.

First, several of the traditional arguments of natural theology push towards the view that God's existence and attributes are metaphysically necessary. Most obviously, the ontological argument purports to show that the existence of a perfect being is conceptually necessary – true by the very concept of a perfect being itself.⁵ Since whatever is conceptually necessary is metaphysically necessary, it follows that it is metaphysically necessary that God exists and is perfect. Additionally, the moral argument claims that God is needed to provide the ground of certain moral truths, such as fundamental truths about goodness or rightness.⁶ If the common view that fundamental moral truths are metaphysically necessary is correct, this argument would demonstrate that God's existence is metaphysically necessary, and perhaps that God is necessarily perfectly good. Finally, certain versions of the cosmological argument are explicitly arguments for the existence of a metaphysically necessary being as the explanation of all contingent reality.⁷

Second, the claim that God is perfect might be taken to entail that God is necessarily perfect. For it seems better to be perfect necessarily than contingently, and therefore better to have all the particular perfections like omnipotence, omniscience, etc. necessarily than to have them contingently. Of course, these kinds of appeals to the concept of perfection are somewhat inconclusive, but they are commonly a part of so-called 'perfect being theology' or 'Anselmianism'.

And third, the claim that any of these truths are merely contingent appears explanatorily mysterious. For what could explain why God in fact exists, or is in fact omnipotent, when God could have failed to exist, or failed to be omnipotent, etc.? This view is therefore in tension with

⁵ Or at least, this is one prominent way of understanding the ontological argument. See Oppy (2018) for a collection of essays on the ontological argument.

⁶ See Ritchie (2012) for an extended argument along these lines.

⁷ See O'Connor (2008: ch. 3 -5) for such an argument.

a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason that many theists like, which says that any contingent truth must have an explanation.⁸ But even if you don't subscribe to this version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, you might still think that truths about God are not the kinds of truths that should be brute contingents.

0.2 Overview of the Dissertation

I hope to have said enough to convince you that theism, as I understand it here, is not merely an artificial philosopher's invention, but is worth taking seriously. This dissertation examines the relationship between theism and some principles of *secular modality*. These are modal principles that are commonly adopted in a secular context, but which I argue stand in tension with theism. My main purposes in doing so are two-fold. First, by determining which modal principles theists can accept or reject, we get a clearer picture of the theist's modal commitments. Is there a limit to how bad things can get, if theism is true? Can God do something evil? We get a better handle on how theists should respond to these questions by examining the relation between theism and the kinds of modal principles at issue in this dissertation. Second, I aim to show what a plausible kind of theism looks like that denies these secular modal principles. I am not merely interested in arguing for an incompatibility. I am interested in seeing what theists can say about the motivations for such principles, in seeing what other ramifications denying these principles has for theism, and in what theorizing about modality looks like from this theistic perspective.

In chapter 1, I argue that theists must be revisionists about the scope of metaphysical possibility. That is, they must take some things to be impossible that, pre-theoretically, would seem clearly to be possible. In particular, they must maintain that certain really bad states of affairs are metaphysically impossible. The reason is that God's omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness ensure that God would not allow those states to exist. Therefore, the necessity of these traits ensures that they necessarily do not come to pass. I defend an argument for this conclusion, along the way exploring God's abilities and God's relationship to morality.

In chapter 2, I argue that this modal revisionism puts theism in tension with a principle of secular modality known as 'Cut-and-Paste'. Very roughly, this principle says that we can mix and match any objects in any arrangement, and the result is a metaphysical possibility. Intuitively, the

⁸ E.g. Pruss (2006).

problem is that by mixing and matching objects, we can mash together a bunch of bad things, remove the good things, and the result will be very bad. Having defended this argument from a number of objections, I assess what theists should say about the various motivations for Cut-and-Paste. I argue that theism furnishes a plausible explanation for the necessary connections that it posits, and that theists can suitably revise Cut-and-Paste without compromising its philosophical utility (e.g. in attempts to provide reductive analyses of metaphysical possibility).

In the second half of the dissertation, we turn our central focus to issues regarding agentic modality. Specifically, the central questions of this half concern what God is able to do. Having argued that certain arrangements of objects are metaphysically impossible on theism, one might wonder whether, nevertheless, God is able to bring about those arrangements. The argument of chapter 3 supports the idea that God is able to do so. I argue that theists have strong reasons to think that the ‘Poss-Ability’ principle is false as it applies to God. This principle says that no one is able to do something which is metaphysically impossible for them to do. Denying, Poss-Ability, I argue, is the theist’s best route to reconciling God’s omnipotence and God’s perfect freedom with the other essential divine attributes. I give an account of why God is able to do the impossible. At the heart of this account is a sophisticated view of the interplay between issues of value, agentic possibility, and metaphysical possibility. In particular, when metaphysical possibilities are ruled out by normative decision-making that issues from God’s character, God’s agentic possibilities remain unrestricted. Finally, as in chapter 2, I assess what theists should say about the motivations for Poss-Ability. In doing so, I show how theists can reconcile this view with standard semantic analyses of ability ascriptions.

In the final chapter, I argue against an alternative way of reconciling God’s omnipotence with the other divine attributes. This alternative proposes that omnipotence never requires the ability to do the metaphysically impossible. I discuss two arguments against this view, which both center around the notion of dominance. Very roughly, one agent dominates another just in case it can do everything the other can do and more. These two arguments are mirror images. The first alleges that if the view in question were correct, then God could be dominated despite being omnipotent, which is absurd. The second argument alleges that if the view in question were correct, then there could be an omnipotent agent dominated by God, which is also absurd. My conclusion is that these arguments are promising but not conclusive. However, together with

the arguments of chapter 3, I take the second half of the dissertation to constitute a strong cumulative case that God is indeed able to do the metaphysically impossible.

In sum, this dissertation is an examination of some issues in the philosophy of religion at the intersection of metaphysical and agentic modality. It is centered around the idea that theism is in tension with two principles about these modalities and their relation, namely Cut-and-Paste and Poss-Ability. It argues for the negative thesis that these incompatibilities are largely real rather than merely apparent. But, more positively, it describes what a plausible version of theism might look like that denies these two principles. I hope that this description is illuminating to both believers and non-believers alike.

Chapter 1: It Can't be that Bad: Theism Entails Normative Restrictions on What's Possible

Does the world contain either an amount of evil or particular kinds of evil that are inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God? If you believe in such a God, you must answer 'no'. The existence of God must be compatible with the existence of starving children, the Holocaust, and Alzheimer's Disease, by these lights. But you might still think that there are certain amounts or kinds of evil that *would be* incompatible with the existence of such a God. Perhaps, for example, if we all inevitably were struck with life-long dementia immediately after adolescence, this would have amounted to a disproof of God. If you believe that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God not only exists, but exists necessarily, then these evils could not have come to pass. The necessity of a good God apparently entails the impossibility of certain amounts or kinds of evil. This is the Modal Problem of Evil.⁹

As an atheistic argument, the Modal Problem of Evil can be thought of as preceding in two halves. The first half must show that theism entails that certain amounts or kinds of evil are impossible. The second half must show that these evils are in fact possible.

It is fair to say that most discussions of the Modal Problem of Evil take the first half for granted and take up only the second half for critical discussion.¹⁰ These discussions assume, in other words, that theism places strong normative restrictions on modal space. It is worth taking a closer look at the first half of the argument, not only to ascertain the true modal implications of theism, but also because there are now several strands of theistic thinking that stand in tension with this first half of the argument.

I defend the view that theism does require normative restrictions on the scope of possibility. I begin by presenting (section 1.1.1) and motivating (section 1.1.2) a formulation of the Modal Problem of Evil, a formulation that improves on existing attempts in several respects (section 1.1.3). I then consider and respond to various objections to the first half of this argument, beginning with objections concerning free will and God's abilities (section 1.2), and ending with objections concerning the relationship between God and morality (section 1.3).

⁹ Guleserian (1983) is the source of the Modal Problem of Evil in contemporary literature.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Garcia (1984), Morris (1985), and Tidman (1993).

1.1 An Improved Modal Problem of Evil

1.1.1 Presenting the Improved Modal Problem of Evil

My formulation of the Modal Problem of Evil is presented below. I stipulate that phrases of the form ‘God allows P’ are to be understood as equivalent to ‘P and God is able to prevent P’.

- (1) Necessarily, God exists and God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. [Assumption for *reductio*]
- (2) Necessarily, God is able to prevent P without cost to anyone. [From God’s necessary omnipotence]
- (3) Necessarily, God knows that God is able to prevent P without cost to anyone. [From (2) and God’s necessary omniscience]
- (4) Necessarily, it is morally impermissible for anyone to allow P if they are able to prevent P without cost to anyone and they know that they are able to prevent P without cost to anyone. [Basic moral premise]
- (5) Necessarily, it is morally impermissible for God to allow P if God is able to prevent P without cost to anyone and God knows that God is able to prevent P without cost to anyone. [Instance of (4)]
- (6) Necessarily, it is morally impermissible for God to allow P. [From (2), (3), and (5)]
- (7) Necessarily, if God allows P, then it is morally permissible for God to allow P. [From God’s necessary perfect goodness]
- (8) Necessarily, it is not the case that God allows P. [From (6) and (7)]
- (9) Necessarily, either God is not able to prevent P or it is not the case that P. [From (8) and the definition of ‘God allows P’]

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| (10) Necessarily, it is not the case that P. | [From (2) and (9)] |
| (11) Possibly, it is the case that P. | [Basic modal premise] |
| (12) It is not the case that necessarily, God exists and God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. | [From (1), (10), and (11)] |

This formulation is schematic; it is to be completed by substituting for ‘P’ a description of a catastrophically bad state of affairs that renders the argument sound. In what follows, I will refer to such putative states of affairs as ‘catastrophic evils’. In my view, there are many such values of ‘P’. For example, let ‘P’ be replaced by ‘many people live terrible lives that are not worth living and no one lives a life even close to being worth living’. I will proceed to argue that steps (1) to (10) of the argument above go through for this value of ‘P’.

1.1.2 Motivating the Improved Modal Problem of Evil

Premise (2) becomes the claim that necessarily, God is able to prevent its being the case that many people live terrible lives that are not worth living and that no one lives a life even close to being worth living, and that God is able to do so without cost to anyone. By ‘without cost’, I mean that God’s doing so would not be worse for anyone, compared to God’s allowing this to be the case. I will argue that necessarily, God is able to do this because necessarily, God is able to ensure that no people other than God exist. By ensuring this, God would ensure that the catastrophic evil described does not come to pass. Moreover, God’s doing this would not be worse for anyone, compared to God’s allowing the catastrophic evil. It would not be worse for any of the people other than God, because none of them would have lived lives that are even close to being worth living. It is better to never live at all than to live a terrible life that is not worth living. And it would not be worse for God, since it could not be better for God to exist in a world where everyone else lives terrible lives, compared to existing alone.

The crucial claim to be established then, is that necessarily, God is able to ensure that no people other than God exist. I argue that God’s omnipotence entails that God is able to ensure that no people other than God exist. Therefore, the necessity of God’s omnipotence entails that

necessarily, God is able to ensure that no people other than God exist.¹¹ God's omnipotence entails that God is able to exist alone because an omnipotent being is one whose will could not be frustrated, in the sense that an omnipotent being has what Pearce and Pruss (2012: 407) call 'perfect efficacy of will':

X has perfect efficacy of will if and only if for all P, necessarily if X were to try to bring it about that P, then X would intentionally bring it about that P.

Now, there are some legitimate questions to be asked about what the scope of 'all' should be here. For example, it is not obvious that omnipotence requires that if God were to try to bring about an impossibility, then God would succeed. However, in the case where 'P' describes an ordinary metaphysical possibility not involving free agents or random processes, it does seem obvious that omnipotence requires that if God were to will that P, then God would bring it about that P.¹² In our case, we can let 'P' describe the ordinary metaphysical possibility that no one other than God exists. By both theistic and non-theistic lights, this is a metaphysical possibility. Theists believe that God at least could have existed alone; that God is not forced to have worldly roommates milling about.¹³

Since it is straightforwardly possible that God exists alone, God's omnipotence requires that God is able to will that God exists alone. And it requires that if God were to will this, then it would come about. God's omnipotence therefore entails that God is able to ensure that no one other than God exists, by willing from eternity past that no one other than God exists. So God's necessary omnipotence entails that necessarily, God is able to ensure that no one other than God exists. This suffices to establish (2) for the relevant value of 'P'.¹⁴

¹¹ This follows by a basic principle of modal reasoning: if P entails Q, then necessarily P entails necessarily Q.

¹² This perhaps needs some further qualification. For it might be that P is not intrinsically impossible, but what is impossible is for God to intentionally bring it about that P. One example is where 'P' is 'P and God does not bring it about that P'. I ignore this complication in what follows because there is no impossibility in God's bringing it about that no one other than God exists.

¹³ Although not all theists accept that God could have existed *completely* alone. Perhaps certain objects like abstract numbers, etc. exist necessarily. This is clearly compatible with the claim that it is not necessary that there are *people* other than God.

¹⁴ One could also argue from divine aseity and freedom to the truth of (2). Divine aseity is typically taken to require at least that God creates all of concrete reality (other than God). By divine freedom, God's creative decisions are always free. Therefore God is always free to not create anything else concrete. Therefore God is always able to not create anything else concrete (by the Principle of Alternative

Premise (3) follows from the general premise that God's omniscience entails that if God is able to Φ , then God knows that God is able to Φ .¹⁵ This follows from the traditional conception of omniscience as knowing all truths. Now, this traditional conception runs into well-known problems. For example, if there are special private propositions that are essentially first-personal in character and can only be known by a particular subject, then omniscience might not require knowledge of all such private propositions.¹⁶ But there is nothing like that going on in this case. That God is able to prevent a certain state of affairs is not a private proposition. And in fact, since it concerns God's own abilities God should certainly be in a position to know this truth. An omniscient being should not be ignorant about the extent of its own abilities. Premise (3) therefore seems uncontroversial.

For the relevant value of 'P', premise (4) claims that it is a necessary moral truth that if you are able to prevent it from being the case that many people live terrible lives that are not worth living and that no one lives a life even close to being worth living, and that you are able to do this without cost to anyone, and that you know that you are able to do this without cost to anyone, then you are morally required to prevent this. For example, if I were in such a terrible world and I was able to make it that at least one person lived a life worth living, and I could so without making things worse for anyone else, and I knew that I could do this, then I would be morally required to do so.

It is worth noting how weak this moral premise is. It is not the claim that in general, if I can make things better off, then I am required to. Perhaps making things better off is sometimes supererogatory. Or perhaps I cannot be required to make things better overall only by making things worse for some. Or perhaps I sometimes have special obligations to some that trump the obligation to make things better overall. All of this is consistent with (4). All I am saying is that if I can prevent this particularly catastrophic evil, and I can do so without making things worse for anyone, then I should do that. An analogy: it is wrong to watch a child drown in a pond if you know that you could easily save them without making things worse for anyone. It would also be wrong for God to allow us all to drown in ponds if God could easily save us all.

Possibilities). Perhaps these other divine attributes can be derived from omnipotence. But I won't pursue this line any further here.

¹⁵ And therefore God's necessary omniscience entails that necessarily, if God is able to Φ then God knows that God is able to Φ .

¹⁶ See Nagasawa (2003) for discussion.

Premise (7) follows from the general principle that God's perfect goodness entails that if God Φ 's, then it is morally permissible that God Φ 's.¹⁷ In other words, a perfectly good being does nothing morally impermissible. I take it that this premise is generally uncontroversial, although later I will examine some unorthodox views about God's goodness that might deny (7). One case I could see for qualifying (7) would be if there are genuine moral dilemmas, in which there is no permissible option, then one might claim that someone can be perfectly good despite making an impermissible decision in such dilemmas. This is a genuine choicepoint, of course, one could instead claim that genuine moral dilemmas are inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly good being. In any case, even if one were to qualify (7) in the case of dilemmas, the argument would still go through, as the relevant case here is not a dilemma. God's preventing the catastrophic evil by choosing to exist alone would be a morally permissible option.

This concludes our defense of each of the substantive premises of steps (1)-(10) for our chosen value of 'P'. Steps (1)-(10) constitute what I have called the 'first half' of the Modal Problem of Evil. If we get to (10), we have succeeded in showing that theism has a revisionary modal consequence: that certain catastrophic evils are not metaphysically possible. In my view, this should be common ground between theists and their critics. The real action is with respect to the modal premise (11), and that is where the debate should lie. But there are some lines of theistic thinking that push against this picture, and that is where I will turn.

1.1.3 How this is an Improvement

However, I first want to indulge myself by briefly noting some of the ways in which the above presentation improves on existing presentations in the literature. The most developed presentations are Guleserian (1983), Kraay (2011), and Collier (2022). Let me note a few respects in which I find these presentations lacking.

All of these formulations employ a possible worlds semantics. While I have no problem with possible worlds semantics, this framework leads each of these accounts to make extraneous assumptions and introduce baggage that are not essential to the argument. Guleserian lists four principles about the relation between worlds, states of affairs, and the property of actuality that

¹⁷ And therefore God's necessary perfect goodness entails that necessarily, if God Φ 's then it is morally permissible that God Φ 's.

his argument relies on.¹⁸ While none of these is especially controversial, they could be denied. My presentation makes no assumptions about these matters. More importantly, this presentation has sometimes encouraged participants in the debate to think that the possible worlds framework is somehow essential to the Modal Problem of Evil. Kraay (2011: 361), for example, presents Guleserian's argument as beginning by "marshalling some standard consequences of possible world semantics for theism". And Collier (2022: 471) says that the Modal Problem of Evil "can be conceived of as an argument against the existence of God, if generic possible worlds-theory is correct". As my presentation demonstrates, the Modal Problem of Evil is independent of any possible worlds framework for modality.

The existing formulations also contain gaps by failing to pay sufficient attention to the crucial role of God's abilities in the argument. Guleserian's strategy, also adopted by the later presentations¹⁹, is to claim that what God is responsible for is allowing a certain world to be actual. Guleserian notes that God is able to prevent a certain world from being actual simply by "bringing about some state of affairs that is not included in that world".²⁰ But this line of reasoning applies to any agent that has any unexercised abilities in a given world. It is true in the same sense that I allow the actual world to be actual. These presentations therefore fail to establish that God has the relevant amount of power to prevent the problematic evils at the heart of the argument. My presentation rectifies this by specifying exactly the relevant ability that God has and arguing in detail that God's omnipotence entails this ability.

In addition to containing more detailed support of the substantive premises in the argument, these are two of the ways in which I hope to have advanced and clarified the Modal Problem of Evil in my presentation. I now turn to defending the first half of the argument from some possible and actual lines of resistance.

¹⁸ Guleserian (1983: 222-223).

¹⁹ Collier (2022: 470) speaks of God 'creating' a world rather than allowing one to be actual. But whatever that might mean, Collier does not argue for the claim that God is able to create a world without the relevant evils. Rather, like Kraay, this claim is inserted into the formulation but unsupported.

²⁰ Guleserian (1983: 223).

1.2 Resisting Modal Revision I: Abilities and Freedom

In this and the next section I try to rebut some ways of resisting the conclusion represented by (10), which says that various catastrophic evils are metaphysically impossible.

1.2.1 *Is God Unable to Eliminate Possible Evils?*

No one has been more vocal about resisting the modal consequences of the Modal Problem of Evil than Michael Almeida.²¹ I've distilled his work into two main lines of resistance. I discuss the first here and the second in section 1.2.2.

Almeida's first line of resistance is that God is really unable to eliminate merely metaphysically possible evils. Almeida presents several different routes to this view. I first challenge these routes, and then I argue that even if this were true, it would not overturn the Modal Problem of Evil and its modal consequences.

1.2.1.1 *The Rescue Situation*

In some of his earliest work on the topic²², Almeida argues that God is in a moral rescue situation, like when a lifeguard can save each of two people from drowning, but cannot save both of them, and so must save one at the cost of the other.²³ In particular, consider Smith. According to Almeida, God can save each of Smith's counterparts from catastrophic evils (including Smith himself), but cannot save all of Smith's counterparts from catastrophic evils.²⁴ God must save some at the expense of others, and, like the lifeguard, is morally justified in doing so.

However, God is not in a position analogous to the lifeguard. When the lifeguard chooses to save one drowning person, the lifeguard renders themselves unable to save the other due to lack of time – by the time they have saved the one the other will have drowned. God's situation is not like that. God's choosing to prevent catastrophic evil to a Smith-counterpart does not render God unable to prevent catastrophic evils to any other Smith-counterpart. At no world is God in a moral rescue situation, forced to choose between allowing one of a set of catastrophic evils. Rather, at each world God is able to prevent the relevant kinds of catastrophic evils. And

²¹ In Almeida (2011), Almeida (2017), and Almeida (2020).

²² Almeida (2011: sec 3-6).

²³ Almeida (2011: 6-9).

²⁴ Almeida (2011: 9).

were God to exercise this ability at each world, God would save all the Smith-counterparts and eliminate catastrophic evils from metaphysical space.

Why does Almeida think that God cannot save all of Smith's counterparts from catastrophic evil? The answer is that he assumes that it is possible that Smith endures catastrophic evils.²⁵ Almeida moves from this to the claim that necessarily, it is possible that Smith endures catastrophic evils, and therefore "if God prevents the suffering of all of Smith's non-actual and morally equal counterparts, then God cannot also prevent the suffering of Smith."²⁶

There are two key problems here. The first is that the Modal Problem of Evil is an argument from theism to the claim that it is *not* possible that there are catastrophic evils of the relevant kind. Almeida has not at all shown where this argument goes wrong. In a context where we are assessing whether theism has revisionary modal consequences, it is not legitimate to assume at the outset that there are no such consequences, which is what the claim that it is possible that there are catastrophic evils amounts to. The second problem is that the conclusion, that God is unable to prevent Smith's suffering, simply doesn't follow from the premise. I suspect that what's really in the background here is some kind of argument from God's not being able to do the impossible, and I will have more to say on that in a moment (section 1.2.1.4).

1.2.1.2 Theistic Modal Realism

Almeida's second attempt at showing that God is unable to eliminate possible evils appeals to modal realism.²⁷ According to Almeida, if modal realism is true, then the collection of all possible worlds (which Almeida calls the 'pluriverse') could not have been any different than it is.²⁸ Therefore, any evil anywhere in the pluriverse simply cannot be eliminated from the pluriverse. Here is a summary:

The totality of God's creation is usefully viewed as a very large possible world – a very large necessitarian world. It is indeed the largest possible region of reality. It is false that the totality of God's creation might have included any less evil than it does. It is false as well that

²⁵ Almeida (2011: 6-9).

²⁶ Almeida (2011: 8).

²⁷ Almeida (2017: sec 4).

²⁸ Almeida (2017: 6).

any part of the totality of God's creation might have included any less evil than it does. Every instance of evil in every region of the pluriverse – every instance of evil in every possible world – is necessary to the greatest possible good. There is no gratuitous or pointless evil anywhere in the pluriverse. Indeed, there is no eliminable evil anywhere in the pluriverse. There is therefore no problem of evil anywhere in the pluriverse.

Almeida's claims about what is true on modal realism are dubious. What is necessary, according to the usual modal realist analysis of modal claims, is what is true at all possible worlds. And what is true at a possible world, on the usual analysis, is what is true when the domain of quantification is restricted to things that are a part of that world. Consider, then, the following sentence: 'necessarily, a catastrophic evil exists'. The sentence embedded under 'necessarily' is false at any possible world where there is no catastrophic evil. And Almeida believes that there are many such possible worlds. Therefore the entire sentence is false. Well, what about sentences that explicitly talk about the pluriverse? Consider the following: 'necessarily, a catastrophic evil exists somewhere in the pluriverse'. Again, to assess a sentence at a possible world, we must restrict our domain of quantification to what exists in that possible world. But the pluriverse exists in no possible world. So the sentence embedded under 'necessarily' seems to be false at every possible world, and therefore the entire sentence is false.

The above problems are related to the so-called problem of 'advanced modalizing'.²⁹ Roughly speaking, the problem concerns the fact that the ordinary modal realist way of analyzing modal discourse seems to fall apart when talking about the modal realist ontology itself. Since Almeida supplies no way of thinking about this advanced modal discourse, it is hard to assess his claims. In any event, it seems more profitable to think directly about the question of whether God would be able to eliminate evils from the pluriverse, rather than simply to assume that "the pluriverse is necessarily unchangeable"³⁰, which, so far as I can tell, is simply an assumption that Almeida lifts from the Lewisian version of modal realism without reason. When I think directly about this question and assume the picture of theistic modal realism, the intuitively obvious answer is that yes, God could have made the pluriverse differently and could have made a pluriverse without any catastrophic evils. In fact, God could have ensured that no

²⁹ See, e.g., Jago (2016).

³⁰ Almeida (2017: 1).

pluriverse existed at all. God could have done this by willing that nothing else concrete exists. Since God is omnipotent, had God willed this, no pluriverse would have existed.³¹

I conclude that theistic modal realism provides no reason for thinking that God is unable to eliminate possible evils.

1.2.1.3 The Impossibility of Eliminating Possible Evils

Almeida's latest attempt to show that God is unable to eliminate possible evils is the simplest, but also, in my view, gets to the heart of what is really going on in all of the foregoing. After discussing some analyses of what makes an evil gratuitous, Almeida argues that "it cannot be a moral requirement on God to prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world, since it is impossible to do so."³²

Almeida's argument is a reductio of the claim that necessarily, God prevents S, where 'S' describes a catastrophic evil.³³ The argument claims that necessarily, God prevents S if and only if necessarily, God prevents $\Diamond S$. In S5, $\Diamond S$ is equivalent to $\Box \Diamond S$. Therefore necessarily, God prevents S if and only if God prevents $\Box \Diamond S$. But this means that God prevents a necessary truth, which is impossible. Therefore it is not true that necessarily, God prevents S.

There are at least two flaws in the above argument. First, it is not clear what justifies the move from God's necessarily preventing S to God's necessarily preventing some modal consequence of S, like $\Diamond S$ or $\Box \Diamond S$. In general, agentive notions like preventing or bringing about are not closed under logical consequence or even logical equivalence.³⁴ So if the idea is that for God to prevent S, God must prevent any modal consequence of S, this justification

³¹ Almeida's position that God couldn't have brought it about that the pluriverse was any different is even stranger in light of the fact that Almeida holds that God creates the pluriverse. ("Theistic modal realism holds that God necessarily creates the pluriverse." [Almeida 2017: 5]) God's creative abilities, on this view, are incredibly constrained down to the most minute detail of every individual universe!

³² Almeida (2020: 130).

³³ Actually, this is my own very charitable reconstruction of the argument. In fact, Almeida formulates the argument as a reductio making two assumptions: (1) what he calls the "standard position on God and gratuitous evil", which is basically that necessarily, God prevents S; and (2) that gratuitous evils are possible. But it is completely unclear what entitles him to conclude, at the end of the reductio, that it is (1) that is false rather than (2).

³⁴ If preventing were closed under logical consequence then by preventing P I would prevent any logical truth. If preventing were closed under logical equivalence then by preventing P I would prevent the conjunction of P with any logical truth.

fails.³⁵ We could show by this reasoning that I cannot prevent anything, since by preventing P I would have to prevent the modal consequences $\Diamond P$ and $\Box \Diamond P$, which is impossible. It is not clear why this line of reasoning would be any better when all of the premises are within the scope of a metaphysical necessity operator, as in Almeida's argument.

Second, the argument implicitly assumes that S is possible. The conclusion, that God prevents $\Box \Diamond S$, is supposedly absurd because $\Box \Diamond S$ is a necessary truth. But this is derived from the claim that $\Diamond S$ is true. But whether $\Diamond S$ is true is exactly what is at issue. The question is whether theism has the revisionary modal consequence that S is impossible. As I said in section 1.2.1.1, if one holds the possibility of S as a fixed assumption, then of course you will get the result that there is no revisionary consequence that S is impossible. But this smoke-and-mirrors tactic is nothing but a reflection of what we started with.

1.2.1.4 God Does not Need the Ability to Eliminate Possible Evils to Make Evils Impossible

I think if we cut through all the distractions, what all three of the above lines of reasoning come to is the idea that in order for God's existence to entail the impossibility of certain evils, God must have the ability to do something impossible. In section 1.2.1.1 it was the ability to save all of the Smith-counterparts. In section 1.2.1.2 it was the ability to change the pluriverse. And in section 1.2.1.3 it was the ability to prevent $\Box \Diamond S$.

In addition to more specific issues, one problem that plagued all of these arguments is that the relevant ability is only supposed to be an ability to do the impossible because it was assumed that the contested catastrophic evils are possible to begin with (or exist somewhere in the pluriverse). This assumption, combined with theism, amounts to the assumption that theism has no revisionary modal consequences. This assumption cannot be made in the current context.

Even more fundamentally, it is simply not true that God must possess an ability to do the impossible in order for the existence of God to make certain evils impossible. All God needs is the ability to do something perfectly possible by everyone's lights – prevent those evils. If God has this ability at each world, then God can make evils impossible. There is no world where God needs the ability to prevent the possibility of evils or any other such questionable ability. The Modal Problem of Evil precisely shows that the necessity of this very ordinary ability – the

³⁵ And indeed this is at least what seems to be Almeida's justification for this move. See his explanation on why his premise (6) follows from his (5) at Almeida (2020: 131).

ability to prevent a certain state, combined with some normative premises, entails the impossibility of that state. No extraordinary ability is required – just a necessary ordinary ability.³⁶

1.2.2 Does Free Will Disprove a Lower Bound of Goodness?

In some other work, Almeida presents an argument against the idea that there is some lower bound N on such that worlds cannot be worse than N .³⁷ While he does not present this as an argument against the claim at issue here, that God would necessarily prevent certain catastrophic evils, it is natural to think that the argument could be extended in this manner. For if there is no limit to how bad God can permissibly allow things to get, then it is tempting to conclude that God can just allow anything at all, no matter how bad. After all, it cannot be *the badness* of the catastrophic evils in question that obligates God to eliminate them, on the view that there is no lower bound to the badness of worlds in general.

Crucial to Almeida's argument is the concept of significant freedom. Let 'T' be a complete description of the largest state of affairs that God directly causes or 'strongly actualizes'. Then we can define this concept as follows:³⁸

S has significant freedom with respect to action Φ at time t if and only if:

- (i) Either it would be wrong for S to Φ at t or it would be wrong for S not to Φ at t .
- (ii) Possibly, T obtains and S Φ 's at t .
- (iii) Possibly, T obtains and S does not Φ at t .

In other words, in order for you to have significant freedom with to an action, that action must be morally significant – some moral obligation must either require you to perform it or not to

³⁶ I will also argue in chapter 3 that theists should believe that God is able to do the metaphysically impossible. But this more controversial position is not needed here.

³⁷ Almeida (2012: sec 5.5). Almeida presents a similar argument in Almeida (2015).

³⁸ See Almeida (2012: 87-88). This definition is based on Plantinga (1974: 165-166). Almeida actually gives two non-equivalent definitions, one in which one holds everything in the past fixed and the other in which one just holds what God strongly actualizes fixed. I have adopted the weaker of these because it is more conducive to the argument. Specifically, Almeida's description of world W_1 is incoherent on the stronger notion, since one cannot hold the entire past fixed and alter the choices of agents at different times.

perform it – and it must be both possible for you to perform it and possible for you not to perform, while holding fixed certain features of the world.

Almeida's argument is a reductio of the claim that there is some lower bound N such that all possible worlds have value N or greater. Almeida assumes that if such an N exists, then there exists a possible world W_0 with value N such that there are several significantly free agents³⁹ in W_0 and these agents make the right choice with respect to their significantly free actions. Almeida claims that since each of these agents are significantly free, there is a world W_1 , possible relative to W_0 in which all these agents make the wrong choice with respect to all of their significantly free actions. Almeida claims that W_1 would be worse than W_0 , and therefore have a value lower than N . By the characteristic axiom of S4 that relative possibility is transitive, W_1 is possible relative to the actual world. It follows that there is a possible world, namely W_1 , with a value lower than N . This contradicts our assumption of a lower bound.⁴⁰

This argument goes wrong in many ways. First, although I have said it is tempting to move from a lack of a lower bound on overall goodness to the claim that God can allow anything, this temptation is resistable. Perhaps, for example, God is obligated to prevent certain kinds of evils not for axiological reasons concerning how bad they are, but for reasons along more deontic lines. Perhaps God's failing to prevent certain evils would manifest a lack of respect for persons, for example. Second, even if we think that there must be a lower bound N on the goodness of worlds, it does not follow that there is a world with a value of N . Perhaps there is no worst world, but an infinite series of increasingly worse worlds that approach N as a limit but never reach it. And even if there is a least acceptable world of value N , why think that it must contain significantly free agents? Perhaps the least acceptable world is a boring one with no agents at all, other than God. Or perhaps it contains minimal forms of agency that experience some amount of pleasure but never make decisions. Or perhaps it contains agents that make decisions, but possess a less demanding type of control over their decisions, like some of kind of

³⁹ A significantly free agent is an agent who is significantly free with respect to at least one action.

⁴⁰ The argument is summarized by the following passage (Almeida 2012: 155). Note that Almeida uses 'significantly free instantiated essence' where I use 'significantly free agent':

It is possible in W_0 that with respect to all duties of beneficence, every significantly free instantiated essence goes wrong. But if all instantiated essences in W_0 were to go wrong with respect to every duty of beneficence, these essences would of course actualize a world W_1 that has less overall value than W_0 . The violations of justice and beneficence in W_1 would make the overall value of W_1 is less than N .

‘actual sequence’ freedom that does not require the ability to do otherwise⁴¹, or they might have an ability to do otherwise holding fixed something more minimal than T. And even if the least acceptable world contains agents that make significantly free choices, in Almeida’s sense, over morally important matters, perhaps they all make the wrong decisions with respect to these matters. If these matters are not of extreme significance or are sufficiently rare, then the world might be overall good enough for God to allow. This would also prevent Almeida’s argument from getting started, since it would leave no room for a worse possible world that includes agents making more mistakes, since they would have no more to make.

The argument we are considering therefore makes many unwarranted assumptions. But even leaving these aside, there are flaws in the heart of the argument. Consider the derivation of W_1 from W_0 . From the fact that there are many significantly free agents in W_1 that make correct choices, it does not follow that there is a world W_0 in which these agents *all together* make the wrong choices. It simply follows that, for each significantly free action A in W_0 , there is a possible world W_2 in which T obtains and the relevant agent makes the wrong choice with respect to A. But no other agents need to make incorrect choices in W_2 . In other words, there must be a world for each significant decision in which that decision goes the other way, but there doesn’t need to be a world in which all the significant decisions go the other way.

One might reply that if even one more significant decision in W_0 went wrong, then the resulting world would be worse than W_0 , and this suffices to complete the argument. But this does not follow. Perhaps in the least acceptable world W_0 , if someone had made an extra moral mistake, then something else would have occurred that didn’t actually occur, and this would have resulted in a world that is at least as good as or better than W_0 . Of course, we have to hold T, or whatever God directly causes fixed. But this leaves plenty of wiggle room. Perhaps, for example, if Jim had made an extra mistake, then Pam would have done an extra nice thing. Almeida replies to a similar objection by saying that this would mean that “no significantly free being can do anything in W_0 that lessens the overall moral value of W_0 ”, and that this “is in violation of our hypothesis that W_0 includes significantly free beings performing morally significant actions”.⁴² But an action can still be wrong even if it’s true that, were you to do it, the world would be better

⁴¹ See, e.g., Sartorio (2016) for such a view.

⁴² Almeida (2012: 157).

off overall. Even consequentialists should admit this, since the causal consequences of an action do not include everything that would have happened in an entire world were you to do it.

In sum, the argument of this section fails in many different ways. First, the lack of a lower bound of goodness does not necessarily imply that God is permitted to allow anything. Second, the existence of a lower bound of goodness does not entail the existence of a least acceptable world. Third, the argument makes many unwarranted assumptions about what the least acceptable world would have to look like. And fourth, even if there were a least acceptable world with significantly free agents that make correct significant decisions, it does not follow that there is a world where they all make the wrong decisions, nor does it follow that if one of them had made the wrong decision, the result would be a worse world overall.

1.3 Resisting Modal Revision II: God and the Bounds of Morality

In this section I turn to some theistic lines of thinking that converge around the idea that God is somehow “outside the bounds of morality”⁴³, or at least outside the bounds of “norms of familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness”⁴⁴. On these views, God does not possess any moral obligations, or at least any moral obligations concerning the welfare of human beings. Moral principles like (4), then, cannot be applied to God. The views in question are increasingly being applied to resolve versions of the problem of evil⁴⁵, but as far as I know no one has yet explicitly applied them to the Modal Problem of Evil. Perhaps this is driven by a certain squeamishness about explicitly bringing out the consequences of placing God outside of the bounds of morality – that God would do no wrong by sitting by indifferently while creation squirms and writhes senselessly in unending agony, like forgotten maggots.⁴⁶ This is precisely the consequence that must be drawn upon to avoid the modal revisionism called for by the Modal Problem of Evil.

⁴³ Rubio (2023: 1).

⁴⁴ Murphy (2017: 46).

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Murphy (2017), Flanagan (2022), Huffling (2022), Rubio (2023), Rutledge (2023), and Taliaferro (2023).

⁴⁶ I find it telling that proponents of these kinds of views explicitly compare humans to worms in the eyes of God. Adams (1999: 94-95) opines, “We have no more rightful place in God's household than worms and maggots do in ours[...]nothing we could be or do could count – simply by virtue of what it is – as an appropriate move in relation to God, any more than a worm's wiggling to the right could be intrinsically more respectful of humans than its wiggling to the left.”

Even though these views end up in what I consider obvious and even morally appalling error, it is worth examining them, if only to discern the best ways of rejecting them.

1.3.1 The “Metaphysical Size Gap”⁴⁷

A number of authors have claimed that the “sheer difference” between God and humans “places God outside of the network of rights and obligations that constitute morality”.⁴⁸ Of course it is true that God would be very different from us. But it is very difficult to discern in the writings of these author’s exactly what about this difference makes God exempt from ordinary moral obligations. The sheer fact that something is very different from us doesn’t at all support the claim that it is exempt from all obligations towards us. We are not completely in the dark about the factors that ground moral obligations. We don’t have a complete or completely precise story at hand, but when it comes to having moral obligations, i.e. being a *moral agent*, surely central to these factors will be having abilities like the ability to reason and make free choices, the ability to recognize the mental states of others, the ability to predict the consequences of one’s actions, and so on. Although God is very different from us, these differences do not include a lack of these abilities. And when it comes to having moral rights, i.e. being a *moral patient*, surely central to these factors will be consciousness, the ability to mentally suffer or thrive, and so on. God’s differences from us cannot reduce our moral patiency with respect to God, since the factors that ground patiency are not relative ones that are affected by the “size gap” between agents. We therefore have strong grounds to think that the differences between God and humans, vast as they are, would not exempt God from obligations towards us.

Rubio develops the size gap argument by pointing out that allegedly small differences between agents can affect whether one is a moral agent:

The difference between human infants and human children, who do possess moral agency, is minuscule. Yet, it is the difference between having moral obligations and lacking them. It does not take much to stand apart from morality’s grasp.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Adams (1999: 96).

⁴⁸ Rubio (2023: 3), summarizing the views of Adams (1999). See also Davies (2006: ch. 4) for a similar view.

⁴⁹ Rubio (2023: 4).

And therefore:

Given that even very small differences exempt rational agents from the moral norms that govern us, we should expect that vast differences such as between the Abrahamic God and us would have the same effect.⁵⁰

But this argument is not convincing. Clearly, early infants do not possess abilities like the ability to predict the consequences of their actions. At some point in their development, they will develop the relevant abilities and therefore become moral agents. Although the physical differences between early infants and children may appear small by some measures, it is the differences in the relevant abilities that ground moral agency that explains why infants are not bound by morality but children are. Compared to us, God has enhanced rather than diminished abilities in these respects. Therefore, comparing the sheer size of the differences between infants and children (“very small”) and us and God (“vast”) is simply immaterial.

Rubio considers a response along these lines and responds that although an artificial general intelligence (AGI) would have “rational capacities superior to that of a human adult”, it would not obviously therefore be a moral agent.⁵¹ I’m inclined to think that our hesitancy to attribute moral agency to an AGI is attributable to our hesitancy to attribute some relevant capacity to AGI, like capacities for free will or consciousness. But if an AGI had such capacities in addition to rational capacities that exceed our own, then it would obviously be a moral agent. Since God is supposed to have these capacities, our hesitancy to attribute moral agency to an AGI doesn’t cast doubt on God’s being a moral agent.

1.3.2 Does God have Reasons to be Moral?

In the previous section I argued that the sheer *size* of the difference between God and us is no reason to think that God lacks moral obligations towards us. In this section, I examine a more substantial reason to explain exactly why the differences between God and us put God outside the bounds of morality.

⁵⁰ Rubio (2023: 4).

⁵¹ Rubio (2023: 4).

Mark Murphy argues that God is not morally good, at least not when goodness is understood in the “familiar welfare-oriented” sense.⁵² Murphy’s picture is one on which there is a generic kind of reason, and rationality consists in responding appropriately to these reasons. Murphy argues that for the demands of morality to apply to God, they must give God these generic reasons for action. Moreover, these reasons would have to be requiring reasons, i.e. reasons such that failing to act on them in the absence of countervailing reasons would be irrational. To summarize, Murphy endorses the following view of the relation between morality and rationality:⁵³

Morality Gives Reasons: Necessarily, if S morally ought to Φ , then S has a (*pro tanto*) requiring reason to Φ .

Murphy argues from **Morality Gives Reasons** to the claim that God has no moral obligations through the premise that God does not have requiring reasons to be moral. He supports this premise by considering and rejecting various accounts of why God would have requiring reasons to be moral.⁵⁴ He examines various famous attempts that ethicists have made to argue that we have reasons to be moral. These include Hobbesian views⁵⁵, Humean views⁵⁶, Aristotelian views⁵⁷, and Kantian views⁵⁸. Murphy points out that, whatever their independent merits, these views are manifestly inadequate to show that God has reasons to be moral. In broad strokes, this is because they all presuppose something about the human situation (human psychology, human vulnerability, human nature, etc.) in order to derive reasons to be moral. But these facts about the human situation would not apply to God, rendering the accounts inadequate in God’s case. Murphy also considers an attempt to argue that God would have requiring reasons

⁵² In Murphy (2017).

⁵³ See especially Murphy (2017: sec 2.2) for the foregoing.

⁵⁴ Murphy (2017: sec 3.3 - 3.5).

⁵⁵ Roughly, we have reasons to be moral because we have certain shared desires, and our mutual vulnerability makes it instrumentally rational for us to adopt shared moral norms to fulfill these desires.

⁵⁶ Roughly, we have reasons to be moral because our innate sympathies for other people simply include desires that make it rational to abide by common moral norms.

⁵⁷ Roughly, we have reasons to be moral because the metaphysical kind to which we belong somehow determines what is good for us.

⁵⁸ Roughly, we have reasons to be moral because we must value ourselves as rational agents in a way that commits us to valuing other rational agents equally.

to be moral because human beings are intrinsically valuable. Among other responses, Murphy replies that theism entails that human beings are not intrinsically valuable.⁵⁹

In what follows, I will sketch a way of rejecting Murphy's argument by appealing to the idea that morality is *normatively autonomous*. The problem with all of the traditional attempts to justify morality that Murphy examines is that they try to derive moral reasons from some more basic type of reasons. For the most part, these concern reasons about what is good for an agent, or something like desire-based, prudential reasons. To be honest, I think that this project is largely hopeless, at least in its more grandiose ambitions (e.g. of showing that all rational agents or all human beings have prudential reasons to be moral). But why think that moral reasons must be justified by some more basic kind of reason? Moral autonomy is the idea that moral reasons stand on their own two feet, and do not require further normative justification from another normative realm:

Moral Autonomy: The truth of **Morality Gives Reasons** is normatively basic – it has no further normative explanation.

It is worth clarifying that **Moral Autonomy** does not require that the existence of moral reasons posited by **Morality Gives Reasons** has no further explanation at all. Such reasons might be given a further metaphysical explanation. That is a story to be told in metaethics, not in normative ethics. **Moral Autonomy** is a claim about the normative, not metaphysical, autonomy of morality.

The picture I just sketched can be motivated by the idea that there is nothing special about one kind of norm, like prudential norms, that gives them priority over moral norms. Perhaps, there are several reason-giving autonomous normative realms, like the prudential, the moral, the epistemic, and the aesthetic. Rationality would consist in somehow weighing and responding appropriately to all these kinds of reasons.

Humeans about reasons, however, would deny this picture. They claim that all reasons are ultimately desire-based reasons.⁶⁰ For Humeans, desire-based reasons, or what I have been calling 'prudential reasons', must undergird moral norms in order for them to have genuine

⁵⁹ Murphy (2017: sec 4.4). See Rubio (forthcoming) for a critical discussion of Murphy's views here.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Schroeder (2007) for a sophisticated version of this view.

reason-giving force. However, I will argue that Humeanism about reasons is in tension with **Morality Gives Reasons** to begin with.

I will argue that Humeanism about reasons, together with **Morality Gives Reasons**, suggests a moral error theory, or at least a strong form of moral revisionism. If moral obligations do always provide reasons for action, it is plausible that these reasons are categorical reasons, in at least the sense of holding independently of the desires of the agent for whom these are reasons for. If moral reasons were not categorical in this sense, it would follow by **Morality Gives Reasons** that one could escape moral obligations simply by altering one's desires in an appropriate way. By **Morality Gives Reasons**, I am only under a moral obligation to Φ if I have a reason to Φ . Therefore if these reasons are not independent of my desires, failure to possess the relevant reason-grounding desires would entail my not being under any obligation to Φ . But moral obligations, or at least many of them, are not supposed to be escapable by failure to possess some relevant desire.⁶¹ So the truth of **Morality Gives Reasons** would suggest that the reasons given by moral obligations are desire-independent. But Humeanism about reasons is exactly the view that all reasons are desire-dependent. Therefore, given **Morality Gives Reasons**, the kinds of reasons that would have to exist for us to be under moral obligations are incompatible with Humeanism. Humeanism and **Morality Gives Reasons** together, then, imply an error theory about morality – that we are never morally obligated to Φ , for any Φ .⁶²

It is worth noting that even if you reject my claim that **Morality Gives Reasons** suggests that moral reasons must be categorical, Humeanism about reasons plus **Morality Gives Reasons** already entails worrying kinds of moral revisionism, all by themselves. The resulting view has it that we are sometimes under moral obligations, but only when we have a desire that grounds a reason to follow those obligations. It seems that virtually no moral principle could be necessarily

⁶¹ See Joyce (2001: sec 2.0 - 2.1) for a defense of a similar view. The argument of this paragraph bears many similarities to Joyce's argument for the moral error theory. The important difference is that I am not arguing for **Morality Gives Reasons** (which Joyce calls 'Mackie's Platitude') or for Humeanism about reasons, I am simply suggesting that if you do accept that combination, you are pressured towards the error theory. Joyce's argument for the error theory, of course, relies on the truth of those claims (see premises 2 and 4 of his master argument [Joyce 2001: 42]).

⁶² You might think that isn't so bad. But it is a presupposition of the Modal Problem of Evil that we are sometimes under moral obligations – see basic moral premise (4). And if you're an error theorist, you don't have to worry about the special question of whether God is within the bounds of morality, since you think that no one is. Besides, error theory and theism make strange bedmates. Lambert (2022) argues that they are at least compatible, but elsewhere Lambert (2021: sec 5.3) argues that, nonetheless, theists have good reasons to reject error theory.

true on this combination of views, due to the wide variety of possible psychologies. And no ordinary moral principles will be actually true, given the wide variety of actual psychologies. For example, we couldn't say that it is always wrong to murder for pleasure, given that a psychopathic sadist in the right kind of situation (e.g. they would not be caught, etc.) lacks the relevant desires that would ground a desire-based reason not to murder for pleasure in that situation. These results will be worrying to many Humeans about reasons.

To summarize, I argued that we do not need a deeper normative story about why morality gives God reasons to act if we accept that morality is normatively autonomous. Although Humeans about reasons cannot accept this picture of the relationship between morality and rationality, I argued that Humeanism about reasons is in tension with the idea that moral obligations require reasons to act in accordance with them. On a Humean view, God doesn't need reasons to be moral to be bound by moral obligations. And on a non-Humean view, God has these reasons because morality gives moral reasons for acting, and there is no deeper normative story to look for. Either way, we can resist Murphy's argument that God is not bound by morality because God lacks reasons to be moral.

1.3.3 Divine Command Theory

Some theists believe that God's commands are the ground of moral obligations.⁶³ On a naive formulation of this sort of Divine Command Theory of obligations, S is morally obligated to Φ if and only if God commands S to Φ . An obvious implication of this is that God is only morally obligated to do anything if God issues self-binding commands. But this seems like an odd prospect. Flanagan (2022: 5) puts it plainly, "It is unlikely that God issues commands to himself. Why would he need to? If he wanted to do something, would he not just do it?" The Divine Command Theory therefore provides another motivation for placing God outside the bounds of moral obligation, on the grounds that God would not issue self-commands.

The idea of a self-command is not as absurd as it might first seem. We commonly issue ourselves self-commands, though these are not usually spoken aloud. "Don't take another piece of cake!", you might think to yourself. Or a military leader might issue a very general order – "No one advance!" – meaning to include themselves under the scope of the order. Perhaps some

⁶³ See, e.g., Adams (1999: ch. 11) for a development of this view.

of God's commands would be absolutely unrestricted in scope, binding not just created beings but self-binding as well.

However, let's concede that God wouldn't issue self-commands, and that therefore on the Divine Command Theory God is under no moral obligations. I will argue that, nonetheless, divine command theorists must adopt certain substantive assumptions about God's essential character, and that this is sufficient to reinstate the Modal Problem of Evil and its implication of modal revisionism.

The most famous objection to Divine Command Theory is without a doubt the Euthyphro Dilemma, which asks: Does God command Φ -ing because Φ -ing is morally obligatory, or is Φ -ing morally obligatory because God commands Φ -ing? The Divine Command Theory, as a theory of the grounds of moral obligation, rules out the former answer. But what's wrong with the latter answer? The worry, as I understand it, is that God's commands would be rendered objectionably arbitrary. If there is no independent standard of rightness which forms the basis of God's commands, then they are objectionably arbitrary, or so the worry goes.

Divine command theorists answer this worry by appealing to some independent standard of *goodness* that forms the basis of God's commands. As Adams (1999: 255) puts it:

It is crucial (and plausible on the assumption that God is the supreme Good) that God's commands spring from a design and purpose that is good, and that the behavior that God commands is not bad, but good, either intrinsically or by serving a pattern of life that is very good.

Moreover, this standard of goodness must be substantive in order to provide a non-arbitrary rational basis for God's commands. In other words, it would not be enough to say that God's commands are based on considerations of goodness, and that goodness is determined by God's whims. This would leave no rational basis for God's commands. Therefore, Divine Command Theorists adopt a substantive conception of God's moral character (Adams 1999: 253):

The claim that God is the standard [of goodness] is not inscribed as the first line on a blank slate of ethical theory. It is made, rather, against the background of many substantive beliefs about what properties are excellences that must be reflected somehow in the character of any being that is the standard of excellence.

So in order to avoid objectionable arbitrariness in the divine commands, divine command theorists should appeal to a substantive conception of God's moral character. Plausibly, this would include God's possession of such moral virtues as beneficence, kindness, justness, fairness, generosity, and so on.

Moreover, divine command theorists should hold that God has these virtues not just contingently, but necessarily. God's commands, on this picture, are rationally grounded in his moral character. If God were to lack these virtues and instead possess a different moral character, for example being cruel rather than kind, then God's commands would reflect these other traits. It would follow by Divine Command Theory that our moral obligations would be radically different. Perhaps, for example, we would be obligated to be cruel to our neighbors instead of being obligated to love our neighbors. But it is not possible that, in general, we are morally obligated to be cruel to our neighbors. Since morality could not be radically different in this manner, neither could God's moral character, which grounds what God commands.⁶⁴

I conclude, then, that the divine command theorist should hold that God has an essential moral character. Unless we are radically mistaken about the nature of morality, this character would include virtues like beneficence and kindness. But the idea that God is essentially beneficent and kind is enough to reinstate the heart of the Modal Problem of Evil. A beneficent and kind being would not allow certain kinds of catastrophic evils. For example, a beneficent and kind being would not allow everyone to live terrible lives not even close to being worth living, if it could easily prevent this at no cost to anyone, and it knew that it could do this. This normative truth leads to modal revisionism when combined with the rest of the Modal Problem of Evil.

Indeed, the idea that God is necessarily beneficent and kind perhaps provides a deeper and more incorrigible basis for the Modal Problem of Evil than principles about moral obligation. For even if it is true that God is outside of the bounds of moral obligation, it could be that God would still necessarily act in a certain way despite not being obligated to, because of God's essential character. And it is plausible, even independently of Divine Command Theory, that God is necessarily beneficent and kind. For kindness and beneficence (as well as the other

⁶⁴ Note that this argument does not assume that God's commands could not be different in any way. Adams (1999: 255-256) gives some plausible examples where God seems to have leeway with respect to what to command. My point is just that God's commands could not be radically different than they actually are, in the way that way would be if God's basic moral character were different.

moral virtues) are perfections, just as much as power and knowledge. A perfect being is a kind and beneficent one. It follows that a necessarily perfect being would necessarily act in a kind and benevolent way, and it is manifest that this includes preventing certain catastrophic evils.

1.4 Conclusion of Chapter 1

I argued that theism entails a kind of modal revisionism – if theism is true, then certain horrendous states of affairs are metaphysically impossible. I supported this by defending (the first half of) an improved Modal Problem of Evil. I defended this argument from a number of objections. I rebutted various arguments to the effect that God lacks the abilities required by the Modal Problem of Evil. I also challenged several lines of thinking that support the idea that God is outside the bounds of morality. I finished briefly with the idea that even if God is not bound by moral obligations, God’s essential character is enough to show that theism leads to modal revisionism. If you are a theist, you should think that it really can’t be *that* bad.

Chapter 2: God's Problem of Cut-and-Paste

In the last chapter I argued that certain very bad states of affairs are metaphysically impossible if theism is true. The specific example that I presented in detail is the following: that many people live terrible lives that are not worth living and no one lives a life even close to being worth living. In this chapter, I take as a starting point a different normative restriction on metaphysical possibility. Specifically, I take it as a working assumption that theism entails that there is a lower bound on how bad overall it is possible for the world to be.

Normatively, it is plausible that there is some lower bound of goodness *E* such that it is impermissible for God to allow the world to be that overall worse than *E*, if God is able to prevent the world from being worse than *E* at no cost to anyone, and God knows that God is able to do this. That God is able to prevent this catastrophic evil follows by the same line of reasoning presented in section 1.1.2. God could choose to exist alone without anyone else, and this would prevent there being a world that is worse than *E*, granted that God's existing alone is at or above *E*.⁶⁵ The rest of the reasoning to show that worlds worse than *E* are impossible proceeds similarly.

Can more be said about what the lower bound *E* actually is? Several theists have assumed that this lower bound is overall badness. That is, God would not be permitted to allow the world to be bad overall.⁶⁶ In what follows, I will investigate both this view and the weaker view that only assumes that *E* must be only finitely bad. That is, on the weaker view, *E* represents some finite level of overall disvalue of a world, below which would be too bad for God to allow.

Later I will argue for some less purely axiological constraints on what God can permissibly allow. But, for now, these views will be convenient for generating some *prima facie* arguments for the tension that I will be concerned with in this chapter. This tension concerns theism and a certain principle of modal recombination. The sort of principle I have in mind sometimes goes under the name of the 'patchwork'⁶⁷ principle or the 'Cut-and-Paste'⁶⁸ principle.

⁶⁵ I also assume that God's doing so would be no worse for anyone. To substantiate that assumption, we can suppose that no one in the world that is below the lower bound lives a life worth living. I ignore this complication in what follows.

⁶⁶ E.g. Kraay (2011).

⁶⁷ Segal (2014: 231).

⁶⁸ Russell and Hawthorne (2018: 150).

It intuitively says that one can freely patch together different parts of possible worlds, cutting and pasting entities together to form new possibilities.

My aims in investigating this tension are three-fold. First, I aim to determine whether the tension is genuine or merely apparent. While the tension has been alluded to before⁶⁹, it has yet to be fully spelled out. As it turns out, laying out the problem more precisely allows us to see some interesting potential lines of response for the theist. Second, by investigating what theists can and cannot freely recombine and mapping out this logical space, we get a better picture of what the modal commitments of theism really look like. This is an important task both for theists and non-theists alike. Third, I come to some judgments about how concerning this tension should be for theists. By examining the motivations for the kinds of free recombination principles I am concerned with, we will be able to measure the costs associated with theistic restrictions on them.

We proceed as follows. In section 2.1, I introduce a precise version of the Cut-and-Paste principle and indicate some dimensions along which it might vary. In section 2.2, I formulate two arguments based on Cut-and-Paste to the conclusion that there are possible worlds that are too bad for God to allow. These two arguments correspond to the two views about the lower bound of goodness presented above. The first aims to show that there is a world that is bad overall. The second aims to show that there is a world worse than E, for any arbitrary finite value of E. In section 2.3, I consider and respond to objections to the arguments of section 2.2. I also consider whether theism is compatible with close variants of our formulated version of Cut-and-Paste. Finally, in section 2.4 I assess how theists should respond to this conflict.

2.1 The Principle of Recombination

In this section, we formulate a precise version of the principle that we will employ to show that impermissibly bad worlds are possible.⁷⁰ This principle is perhaps best introduced by David Lewis:⁷¹

⁶⁹ See Hudson (2005: 10) and Russell and Hawthorne (2018: 149).

⁷⁰ By ‘impermissibly bad world’ or ‘impermissible world’, I mean a maximal state of affairs such that it would be impermissible for God to permit that state of affairs to be actual.

⁷¹ Lewis (1986: 87-88).

To express the plenitude of possible worlds, I require a principle of recombination according to which patching together parts of different possible worlds yields another possible world. [...] Thus, if there could be a dragon, and there could be a unicorn, but there couldn't be a dragon and a unicorn side by side, that would be an unacceptable gap in logical space, a failure of plenitude. And if there could be a talking head contiguous to the rest of a living human body, but there couldn't be a talking head separate from the rest of a human body, that too would be a failure of plenitude. [...] Not only two possible individuals, but any number should admit of combination by means of coexisting duplicates.

As I see it, there are four key ideas introduced here about how possibilities can be recombined:

1. *Parts of possibilities can be patched together in novel spatiotemporal arrangements.* Here the parts in question are taken to be objects.⁷² This corresponds to a metaphorical copy-and-paste function. The dragon and the unicorn can be copied and pasted together side by side.
2. *Parts of possibilities can be removed to form complete possibilities.* This corresponds to a metaphorical cut-and-paste function. The talking head can be cut from its original context within a body and pasted by itself into another possibility.
3. *What is recombined are not the parts themselves, but duplicates of the parts.* Lewis himself motivates this restriction by way of his ban on literal trans-possibility identity, but this weaker formulation of recombination can be motivated on independent grounds. For example, those who accept the essentiality of origins cannot accept the stronger version, which requires that I could exist without the sperm and egg (or anything just like them) from which I came having ever existed.⁷³
4. *Any number of duplicates of parts can be recombined.* In fact, “the number might be infinite”, Lewis continues.⁷⁴ Lewis later qualifies this demand because he thinks there may

⁷² Taking the parts to be properties rather than objects results in “pattern” recombination principles, see Russell and Hawthorne (2018) for elaboration.

⁷³ See Segal (2014: 232) for this and other reasons to doubt the stronger formulation.

⁷⁴ Lewis (1986: 89).

be a limit on the size of possible spacetimes.⁷⁵ This element of our recombination principle has also been thought to have paradoxical consequences (such as that there can be no set of all possible objects), especially when conjoined with certain mereological principles.⁷⁶ Though here I stick with the bolder ‘any number’ formulation, I believe that each of the arguments of section 2.2 could be run quantifying over only finite numbers, a weakening which should be paradox-free.⁷⁷

Should we care about this sort of combinatorial principle? In section 2.4 I will consider various theoretical grounds that have been thought to support the Cut-and-Paste idea. But further, the idea seems to me to possess a basic sort of attractiveness. The person who would accept that there could be a dragon and a unicorn, but claim that these could not coexist together, would I would think at least owe us an explanation of why they think this. In this way, accepting the possibilities generated by Cut-and-Paste seems to me like the default position, with failures of plenitude requiring justification.⁷⁸

At any rate, with these four key ideas in hand, we are in a position to give a more precise formulation of a Cut-and-Paste principle:⁷⁹

C&P: For any sequence of intrinsically distinct spatiotemporal objects x_1, x_2, \dots, x_m in any worlds and any sequence of cardinals ($n_i \geq 0$) n_1, n_2, \dots, n_m and any m -place (non-overlapping) spatiotemporal relation⁸⁰, there exists a possible world that contains:

⁷⁵ Lewis (1986: 89).

⁷⁶ See Uzquiano (2015: sec. 4.1).

⁷⁷ See footnote 86 for elaboration.

⁷⁸ One way of justifying this take on the dialectic might appeal to the idea that one should not multiply necessities without good reason. This sort of methodological principle has been called ‘Hume’s Razor’ by Forrest (2001). Since failures of Cut-and-Paste amount to a necessity claim, Cut-and-Paste has the status of the default presumption.

⁷⁹ This formulation draws on elements from Efid and Stoneham (2008) and Darby and Waston (2010).

⁸⁰ The restriction to non-overlapping spatiotemporal relations is to avoid requiring that there could be, e.g., a completely green thing colocated with a completely red thing. Others (e.g. Segal (2014)) use a restriction to mereologically non-overlapping arrangements rather than spatiotemporally non-overlapping arrangements. This makes no difference to my arguments unless one has an exotic mereology, for instance claiming that necessarily, everything mereologically overlaps because there is something (The One) that is part of everything else. This view, together with the mereological restriction of Cut-and-Paste, renders Cut-and-Paste impotent (Segal uses this to reconcile Cut-and-Paste with causal essentialism). I reply that any reasons adduced to support the impotently restricted version of Cut-and-Paste also support non-impotent versions, such as a version where the restriction is to arrangements that are mereologically disjoint with the exception of The One.

exactly n_1 duplicates of x_1 , exactly n_2 duplicates of x_2 ,...exactly n_m duplicates of x_m , in that spatiotemporal relation and no spatiotemporal object that isn't a part of the mereological sum of those duplicates.

C&P says roughly that we can take any sequence of possible objects, duplicate them any number of times, and then rearrange the duplicates however we'd like. This arrangement of objects can then exist as the only spatiotemporal objects at a world.⁸¹ The first part represents key idea 1, and the second represents key idea 2. For simplicity, I hereafter refer to a sequence of objects duplicated some number of times and in some spatiotemporal relation as a 'spatiotemporal arrangement', and when such an arrangement constitutes the entirety of the spatiotemporal objects at a world, I refer to it as a 'maximal spatiotemporal arrangement'.

There are at least three nice features of this formulation of the Cut-and-Paste idea. First, the entities that are taken to be subject to unrestricted Cut-and-Paste operations do not form an exhaustive class. Everyone, even Lewis, might want to allow that there are some things that exist necessarily (for example, sets, properties, and numbers). If there are such entities, they cannot simply be cut out of a possible world. **C&P** accounts for this by restricting its scope to spatiotemporal objects only. Second, in light of the above, it can be seen that **C&P** is not immediately incompatible with theism. It is no surprise that theism is incompatible with recombination principles that rule out all necessary beings. But **C&P** is compatible with the necessary existence of a non-spatiotemporal agent. Admittedly, theists who think of God as spatiotemporal will still not be happy with **C&P**, but there are ways of slightly amending **C&P** to accommodate these views (see footnote 82). Along these lines, the third nice feature of this formulation is that it allows us to see some ways in which we might vary Cut-and-Paste principles.

There are two important kinds of variations I have in mind here. First, how strong should the notion of *duplication* involved be? Lewis roughly understands duplicate objects as sharing all fundamental or perfectly natural properties, but there are other notions available. For example, intrinsic duplicates share all intrinsic properties, and physical duplicates share all physical

⁸¹ This rough idea needs to be formulated delicately, as indicated by the last clause in (C&P). Obviously the arrangement of objects may have a mereological sum, so we don't want to rule out the existence of this sum. Perhaps we also don't want to rule out the existence of everything else that is not a spatiotemporal object (more on this later). Much of the haggling in Darby and Watson (2010) concerns the precise formulation of this clause.

properties. These notions are interrelated, but we should not immediately assume that all Cut-and-Paste principles invoking different kinds of duplication have all the same consequences. Secondly, which entities should be subject to free recombination and which should be exempted? In **C&P** the restriction is to spatiotemporal objects, but again there are similar alternatives available (e.g. material objects, concrete objects, contingent objects).⁸² In the following section, I will run arguments assuming the principle as formulated above (with duplication understood as involving sharing all fundamental properties). But we will return to the question of how these variations may affect the arguments in section 2.3.3.

2.2 Two Arguments from Cut-and-Paste to Impermissible Worlds

In this section, I outline two arguments for the claim that there are genuinely possible worlds which God could not justifiably allow to be actual. As these arguments rely essentially on our recombination principle **C&P**, they purport to show that theism is incompatible with **C&P**.

The first argument, which I call ‘The Overall Bad Argument’, relies on the idea that it would be impermissible for God to allow a world where things go badly overall. More specifically, the idea is that God cannot allow a world where the spatiotemporal realm (universe) is bad overall.⁸³ Everyone, however, agrees that some parts of possible worlds are bad overall. For example, an innocent person suffering is bad, all things considered. The event of an innocent person suffering is constituted by some spatiotemporal arrangement of objects with certain properties. According to **C&P**, we may take this bad spatiotemporal arrangement, cut it from its original world and paste it into a new world where it exists as the entire universe. But then we have a world with a universe that is bad overall, and this, we have agreed, God could not have allowed.

But, suppose that we think that God could justifiably allow things to get worse than bad overall. How much worse? We can allow the theist to set the bar as low as they like, so long as they agree that there is some finite level of disvalue *E* such that God could not have allowed a

⁸² Some of these alternative formulations even accommodate the theist who believes in a spatiotemporal God (who is, e.g., immaterial).

⁸³ This is stronger than the claim that God cannot allow *everything* at a world to go badly overall, and one could reasonably deny the stronger claim while accepting the weaker one. I will consider this kind of objection in depth in section 2.3.1.

spatiotemporal realm worse than E. This second argument, which I call ‘The Bad As You Want Argument’, shows that **C&P** entails the possibility of universes that are worse than any finite threshold level of disvalue.

We start where we left off in a world where the spatiotemporal realm is bad overall. Perhaps, for example, it consists of just one innocent person suffering. **C&P** allows us to take some other bad spatiotemporal arrangement and combine it with the existing world to deliver a new world. Surely the resulting world is now worse than the original, as it contains just another bad thing.⁸⁴ By **C&P** we can iterate this operation arbitrarily many times. We are guaranteed to reach a world with a spatiotemporal realm exceeding the threshold level of disvalue E so long as the resulting spatiotemporal realms do not get worse while approaching some finite limit on the level of disvalue above E. For this reason I do not assume that we must keep adding the same bad thing over and over. It could be that one can only recombine a certain number of hangnails before we begin to approach a limit of disvalue below that achieved by a single death.⁸⁵ However, I do assume that there must be something in the space of possible worlds that we could add to a bad universe to make it worse by at least some positive, non-zero constant C. This constant may be arbitrarily small, but we must mention it to ensure that we do not approach a limit above E as we add bad upon bad things.⁸⁶ In sum, then, no matter how bad we think God could allow the universe to get, **C&P** guarantees that there are universes worse than that since we can keep recombining bad things until we surpass that limit.

It is worth pausing to note how many theodocical resources fail to even touch the kinds of worlds that can be generated by **C&P**. Free will theodicies⁸⁷ will not work, as **C&P** guarantees universes where no agent ever makes a morally significant choice. If the agents at these

⁸⁴ We have to be somewhat careful here. Some ways of combining multiple bad things may result in something good, or at least something no worse. But there should be some spatiotemporal arrangement such that combining bad things in that arrangement makes the world overall worse.

⁸⁵ These kinds of views are known in the literature on aggregating harms as ‘Limited Aggregation’ views. See, e.g., Tomlin (2017).

⁸⁶ Given that we start with a world with some positive, non-zero level of disvalue A, and there is an operation to increase A by the positive, non-zero constant C (namely adding some other bad thing to our original world), it is easy to show that E will be exceeded iterating this operation a finite number of times. In particular, one need only perform this operation E/C times (rounding up to the nearest integer). Since the total amount of disvalue added to A is equal to $C \times (E/C)$, which is equal to E. Thus the total amount of evil at the end of the process will be $A+E$, which is greater than E. Since this operation need only be performed finitely many times using (I assume) finitely many objects at each iteration, it is supported by the weakened and paradox-free version of **C&P** which quantifies only over finite numbers of duplicates.

⁸⁷ E.g. Swinburne (2004: ch. 11).

universes have free will at all, they are never able to exercise it in a valuable manner. Perhaps, for example, they are completely paralyzed. Similarly, theodicies appealing to a notion of the Fall⁸⁸ have no purchase, since there is no Fall in universes with no morally significant choices. Soul-making theodicies⁸⁹ also founder here, since the evils in many of these universes elicit no virtuous responses and contribute to no one's moral development.⁹⁰ Natural law theodicies⁹¹ fail to get off the ground as well, for several reasons. The goods that they appeal to – tidy natural laws that ensure regularity – fail to exist in universes which are completely irregular cacophonies of misery and suffering with no predictable natural order at all. And even in those universes with tidy laws for agents to rely on in deliberation, the value of those laws may go unrealized if agents are unable to make any significant choices. Even Hudson's ingenious appeal to goods of unknown hyperspatial dimensions⁹² will not do the trick, since **C&P** generates universes where no hidden goods are lurking unnoticed in hyperspace. In general, any justification of evils in terms of overriding spatiotemporal goods are structurally inadequate to the task, since **C&P** allows us to simply cut these goods away. These universes are true monstrosities.

2.3 Objections Considered

2.3.1 Counterbalancing Objections

I presented The Overall Bad Argument beginning with the claim that God could not allow a world that is bad overall. But then I quickly moved to the stronger claim that God could not allow a universe that is bad overall. The first family of objections I will consider accepts that there are some limits to how bad God can allow worlds to be, but denies the stronger claim that there are some limits how bad God can allow universes to be. This type of objection claims that the very bad universes delivered by **C&P** may always be outweighed by great goods outside of the spatiotemporal realm. Since non-spatiotemporal goods cannot be jettisoned away by a Cut-and-Paste principle explicitly restricted so as not to apply to such objects, it follows that

⁸⁸ E.g. Stump (1985).

⁸⁹ E.g. Hick (1999).

⁹⁰ At least within anyone's embodied lives. One could have a soul-making theodicy on which all the relevant moral development occurs within the afterlife. I explore strategies along these lines in section 2.3.1.

⁹¹ E.g. Reichenbach (1976).

⁹² Hudson (2006).

C&P cannot deliver worlds that are arbitrarily bad overall. Rather, all it can do is deliver very bad universes, and it falls silent on whether worlds containing these universes have counterbalancing non-spatiotemporal goods. I call these kinds of objections *counterbalancing objections*.

I will discuss at least two different counterbalancing objections⁹³, differing over what the relevant non-spatiotemporal goods are identified as. The first I do not suspect that anyone would actually endorse, but diagnosing where it goes wrong will be helpful in our discussion of the second variant.

The first counterbalancing objection identifies the relevant non-spatiotemporal counterbalancing good with God. Many theists take the existence of a perfect being to be an infinite good, so it may be argued that the existence of a non-spatiotemporal perfect being would swamp any merely finite level of badness in the spatiotemporal realm. Thus, things may go arbitrarily badly in the spatiotemporal realm since worlds are guaranteed to be very good overall by the necessary existence of God.

I do not suspect that anyone will find this line of objection convincing. There is something clearly fishy, if not perverse, about using the goodness of God's own existence to justify God allowing things to go very badly for us embodied creatures. But where exactly does the objection go wrong?

The objection seems to show that mere axiological counterbalancing of an evil need not by itself suffice to justify allowing that evil. If one needs further convincing on this score, there is a very simple case to consider. Suppose that there is a world that is good overall, but that in some remote corner of spacetime an innocent person is horribly tortured for all eternity for no reason. It is evident in this case that the mere fact that this evil is outweighed by goods elsewhere in the world is not sufficient to justify God's allowing the eternal torture, when God could easily prevent it. One is reminded here of Marilyn Adams' (1989) gripe with global solutions to the problem of evil. Adams objected that one could not justify God's allowing horrendous evils by appeal to global features of worlds (such as their containing the best overall balance of moral and

⁹³ I discuss another objection arising from substance dualism which might be classified as a counterbalancing objection in section 2.3.2, but since it raises different issues from the other two counterbalancing objections, I defer discussion of it.

natural evils available to God), since such global features do not guarantee that people live lives worth living or that the horrendous evils within their lives are defeated within their lives.⁹⁴

It would be nice here to have a general story of the conditions necessary and sufficient for a certain good to justify allowing a certain evil. I do not have such a story. Adams appeals to Chisholm's (1968) concept of the good and evil being integrated into some whole with "organic unity". This notion is a bit mysterious. Some appeal to the idea that there must be some appropriate modal connection between the evil and its justifying good.⁹⁵ I think it is correct that there must be some kind of modal or causal connection between a good and an evil for the former to justify the latter, but I also think that this is probably not a sufficient condition for justification, and that spelling out the precise nature of this modal/causal connection will be very difficult. Moving forward, I assume that a necessary condition on the justification of an evil E in terms of a good G is that there is some appropriate connection between E and G, and that this connection is at least partly modal/causal in nature. Although admittedly vague, this is enough for us to make some progress.

The main hurdle that counterbalancing objections must overcome is that the counterbalancing goods for the evils of bad universes generated by **C&P** must be appropriately connected in the above manner. It seems clear that this is where the counterbalancing objection in terms of God's own existence goes wrong. There is just no appropriate causal or modal connection between God's existence and someone being tortured for all eternity in a remote corner of spacetime.

The second, more plausible counterbalancing objection identifies the relevant counterbalancing goods with goods of the afterlife. The idea is that the spatiotemporal realm may be arbitrarily bad so long as there is also a non-spatiotemporal afterlife which is good enough to counterbalance it. Again, the hope is that since the goods identified are non-spatiotemporal, they cannot be touched by **C&P**.

The problem is that the appeal to the afterlife faces a serious dilemma. Universalism, as I will understand it, is the thesis that necessarily, everyone will eventually be saved in the afterlife

⁹⁴ Note Adams' (1989: 299) explicit contrast between the mere "balancing-off" of evils and the "defeat" of evils. I am not, however, assuming that Adams is right that God must ensure everyone lives a life worth living. I am merely pointing out that we agree that mere axiological counterbalancing is not sufficient to justify God's allowing an evil.

⁹⁵ E.g. Hudson (2006: 387).

no matter how they live their embodied lives.⁹⁶ I will argue that if Universalism is false, then **C&P** guarantees worlds with bad universes where no one is saved, and therefore there are no goods of the afterlife to justify these spatiotemporal evils. On the other hand, if Universalism is true, then the counterbalancing goods of the afterlife may not have the appropriate kind of connection to the spatiotemporal evils to legitimately justify them.

Suppose first that Universalism is false. This means that, possibly, some people are not saved. I assume that if some are not saved, this is not an arbitrary decision that singles out some people. Rather, at these worlds, God has some consistent conditions that people must satisfy in their embodied lives to be saved. The alternative, that God arbitrarily saves, appears morally unjust. I make no substantive assumptions about what these possible criteria for salvation are. For instance, perhaps there are worlds where we must come to know and accept God, or we must not commit certain sins, etc. Whatever these conditions are, their satisfaction or non-satisfaction is realizable in terms of the very spatiotemporal arrangements that **C&P** allows us to manipulate. We can therefore, by **C&P**, arbitrarily aggregate evils while also ensuring that no one in their embodied lives satisfies these conditions, and so no one is saved. I conclude that if Universalism is false, then **C&P** delivers objectionably bad worlds where the counterbalancing goods of the afterlife simply do not obtain, and so the proposed objection cannot cover all the relevant cases.

On the other hand, if Universalism is true, it becomes implausible that the goods of the afterlife bear the appropriate connection to evils in the spatiotemporal realm to justify them. If Universalism is true, then we will all end up saved and enjoy the goods of the afterlife no matter what we do. Maybe the goods of the afterlife are the same for all people in all possible worlds. For instance, perhaps they involve knowing God or contemplating the eternal truths. In that case, it seems quite clear that these goods do not have the appropriate modal or causal connection to the evils of the universe to justify them. We would have enjoyed these very goods no matter how our embodied lives went. Rather, the universalist has to maintain something like the following: even though we will all be saved no matter what, the particular goods that we will experience in the afterlife are shaped in some intimate way by the earthly evils we experience, and that this intimate connection is the right kind to justify God's allowing those particular evils. In my view, this is a difficult position to maintain. I am not arguing here that there is no universalist view that

⁹⁶ See Talbott (2007) for discussion of Universalism. Talbott does not define 'Universalism' as a modalized thesis in the way that I do, but does argue that it is necessary that everyone will be saved (Talbott 2007: 455-457).

could validate the right kind of connection between earthly evils and heavenly goods. For example, Adams (1989: 308-309) speculatively suggests that our experience of horrendous evils may give us a window into God's inner life that we come to recognize once we know God in the afterlife, and that this is a great good that justifies God's allowing particular horrendous evils. I am not sure that this proposal generates the appropriate kind of connection, since it is not clear that we could not get the same window, or an equally valuable window, into God's inner life by other, less painful means. But it does seem that this kind of proposal is on the right track in terms of generating a universalist-friendly explanation of particular heavenly goods that bear an appropriate modal/causal connection to earthly evils.⁹⁷

To summarize, the appeal to the afterlife faces a serious dilemma. If it is possible that some are not saved, then we can arbitrarily aggregate evils while ensuring that no one is saved, so the goods of the afterlife cannot justify all the bad universes **C&P** entails. If it is necessary that everyone is saved, then it becomes difficult to see how the goods of the afterlife have the appropriate connection to earthly evils to justify God's allowing them. That's not to say that no account is possible, but it is to say that any such account would require rich normative theorizing about how goods justify evils, and rich theological theorizing about how the goods of the afterlife satisfy this normative account. This theorizing is left as an open challenge to those wishing to reconcile theism with **C&P** by universalist means.

2.3.2 *Substance Dualism*

Suppose that you thought only mental states and events are intrinsically good or bad. Further, you think that the mind is an immaterial substance distinct from all physical objects, and mental states and events involve only these immaterial substances. You might then object to my arguments on the basis that no mere arrangement of spatiotemporal objects having certain properties could be intrinsically good or bad. By locating value exclusively in the mental realm, and locating the mental realm outside of the spatiotemporal realm, one may avoid the thrust of any argument predicated on value being located within the spatiotemporal realm. Substance dualists are among those that may find these assumptions congenial.

⁹⁷ Thanks to Jeff Russell for repeatedly impressing on me the importance of this kind of view in this context.

This substance dualism-inspired objection is a serious one. I have three responses to this objection, none of which I consider individually decisive but collectively they do present a formidable challenge to this way of objecting to our arguments from recombination.

First, I note that positing immaterial mental substances does not necessarily put the mental outside of the spatiotemporal realm. If immaterial minds or souls are nonetheless spatiotemporally located, then our recombination principle **C&P** does quantify over them and allows us to subject them to free recombination. Allowing that the mind is immaterial but spatiotemporally located has been suggested as a promising move for substance dualists before, obviating several objections to the view.⁹⁸ For theists who are substance dualists of this kind, the tension with **C&P** is not resolved.

This response may seem cheap because of a point we acknowledged back in section 2.1 – the restriction of **C&P** to spatiotemporal objects is a place where there are several potentially viable alternatives. If we instead restricted our recombination principle to material objects, then substance dualists who locate the mind in spacetime still escape our arguments, since they still posit an immaterial mind, which escapes the scope of this newly restricted principle. So where does this leave the dialectic? In fact there are several places where I believe the arguments of this paper turn on subtle points about the exact formulation of Cut-and-Paste. Some may view this as a favorable result for the theist, but I will argue for a more pessimistic view in section 2.3.3. Until then, I postpone further discussion of this issue.

The second response I have to this substance dualism-inspired objection is to question the assumption that value is exclusively had within the mental realm. There is at least one kind of value that is uncontroversially had by mere material objects and not mental events or states, namely aesthetic value. If we believe that certain spatiotemporal arrangements can have an intrinsic aesthetic value, then **C&P** can be called in to deliver a bad universe simply by taking something that is intrinsically aesthetically disvaluable and cut-and-pasting it into its own world as the entire universe. The Overall Bad Argument can then still be run without assuming that mental events involve material objects. However, this response does not clearly save The Bad as You Want Argument. Even if we recognize aesthetic values, it seems somewhat plausible to be

⁹⁸ Lycan (2013: 537-538) argues this point, and suggests that substance dualists should say that the mind is co-located with the central nervous system. Other dualists, such as Hart (1988: ch. 10) and Hasker (1999: 192), have suggested that the mind is co-located with the brain. Zimmerman (2010: 134-136) also implies that substance dualism may be more plausible with spatiotemporally located minds.

limited aggregationists about these values. For example, it seems that no amount of aggregated ugly things could ever be worse than a single person being tortured.⁹⁹ So it may be that we cannot reach some levels of disvalue merely by aggregating aesthetically disvaluable things.

It may be countered that since immaterial souls may still exist at these ugly worlds, mental goods can compensate for any aesthetic badness in the spatiotemporal realm. This turns the objection from substance dualism into a form of the counterbalancing objection, where the non-spatiotemporal goods are identified with events involving dualistic souls. As with other counterbalancing objections, my reply relies on the idea that goods must bear some appropriate connection to evils in order to justify them. In order for the particular mental goods in question to justify any particular aesthetic evils, there must be some appropriate modal/causal connection between the mental events and those aesthetic evils. The souls cannot simply float free of the ugliness on the ground. But on substance dualism, it seems that the souls should be able to float free – any connection between mental and physical is thoroughly contingent on dualism. And to claim that souls cannot float free is even more anachronistic to theistic substance dualism, which says that our souls can and will exist in the absence of any physical bodies whatsoever. It seems that mental goods just do not have the appropriate kind of connection to aesthetic evils to justify them, given substance dualism. Therefore, they cannot justify God’s allowing a universe consisting solely of aesthetic evils.

The last response I have to the substance-dualism inspired objection also concerns the connection between the mental and the physical. While on dualism there is no metaphysically necessary connection between mental properties and physical properties, there are obviously certain natural correlations between mental properties and physical ones. Dualists typically posit “psychophysical laws” connecting the physical to the mental on a par with other laws of nature.¹⁰⁰ A problem arises for the objection from substance dualism here since **C&P** does allow us to freely manipulate physical objects and events to deliver a world which would be associated with various mental evils if the psychophysical laws of our world still held in that world. To take a toy example, suppose that, actually, it is a psychophysical law that C-fiber firings are correlated with pain events. **C&P** allows us to cut-and-paste to a world with arbitrarily many C-fiber firings. If the same psychophysical laws hold in that world, then we have reached a world with

⁹⁹ Although see Hudson (2006: 394-395) for a theist’s defense of the view that an aggregate of aesthetic evils may be worse than even significant suffering.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Chalmers (1996: ch. 4) and Lycan (2013: 537).

an arbitrary amount of suffering. Therefore, a slightly altered version of **C&P** avoids the substance dualist's objection that merely manipulating spatiotemporal arrangements cannot deliver bad worlds since these operations say nothing about what mental events occur:

C&P*: For any sequence of intrinsically distinct spatiotemporal objects $x_1, x_2 \dots x_m$ and any sequence of cardinals ($n_i \geq 0$) $n_1, n_2, \dots n_m$ and any m -place spatiotemporal relation, there exists a psychophysically possible world that contains: exactly n_1 duplicates of x_1 , exactly n_2 duplicates of x_2, \dots exactly n_m duplicates of x_m , in that spatiotemporal relation and no spatiotemporal object that isn't a part of the mereological sum of those duplicates.¹⁰¹

C&P* allows us to recombine the physical correlates of mental events whilst holding the psychophysical correlations fixed. In this way, even theistic substance dualists cannot escape conflict with **C&P***. This would not be worrisome if there was nothing going for this principle. However, it could be that the intuitions and theoretical considerations in favor of **C&P** equally support **C&P***. I consider motivations for **C&P** in section 2.4. I do not explicitly consider this issue. I leave that as an exercise for the reader with further interests in escaping conflict between theism and Cut-and-Paste by way of substance dualism.

2.3.3 *Variants of Cut-and-Paste*

As has emerged in previous discussion, the tension between theism and Cut-and-Paste may in some cases turn on subtle issues in the formulation of those principles. There are two natural places for modifying **C&P** that we identified back in section 2.1. The first is how exactly to restrict the scope of what is subject to recombination. As we have seen, by restricting the scope to spatiotemporal objects, we subject dualistic minds which are still spatiotemporally located to free recombination. However, if we instead use a restriction to material objects, even those kinds of minds fall outside of the scope of recombination, alleviating at least some of the tension between theism and Cut-and-Paste. In other cases, altering the scope of **C&P** leads to a more

¹⁰¹ A world W is psychophysically possible relative to a world U just in case W and U share all the same psychophysical laws. In **C&P*** the resultant world is psychophysically possible relative to each of the worlds in which the objects $x_1, x_2 \dots x_m$ exist. Strictly speaking then, **C&P*** should be restricted to only sequences drawn from worlds sharing all the same psychophysical laws.

immediate conflict with theism. Recall that one of the main reasons for restricting the scope of Cut-and-Paste is to allow for the necessary existence of some kinds of objects, like numbers, universals, or sets. Since these examples are all abstract, some may want to restrict **C&P** to concrete objects. That version of **C&P** would be in immediate conflict with theism, since it has the consequence that no concrete object exists necessarily, *contra* theism.

The other kind of variation we identified was on the concept of duplication employed in **C&P**. Previously I took duplication to involve the sharing of all fundamental properties, but suppose we weakened the notion of duplication to involve merely the sharing of all physical properties. If our Cut-and-Paste principle only allowed us to recombine physical duplicates of objects, then those who deny the supervenience of mental properties on physical properties could make the same moves discussed in section 2.3.2 *mutatis mutandis* – namely locating value exclusively in the mental realm and insisting that the Cut-and-Paste principle in question simply falls silent about mental properties and events. In this way, property dualists are in much the same position with respect to the a Cut-and-Paste principle involving physical duplication as substance dualists are with respect to **C&P**.¹⁰²

It is far from obvious that there is even a single version of Cut-and-Paste considered here that theism totally escapes conflict with. Not all theists are dualists. And even if some theists hold views about the mind that places minds outside of the scope of a given recombination principle, there are still worries about aesthetic values.

But let's suppose that we were in a dialectical position where we agreed that some versions of Cut-and-Paste are compatible with theism and some are not. Obviously, one does not in general alleviate the costs associated with denying a certain principle by pointing out that one can accept a slightly altered version of that principle. When can that sort of dialectical move succeed? In my view, it can succeed only if the following two conditions are satisfied:

- A. If the original principle does certain important theoretical work, then the substitute principle must be able to do that work as well.

¹⁰² Or at least this is true with respect to substance dualists who deny the spatiotemporality of the mind.

B. If the original principle is motivated on certain grounds, then it must be shown that those grounds support the substitute principle rather than the original principle.¹⁰³

There are some *prima facie* reasons to think that these conditions will not be satisfied, however.

With respect to A, one important theoretical application of recombination principles like **C&P** is to be a part of the project of giving a complete statement of what possibilities there are.¹⁰⁴ The substitute versions of **C&P** that may be compatible with theism differ from **C&P** mostly by exempting minds from the scope of recombination. In that respect, they simply fall silent on what possibilities there are for minds and mental properties and events. This indicates that these weakened substitutes for **C&P** are less suited to doing important work that Cut-and-Paste is called on to do.

With respect to B, Cut-and-Paste principles are typically motivated on very general grounds having to do with explanation or conceivability. I consider these motivations in section 2.4. While I do not take up this issue explicitly, it seems to me that these motivations are simply not sensitive to the subtle differences between the versions of **C&P** we have considered. If these motivations work at all, I suspect that they work equally well for each of the versions considered here. So I suspect that condition B is not satisfied, but I cannot conclusively prove that here.

2.4 Measuring the Cost

I have argued that there is a real tension between theism and Cut-and-Paste. It remains to be seen, however, just how costly that tension is for theists. There is of course a basic cost associated with having to deny recombination principles for anyone who simply finds those principles intuitively appealing. I myself find these principles very intuitive and think that they are as good a place as any to begin theorizing about modality. But for those who don't share this assessment, it remains to be seen whether there are any extra costs associated with denying Cut-and-Paste. If there are plausible independent motivations for Cut-and-Paste and theists cannot undercut these motivations, then the price will be high. But if theists can undercut these

¹⁰³ This condition is obvious since if the grounds support both versions equally, then the original principle is still motivated and so the relevant costs associated with denying the principle are still present. Only if the grounds are shown to not support the principle in its original formulation can the costs associated with denying it be alleviated.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Lewis (1986: 88-92) for this application of Cut-and-Paste to this project.

motivations then the price will not much exceed the original intuitive cost of denying Cut-and-Paste. In this section, I argue that the latter is mostly the case. In order to do so, I assess three motivations for Cut-and-Paste. I formulate these motivations very loosely and picturesquely, because I do not think much would be gained in this context by a more rigorous development.

2.4.1 Explicability

Perhaps the most common contemporary justification given for recombination principles like Cut-and-Paste is that violations of such principles would be metaphysically inexplicable or “unintelligible”.¹⁰⁵ Consider, for example, one kind of violation of **C&P**. Suppose that there is a certain kind *K* of particle such that there could be two *K* particles at some distance *D* from each other, but there just could not be a pair of *K* particles any closer together than *D*. This necessary fact about the arrangement of *K* particles looks repugnant to many, perhaps on the grounds that it is simply inexplicable why this sort of fact could be necessary. To invoke a bewildered Lewis, what metaphysical force could stop such particles from getting closer together?

Theists may have an answer – God. It seems to me that whatever one thinks about other alleged violations of Cut-and-Paste (arising from, e.g., alleged essential causal profiles of properties), the theistic explanation of the necessities that they posit is as good as any. Think about a world that is just barely good enough. If one more little thing had gone wrong, things would have been too bad to allow. If your zucchini had gone bad in the fridge before you got to it, the whole world wouldn't have been worth it. Actually, your zucchini couldn't have gone bad. It's absolutely impossible that your zucchini goes bad before you get to it (while everything else stays fixed). What could possibly explain this necessity? What metaphysical force could stop your zucchini from rotting away in the fridge while you order delivery again? God. Maybe God doesn't care that much about your zucchini, but God would never have allowed the world where that zucchini goes bad (while everything else stays fixed). So it's just impossible for things to go exactly that way.

Perhaps you think this is a bad explanation because God does not exist. While I sympathize with this response, it still seems to me that if a perfectly good, omnipotent God did

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. Lewis (1986: 179-181) and Segal (2014: 239-242) for this sort of motivation for Cut-and-Paste principles.

exist necessarily, then there would be a perfectly good explanation of why certain things which otherwise seem perfectly possible, are nevertheless impossible since God would never allow them to occur. So the objection that theistic violations of Cut-and-Paste are inexplicable seems question-begging.

2.4.2 *Conceivability*

A more traditional route to motivating principles like **C&P** is anchored in rationalist approaches to modal epistemology.¹⁰⁶ These approaches claim that modal space is accessible to *a priori* methods. Some philosophers believe in a conceivability-possibility link, such that if a state of affairs *S* is conceivable (in some sense), then it is possible that *S* obtains.¹⁰⁷ While there has been considerable work done within these camps to hone in on a specific notion of conceivability for which it is plausible that there is a conceivability-possibility link, here I leave this notion opaque to avoid needless complexity.¹⁰⁸ The justification for Cut-and-Paste depends on the claim that all the possibilities demanded by Cut-and-Paste are conceivable in whatever sense for which there is a conceivability-possibility link.

If there is in fact a viable conceivability-possibility link, then there is a much more direct argument for the possibility of impermissible worlds than the arguments from Cut-and-Paste. All one needs to show is that impermissible worlds are conceivable in the relevant sense. This direct conceivability argument would be much more plausible than a Cut-and-Paste argument grounded by a conceivability-possibility link, since the latter requires the much more speculative premise that *all* possibilities required by Cut-and-Paste are conceivable, whereas the former requires the strictly weaker and highly plausible premise that at least one of the impermissible possibilities is conceivable.

It seems to me then that while theists have no special way of undercutting a conceivability-based motivation for Cut-and-Paste, they can argue that a conceivability-based motivation would render the arguments from Cut-and-Paste an unnecessary and inefficient detour on the route to impermissible worlds, sort of like traveling from Louisiana to New Jersey through California. The arguments from **C&P** may be dialectically irrelevant and impotent if

¹⁰⁶ This was Hume's original justification for the denial of "necessary connections". See also Gibbs (2019: ch. 5) for a contemporary discussion of a conceivability-based justification for these kinds of principles.

¹⁰⁷ E.g. Chalmers (2002), Ichikawa and Jarvis (2013), and Kung (2010).

¹⁰⁸ See Chalmers (2002: sec. 1-3) for some distinctions in this area.

backed by a conceivability-possibility link. This will be especially true if theists have already noticed the fairly obvious route from the conceivability-possibility link to impermissible worlds and thereby already rejected this link.¹⁰⁹

2.4.3 *Primitive Modality*

I wrote in section 2.3.3 that Cut-and-Paste principles have been employed in the project of giving an account of what possibilities there are. For some authors it is important that this project be carried out without recourse to any ineliminable modal notions.¹¹⁰ It is not entirely clear whether this restriction is motivated simply by aversion to primitive modality in general or if there is something particularly worrying about primitive modality in this specific application.¹¹¹ The important point here is that Cut-and-Paste principles are substantive principles about what is possible that perhaps need not invoke any primitive modal notions. **C&P** as formulated does employ the concept of a possible world, but there is some hope for a reductive analysis of possible worlds (e.g. in terms of maximal spatiotemporally related sums of objects¹¹² or maximal structured states of affairs¹¹³). If this reductive project is important and Cut-and-Paste is a vital part of this project, then there is some cost associated with having to deny Cut-and-Paste.

I argued in section 2.3.3 that it seems like theists cannot do this work by introducing substitute Cut-and-Paste principles that restrict the scope of what is subject to recombination. But this does not mean that theists are out of this game completely. Even those who violate recombination principles can still use restricted recombination principles to generate a modal space.¹¹⁴ They can even do so without primitive modality if their restrictions on recombination principles can be stated without invoking any ineliminable modal notions. So the theistic violations of Cut-and-Paste threaten the reductive project only if the restrictions they place on Cut-and-Paste require invoking primitive modal notions. For example, if theists could only say that they accept all the possibilities generated by **C&P** except when such possibilities are ones that God *could not* or *would not* permit, then they would require primitive modal notions in

¹⁰⁹ E.g. Plantinga (2004: 8).

¹¹⁰ E.g. Lewis (1986).

¹¹¹ See Sider (2003) on general motivations for eliminating primitive modality.

¹¹² Lewis (1986), among others.

¹¹³ Armstrong (1989).

¹¹⁴ For instance Wang (2013) combines acceptance of primitive incompatibilities between properties with accepting all combinations of property instantiations that respect those incompatibilities.

stating their recombination principles, and would be unable to carry out the reductive project. However, if theists can delimit the possibilities God can and cannot permit without modal notions, then they are still in the reductive game. There is a good chance that this can be done, since the theist's restrictions are fundamentally normative, and normative notions seem to be conceptually independent of modal notions. For instance, theists who maintain that God must ensure that the world is not bad overall can accept all possibilities generated by **C&P** except the ones that are bad overall. Since this restriction invokes no modal notions, it conforms with the reductive project.

Whereas the restrictions examined in section 2.3.3 render **C&P** silent on the possibilities for minds and mental properties, the style of restriction proposed here accepts all the possibilities originally generated by **C&P** except exactly those that the theist is committed to denying are genuine possibilities. If, additionally, these theistic restrictions on **C&P** can be expressed in non-modal, normative terms, then theists needn't surrender this important tool in the reductive project.

However, a residual problem remains. One might think that our fundamental theory of metaphysical modality should not invoke normative concepts either, as these concepts refer to properties that are not metaphysically fundamental enough to be invoked in this context. So the worry is that trading primitive modal concepts for normative ones is not really an advance.

As I see it, the force of this charge depends on one's metaethical inclinations. For the metaethical anti-reductivist, normative properties reach down to the rock-bottom of reality. So, for the anti-reductivist, the residual problem is not so worrying.

Metaethical reductivism, on the other hand, comes in two different flavors. Naturalistic reductivists ground normative properties in natural properties. The natural properties in question tend to be properties like *the flourishing / suffering of sentient creatures* or *the satisfaction / dissatisfaction of desires*. It is plausible that these properties are too high-level to be used in account of what metaphysical possibilities there are.

The other flavor of reductivism is supernaturalistic reductivism, which grounds normative properties in supernatural properties, such as *the satisfaction / dissatisfaction of divine commands* or *being similar / dissimilar to the divine nature in a respect*. These are properties involving the divine nature or divine commands, which are plausibly, on a theistic worldview,

metaphysically fundamental parts of reality. There seems to be no bar, then, in invoking them in our fundamental theory of modality.

My conclusion on the residual worry, therefore, is that it is a problem only for theistic metaethical naturalists, but not for theistic metaethical supernaturalists or anti-reductivists. And while theistic metaethical naturalism is a live theoretical option, it is one that is rarely occupied. So the majority of theists will not be troubled by the residual worry.

2.5 Conclusion of Chapter 2

I have argued that there is a real tension between theism and a popular modal recombination principle known as ‘Cut-and-Paste’. Though there are some surprising ways of trying to reconcile theism with Cut-and-Paste, I have argued that these ways, for the most part, are not promising, or at least require some difficult theoretical work that has yet to be done. And although the nature of the conflict depends to some extent on subtle issues regarding the precise formulation of Cut-and-Paste, I have argued that this is not grounds for optimism about reconciliation. The denial of Cut-and-Paste is a drawback of theism for those, like myself, who find such principles intuitively attractive. In a more concessive spirit, however, I argued in section 2.4 that theists have plausible ways of undercutting some ways of motivating Cut-and-Paste. While this does not undermine the basic cost of denying an intuitive modal principle, it does perhaps show that this cost is not prohibitive.

Chapter 3: Theism and the Poss-Ability Principle

One result of the previous chapters is that certain catastrophic evils are metaphysically impossible, if theism is true. Might theists nevertheless maintain that God is able to bring about a world containing these catastrophic evils? This chapter and the next build a case for thinking that theists should indeed maintain this.

That God might be able to bring to bring about catastrophic evils is in tension with the following principle:

Poss-Ability: For all S and all Φ , if S is able to Φ , then it is metaphysically possible that S Φ 's.¹¹⁵

Poss-Ability is highly intuitive, even seemingly obvious, and I myself believe it. However, this chapter argues that those who believe in an extraordinary agent, namely God, can plausibly deny **Poss-Ability**, and moreover have strong reasons to do so.

I argue that theists have motivation to deny **Poss-Ability** since doing so is the best way of resolving three serious puzzles that plague theism – the Problem of Fit (Hill 2014), the Puzzle of Divine Freedom, and the Paradox of Creation (Rubio 2018). I then argue that theists can make this denial plausible. I do so by addressing the arguments in favor of **Poss-Ability**, showing that theists have distinctive resources to address the most serious of these, and in the course of doing so, I show how denying **Poss-Ability** can be reconciled with extant analyses of ability ascriptions. Before any of that, however, to make my position clearer and intuitively palatable, I explain why it is not surprising that a Godlike agent would be able to do the metaphysically impossible.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ This formulation comes from Spencer (2017).

¹¹⁶ I am not the first to suggest that God would be able to do the impossible. The view has historical roots going back to at least Descartes and probably further into the Middle Ages. Nor am I the first to suggest this view to alleviate the tension between necessary moral perfection and other divine attributes. In contemporary discussion, Morris (1986), Talbott (1988), Wielenberg (2000), Senor (2006), Leftow (2009), Byerly (2017), and Carey (2017) all suggest something like this to resolve the conflict between omnipotence and necessary moral perfection. And Talbott (1988) and Byerly (2017) suggest something like this to resolve the conflict between divine freedom and necessary moral perfection. The major original contributions I make are as follows: I discuss the merits of denying **Poss-Ability** as a solution to the general Problem of Fit, of which the tension between omnipotence and necessary moral perfection is just an instance (section 3.2). I generalize the tension between divine freedom and necessary moral perfection into the broader Puzzle of Divine Freedom, and evaluate potential solutions to the puzzle,

3.1 God's Incredible Abilities

Some may feel that denying **Poss-Ability** to solve theological puzzles is a non-starter, since the claim that anyone is able to do the impossible is simply unbelievable. This section attempts to disabuse readers of this reaction by explaining why a being like God would be able to do the impossible.

God would be an extraordinary agent. God would not only be far more powerful than any ordinary agent, God would also exist from eternity at every possible world. God would exert a great influence over what occurs at every possible world. Suppose that God had simply hated the thought of giraffes. God imagines what a giraffe would be like, and decides that they should never be allowed to exist. God therefore ensures in actualizing a world that the world will be one which does not contain giraffes. Supposing that God's nature is necessary, it would follow that God necessarily ensures that there are no giraffes. Giraffes would then have been impossible. Would it follow that it is not up to God to create giraffes, that God is simply unable to do this? Intuitively not. But for all we know, there are many kinds of entities actually like this, that God ensures do not exist in any possible world. Their existence is therefore impossible, but it seems that God is able to create them.

To think that **Poss-Ability** is not true of God is to take seriously the idea that God's character and decisions exert considerable influence over what is and is not possible. As Morris (1985: 266) puts it, God is a "delimiter" of possibilities. When metaphysical possibilities are ruled out by normative decision-making that issues from God's character, God's agentic possibilities remain unrestricted, since if P is impossible precisely because God chooses to prevent P from obtaining, P's impossibility constitutes no obstacle to God's bringing it about that P. This entails that God may be able to do evil despite it being impossible that God does so, since this impossibility is due to God's free expression of God's normative character. By contrast if P's impossibility really is beyond God's control, then God is unable to bring about P. God is unable to bring it about that $2+2=5$ if, contra Descartes, God does not decide that $2+2=4$, but rather God

including denying **Poss-Ability** (section 3.3). I also put denying **Poss-Ability** to novel use in solving Rubio's Paradox of Creation (section 3.4). I systematically discuss recent arguments in favor of **Poss-Ability** and give distinctively theistic responses to these arguments (section 3.5). I show how to reconcile the denial of **Poss-Ability** with orthodox analyses of ability ascriptions (section 3.5.3). I give a novel account of why God is a special exception **Poss-Ability** (section 3.1). Finally, this is the first systematic discussion of the relation between theism and **Poss-Ability**.

had no control over this fact. The explanation offered here therefore justifies God's being able to bring about some, but not all, metaphysical impossibilities.

It is natural to apply consequence-style reasoning about impossibilities. Since it is not up to me that it is impossible that $I \Phi$, and it is not up to me that *it is impossible that $I \Phi$ entails $I \text{won't } \Phi$* , therefore it isn't up to me that $I \text{won't } \Phi$, if it's impossible that $I \Phi$. Normally, the first premise of this reasoning is true. We have some control over what is actual, but the bounds of possibility are beyond our control. But for God, the space of metaphysical possibilities is not predetermined. Rather, God would have great influence over what is and is not possible. This is the intuitive reason why God would be able to do the impossible. In the following three sections, we will see that endorsing this claim leads to an elegant and uniform solution to three difficult puzzles.

3.2 The Problem of Fit

There is a traditional puzzle concerning the compatibility of omnipotence with necessary perfect goodness.¹¹⁷ It seems that if a being is omnipotent, then that being must be able to kill an innocent person for no morally significant reason. After all, many ordinary human beings possess this ability. But if that being was also necessarily perfectly good, then it would be impossible for that being to perform such an action. Given this, there is tension between God's alleged possession of both omnipotence and necessary perfect goodness.

Recently, this traditional puzzle has been subsumed under a more general problem, called the 'Problem of Fit'.¹¹⁸ The Problem of Fit threatens to show that omnipotence rules out having many other essential properties. It can be expressed by the following schematic argument:

- (1) If God is omnipotent, then God is able to Φ .
- (2) If God is able to Φ , then it is possible that God Φ 's.
- (3) If it is possible that God Φ 's, then it is possible that God does not have property P.
- (4) God is omnipotent.
- (5) It is possible that God does not have P.

¹¹⁷ This puzzle was prominently discussed in the Middle Ages, see e.g. (*Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 25, Article 3). More recently, see e.g. Wielenberg (2000) and Pearce and Pruss (2012).

¹¹⁸ Hill (2014).

The puzzle concerning the compatibility of omnipotence with necessary perfect goodness can be expressed by replacing ‘P’ with ‘necessary perfect goodness’ and ‘Φ’ with ‘act immorally’.

However, other less widely discussed puzzles can be generated with different substitutions.

For example, consider the problem that results from replacing ‘P’ with ‘omniscience’ and ‘Φ’ with ‘believe falsely’. God allegedly has necessary omniscience. It is impossible that God believes falsely. Yet ordinary agents are able to believe falsely. So there is some pressure to think that an omnipotent being should be able to believe falsely. The above argument threatens to show that this rules out necessary omniscience. The same goes for necessary perfect rationality. If God is omnipotent, then it seems that, when facing a certain decision, God should be able to choose some option that is less than perfectly rational. Yet since God is necessarily perfectly rational, it is impossible that God does this.¹¹⁹

3.2.1 Solving the Problem of Fit by Denying Poss-Ability

For the remainder of section 3.2, I argue that denying that God satisfies **Poss-Ability** provides an elegant, uniform, and comparatively attractive way of solving the Problem of Fit.

Formally, the problem is solved by denying all of the relevant instances of (2), which is a schematic expression of **Poss-Ability**. For example, we can affirm that God is able to kill an innocent person for no good reason, but deny that it is possible that God brings this about. Just as, necessarily, God could ensure that there are no giraffes, necessarily, God could ensure that God does not kill an innocent person for no good reason. This in no way entails that it is not up to God or within God’s power to do so. Denying all of the relevant instances of (2) provides a perfectly general and uniform solution to an otherwise quite difficult theoretical puzzle.

Denying **Poss-Ability** is a comparatively attractive solution for theists because all of the other prominent solutions, namely denying (1), denying (4), or accepting (5)¹²⁰, require retreating from the usual conception of classical theism. Each of these involves either giving up some traditional divine attributes, or weakening the pre-theoretical conception of these attributes.

¹¹⁹ Hill (2014: 98) uses the same kind of argument to threaten the conclusion that God is not essentially eternal. Similarly, we can generate the conclusion that God is not essentially omnipotent by letting ‘Φ’ be ‘create a rock that no one can lift’ and ‘P’ be ‘necessary omnipotence’.

¹²⁰ The relevant instances of (3) appear harmless, though I’ll say something about a view that would deny one instance of (3) in section 3.2.2.

Denying (4) or accepting (5) are conciliatory positions, in the sense that they both involve giving up some traditional divine attributes. In particular, denying (4) gives up omnipotence,¹²¹ and accepting all the relevant instances of (5) gives up at least necessary perfect goodness, necessary rational perfection, and necessary omniscience.¹²² I take it that classical theists will, all else equal, prefer a solution that does not curtail any of their traditional doctrines. So, whatever else might be said about these conciliatory solutions, all else equal we should reject them for solutions that do not give up divine attributes. Moreover, these attributes plausibly follow from the theological conception of God as a perfect being, putting these solutions in tension with perfect being theology. And certain divine attributes may be theoretically important, as well. Omnipotence, for example, has been said to entail various other divine attributes.¹²³ If that's right, giving up omnipotence would make theism less theoretically simple and unified.

Where denying (4) and accepting (5) share the concession of traditional divine attributes, denying (4) shares another concession with denying (1). These latter two solutions respectively involve either giving up omnipotence, or claiming that omnipotence is weaker than the Problem of Fit requires. In particular, to deny the relevant instances of (1) is to say that omnipotence does not require being able to do evil, act irrationally, and believe falsely.¹²⁴ But notice that in either case, one escapes the Problem of Fit only by denying that God has certain abilities. If one grants that God has the relevant abilities, then the argument proceeds regardless of the issues concerning omnipotence. Thus there is the following structural similarity between both of these types of solutions: they both involve denying that God has the ability to do evil, and so on. Where the solutions differ is with respect to whether God can be omnipotent despite these limitations.

There are two serious arguments against the view that God can be omnipotent despite lacking the relevant abilities. I discuss these two problems at much greater length in chapter 4, so here I will just give a brief summary and point to some relevant literature. These two arguments

¹²¹ This is pursued by Funkhouser (2006) and Hill (2014).

¹²² Guleserian (1985) and Nagasawa (2008) give up necessary perfect goodness, though I don't know of any theist who explicitly gives up all three of these.

¹²³ For instance, Pruss and Pearce (2012: 409-414) take omnipotence to entail perfect freedom, omniscience, perfect rationality, and perfect goodness.

¹²⁴ This is perhaps the most popular theistic response to these issues. See Flint and Freddoso (1983), Feldman (1986), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1988), Wierenga (1989), Pearce and Pruss (2012), and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2020).

are mirror reflections: The Über-God Argument¹²⁵ and the Unter-God Argument¹²⁶. The Über-God Argument holds that if God lacks the relevant abilities, then there could be someone more powerful than God, in which case God cannot be omnipotent. The Unter-God Argument holds that if God lacks the relevant abilities, then there could be someone just slightly less powerful than God due to some extra essential properties. If God can be omnipotent despite certain limitations due to God's essential properties, then by parity of reasoning it seems this slightly less powerful being could be omnipotent as well. But this absurdity demonstrates that the reasoning used to reconcile omnipotence with God's limitations cannot be sound.

Rather than rely on these considerations about omnipotence, however, I will take direct aim at what these two types of responses to the Problem of Fit have in common, namely the claim that God lacks the ability to do evil, and so on. By taking aim at the structural common core of these two solutions, we can sidestep tricky issues about omnipotence, for now. I will now argue that denying **Poss-Ability** is comparatively more attractive than placing these limitations on God's abilities.

3.2.2 *Against Solutions that Limit God's Abilities*

The foundational reason to prefer denying **Poss-Ability** to the above solutions is simply that it is more attractive to avoid limiting God's power as much as we can. Just as it is more plausible to retain as many of God's attributes as possible, it is also more plausible to retain as much of God's power as possible. This is a good reason to avoid saying that God is unable to do evil, and so on, if we can.

Given these limitations, God would be unable to act immorally, act irrationally, or believe falsely. But this entails that there are a wide variety of ordinary things that God is unable to do, since there are a wide variety of ways of acting immorally or irrationally. For example, God would be unable to harm others for no significant reason, or to play devious tricks purely for amusement. And it's not just that God is unable to steal, murder, microwave fish at work, and go to the express checkout lane with too many items. That God is unable to do these things would require that there are many even more mundane things that God is unable to do.

¹²⁵ E.g. Oppy (2005: 78-82).

¹²⁶ Hill (2014: 101-105).

The reason is that just as there are many ways of acting wrongly, there are in turn many ways of doing the things that constitute acting wrongly. In particular, I maintain that giving up God's ability to do evil, believe falsely, and act irrationally requires giving up God's ability to do anything such that if God were to do that, then God would do evil or believe false falsely or act irrationally. Suppose that it would take a blunt force of 50 newtons to the head to kill a person. So God is unable to apply a blunt force of 50 newtons to the head of Jane, an innocent person. Can God create a stone so heavy that God couldn't lift it? Maybe; maybe not. But God can't drop a stone so heavy it would crush Jane. A child is on life support. All it would take to end his life is to press a button to turn off the machines. God can't press the button, but even a small child can. I am not a religious person, but it offends whatever sense of religiosity I have to suppose that a God could have such limitations. It would be a rather pitiful sort of divine being that could not perform such mundane tasks.

I now consider four objections to the above line of reasoning:

Objection 1: God could press the button and suspend the natural order so that pressing the button does not kill the child. So God can press the button. Similarly, God can drop a boulder on Jane and then miraculously harden her body so that it bounces off her without killing her.

Even if the objection is correct, still God cannot press the button without miraculously suspending the natural order. This is a mundane ability that even children have, but God does not.

Objection 2: Ability ascriptions are restricted possibility modals: 'S is able to Φ ' is true iff S's Φ -ing is compossible with certain contextually salient facts. Now while God's pressing the button is not compossible with the various facts that make it wrong to press the button, God's pressing the button is compossible with a less inclusive set of facts. For instance God may press the button at worlds where the button is configured improperly and pressing it fails to turn off the machine. So there is a perfectly good sense in which God can press the button.

Maybe there is a perfectly good sense in which God can press the button, but there is definitely a stronger sense in which God cannot press the button and in which the child can. The sense in which the child and God are both able to press the button requires failing to attend to the facts that make it wrong to press the button. Meanwhile, even if we hold these facts fixed, it remains true that the child is able to press the button. It is God's inability in this stronger sense that compares unfavorably with the child's abilities and which adds to the objectionability of limiting God's powers in the proposed manner. By denying **Poss-Ability**, we are able to maintain that God can press the button even holding these facts fixed, since God can do wrong, though this is impossible. (I show how to reconcile this with the core of the restricted possibility analysis of ability ascriptions in section 3.5.3.)

Objection 3: The above arguments relies on the following inference pattern:

1. S is unable to Φ .
2. If S were to Ψ , then S would Φ .
3. Therefore, S is unable to Ψ .

But this inference pattern is invalid. Suppose that Maisy is in front of a safe she does not know the code to. The code is in fact 7-3-1. Maisy is unable to open the safe. If Maisy were to dial 7-3-1, then she would open the safe. But Maisy is not unable to dial 7-3-1.

These cases are well known puzzles about ability ascriptions.¹²⁷ I follow Schwarz (2020) in thinking that they can be resolved by noting that when evaluating ability ascriptions, context sometimes imposes restrictions on what counts as a relevant way of Φ -ing. When we say that Maisy is unable to open the safe, we mean that she cannot open it in a deliberate, non-accidental way (Schwarz 2020: 12). Context has ruled out opening the safe by luck or accident as a relevant way of Φ -ing. The counterexample shows that the inference pattern does indeed fail when 'S is unable to Φ ', is read as 'S is unable to Φ non-accidentally'. However, the inference pattern is still good when this premise is read as saying that S is unable to Φ in any way at all. That a dog is unable to open the safe in this stronger sense *does* guarantee that the dog is unable to dial 7-3-1,

¹²⁷ Carlson (1999) and Schwarz (2020).

since if the dog were to dial 7-3-1, it would open the safe in some way or another. Now in the case at hand, the inability ascription is true in the strong sense. It's not that God is unable to kill an innocent for no morally significant reason *deliberately*, but can kill an innocent for no morally significant reason *by accident*. Rather God is unable to kill an innocent for no morally significant reason *simpliciter*, whether on purpose or on accident. Therefore, God cannot press the button.

Objection 4 – When it comes to the normative domain, God is like Nixon said of the president: when God does it, it isn't wrong. So while it is wrong for us to kill for no morally significant reason, it would not be wrong for God to do so. And so on for anything else God might do. So God can press the button.

This objection is not relevant to my current argument. My argument targets views that limit God's abilities by saying that God is not able to kill for no morally significant reason or do various other kinds of things that would ordinarily be considered wrongs. Thus it targets the denial of (1), and, indirectly, the denial of (4). The current objection, however, does not limit God's abilities in this manner, but rather claims that God can be morally/rationally perfect despite, e.g., killing for no moral reason. If it escapes the Problem of Fit at all, it does so by denying instances of (3).¹²⁸ So this objection is not available to those looking to resolve the Problem of Fit by limiting God's abilities.

There is a second, somewhat less important reason to disprefer solutions that limit God's abilities. The reason is that it raises thorny questions about why we lesser beings do possess such abilities. It is evident that we are able to, and often do, act immorally, act irrationally, and believe falsely. If the best kind of being lacks these abilities, then what is the value of our having such abilities? Why not instead simply render us unable to believe falsely, as proponents of these responses claim God is? After all, much suffering and many bad choices are due to ignorance. And what exactly is the value of the ability to act irrationally? I cannot argue here that these

¹²⁸ And arguably, it does not escape the Problem of Fit since it doesn't provide a way of denying all of the relevant instances of (3). It has nothing to say about resolving the tension between omnipotence and necessary omniscience, for example. For further criticism of the view that God is exempt from all normative requirements, see sections 1.3 and 3.4.2.

questions are unanswerable¹²⁹, but nonetheless they are a theoretical challenge to those who limit the scope of God's abilities in the proposed way.

To summarize, in section 3 I argued that denying **Poss-Ability** allows theists to resolve the Problem of Fit by maintaining that though God has various abilities, such as the ability to do evil, God does not even possibly exercise these abilities. *Ceteris paribus*, this is preferable to each of the above solutions which involve either giving up some of God's attributes or limiting God's abilities.

3.3 The Puzzle of Divine Freedom

The Puzzle of Divine Freedom considers the tension between God's freedom and the essentiality of other divine attributes. There is a large literature going back to the Middle Ages on whether divine freedom requires the ability to sin.¹³⁰ If it does, there is tension between divine freedom and necessary perfect goodness, given acceptance of **Poss-Ability**. However, just as the tension between omnipotence and necessary perfect goodness is just an instance of a more general problem, so too can the tension between divine freedom and necessary perfect goodness be generalized. This general puzzle can be expressed by the following argument schema:

(1F) God freely Φ 's.

(2F) If God freely Φ 's, then God is able to not Φ .

(3F) If God is able to not Φ , then it is possible that God does not Φ .

(4F) If it is possible that God does not Φ , then it is possible that God does not have property P.

(5F) Therefore, it is possible that God does not have property P.

The traditional puzzle about divine freedom and the ability to sin can be generated by substituting 'actualizes a permissible world' for ' Φ ' and 'perfect goodness' for 'P'. Other less-widely known puzzles can be generated with different substitution instances.

¹²⁹ See Rasmussen (2013) for a discussion of the related question about the value of the freedom to do evil. See also Ekstrom (2021: ch. 2) for an extended skeptical take on the claim that the freedom to do evil is worth it.

¹³⁰ For a summary of some of the historical discussion, see Kent (2017: sec 1). More recently, see Manis (2011), Howard-Snyder (2017), and Director (2017).

Consider the puzzle that results from substituting ‘believes the true’ for ‘ Φ ’ and ‘omniscience’ for P. If God freely believes the true, then by an instance of (2F), God is able to not believe the true. Given familiar reasoning, this shows divine freedom to be incompatible with necessary omniscience. Similarly, divine freedom can be put in tension with necessary perfect rationality by substituting ‘acts rationally’ for ‘ Φ ’ and ‘perfect rationality’ for ‘P’. This general form of reasoning pits divine freedom against a wide variety of allegedly essential divine attributes.

3.3.1 Solving the Puzzle of Divine Freedom by Denying Poss-Ability

For the remainder of section 4, I argue that denying that God satisfies **Poss-Ability** provides an elegant, uniform, and comparatively attractive way of solving the Puzzle of Divine Freedom.

Formally, the puzzle is solved by denying the relevant instances of (3F). These are equivalent to instances of (3) which we already denied to resolve the Problem of Fit. For example, one of the relevant instances of (3) is: ‘If God is able to actualize an impermissible world, then it is possible that God actualizes an impermissible world’. This is equivalent to the instance of (3F) that we used to generate the puzzle about divine freedom and the ability to sin: ‘If God is able to not actualize a permissible world, then it is possible that God does not actualize a permissible world’. Thus, solving the Puzzle of Divine Freedom by denying **Poss-Ability** requires no additional commitments beyond those already made to solve the Problem of Fit. Moreover, the solution is perfectly general and uniform.

The Problem of Fit and the Puzzle of Divine Freedom raise similar issues, and their possible solutions are structurally quite similar. This means that the alternative solutions to the Puzzle of Divine Freedom suffer from defects analogous to those outlined above. In particular, they either give up some divine attributes or else weaken the pre-theoretical conception of those attributes.

For example, we could simply grant the conclusion of the puzzle. Some theists have reacted to the tension between divine freedom and necessary moral perfection by granting that God is not necessarily perfectly good.¹³¹ Again, we can question whether this solves the general Puzzle of Divine Freedom, or whether these theists would be inclined to say something different regarding the tension between divine freedom and necessary rational perfection, for example.

¹³¹ Manis (2011) and Howard-Snyder (2017).

But, again, the fundamental disadvantage of this view for our purposes is that it gives up an attribute that belongs to the classical conception of God. This should be avoided, if possible.

The remaining feasible solutions are those that deny the relevant instances of (1F) and those that deny the relevant instances of (2F). I take these in reverse order, below.

3.3.2 *Denying The Principle of Alternative Possibilities*

The relevant instances of (2F) are entailed by the ‘Principle of Alternative Possibilities’, which states that freedom requires the ability to do otherwise:

PAP: For all S and all Φ , if S freely Φ 's, then S is able to not Φ .

Denying the relevant instances of (2F), and thereby denying **PAP**, is a potential solution to the puzzle. There is now a massive and ever-growing literature about whether **PAP** is true, sparked by Harry Frankfurt's notorious counterexamples to **PAP**.¹³²

Whether **PAP** is true or false, there is a major cost to this solution. If the denial of **PAP** is to resolve the puzzle, it must be coupled with denying that God is able to not Φ , for all of the relevant instances of ‘ Φ ’. The benefit of denying **PAP** in this context is that it allows one to retain God's freedoms without granting God the ability to do otherwise, which would have led to the problematic conclusion of the puzzle. For example, denying **PAP** allows the theist to say that God freely refrains from doing evil, without saying that God is able to not refrain from doing evil. The theist who opts to deny **PAP** to escape the puzzle must now deny this latter claim, which amounts to saying that God is not able to do evil, or else the denial of **PAP** is irrelevant.

But this would amount to the very same limitation on God's abilities that I argued against in section 3.2.2, once one denies that God is able not Φ , for all of the relevant instances of ‘ Φ ’. It amounts to saying that God is not able to do evil, kill for no moral reason, believe falsely, etc. It therefore adopts all the costs associated with that move, and the additional cost of the

¹³² Frankfurt (1969). Frankfurt's original discussion concerns whether *moral responsibility*, rather than freedom, requires the ability to do otherwise. Much of the subsequent literature focuses on moral responsibility rather than freedom. However, his examples are also sometimes taken to threaten **PAP** as stated here.

controversial rejection of **PAP**. It turns out that resolving the Puzzle of Divine Freedom by denying **PAP** requires limits to God's abilities.¹³³

3.3.3 *The Limits of Divine Freedom*

One could also try to resolve the Puzzle of Divine Freedom by denying the relevant instances of (1F). This means denying that God freely does what is good, freely believes what is true, freely does what is rational, etc. But this maneuver turns out to have serious issues.

The payoff of limiting God's freedoms is to avoid the commitment to the divine abilities that cause all the trouble. So, just like the previous approach, the current proposal must be coupled with denying that God is able to not Φ , for all of the relevant instances of Φ , in order to cash in and avoid the conclusion of the puzzle. Therefore, it also confronts the problems of section 3.2.2. But the problems are even worse in the present case, since in addition to limiting God's power, we are now also limiting God's freedom. So we now have to weaken our conception of God along two dimensions rather than one. This leads to the additional problems discussed below.

Denying the relevant instances of (1F) conflicts with two traditional claims about God: that God is perfectly free, and that God is morally praiseworthy, indeed worthy of worship, for what God does.

With respect to the former, it seems a necessary condition of *perfect* freedom that whatever one does, one does freely.¹³⁴ With respect to the latter, there is a natural link between freedom and moral responsibility – one can only be morally responsible for Φ -ing if one freely

¹³³ There is a more minor dialectical cost of this solution, as well. Many theists are incompatibilists of some kind, with a prominent camp being libertarians about freedom. It is disputed whether this connection is merely sociological or whether there are some substantive philosophical reasons for the theist to endorse incompatibilism (see Timpe and Speak 2016 for a collection on this topic). Whether merely sociological or not, given incompatibilism, acceptance of **PAP** is nearly a given. Incompatibilists typically take determinism to rule out freedom through ruling out the ability to do otherwise. This line of reasoning relies on **PAP**. Without **PAP** then, incompatibilism is bereft of its most powerful motivation. Many theists, qua incompatibilists, will be unhappy to resolve the puzzle of divine freedom by giving up **PAP**.

¹³⁴ However, theists might try to reconcile perfect freedom with these limitations in the same way they try to reconcile omnipotence with certain limitations in ability owing to God's essential nature. I anticipate that such moves would raise familiar issues – can we now imagine an agent that isn't necessarily morally perfect and is thereby more free than God? Doesn't that show God not to be perfectly free? We don't need to pursue this line any further here.

Φ 's. But then denying that God freely Φ 's entails that God is not morally responsible, and thereby not praiseworthy for, Φ -ing.¹³⁵

Claiming that God lacks the freedoms in question also leads to similar questions to those raised at the end of section 3.2.2. If the greatest being lacks these freedoms, what's the point of creating beings that have these freedoms? Most philosophers would agree that we do have at least moral and rational freedom, though it is not obvious whether or to what extent we possess freedom of belief (c.f. the doxastic voluntarism/involuntarism debate).

To summarize, we can solve the Puzzle of Divine Freedom by maintaining that though God is perfectly free to do evil, and so on, God does not even possibly exercise this freedom. All else equal, this is preferable to each of the above solutions which involve either giving up some of God's attributes or weakening the standard conception of them, on top of other drawbacks.

3.4 The Paradox of Creation

A very different puzzle to which denying **Poss-Ability** provides an elegant solution is Daniel Rubio's (2018) Paradox of Creation. Rubio attempts to show that, given some very weak norms of morality or rationality, classical theism leads to the paradoxical result that God cannot actualize any world at all.

Begin with the common assumption that there is no best possible world. Now consider God's decision to actualize some world or another. As in any decision problem, God must choose from a set of available options; a set of outcomes that God is able to bring about. As Rubio says, the available options are "those options that are within the agent's power to bring about".¹³⁶ If there is no best world, then this set of available options is infinite – for each option of actualizing

¹³⁵ Admittedly, some philosophers known as "semi-compatibilists" (e.g. Fischer and Ravizza 1998) do sever the link between freedom and moral responsibility. But in addition to being at odds with libertarian forms of theism, semi-compatibilism might not save all of God's moral responsibility. Several prominent semi-compatibilists accept some sort of asymmetry thesis – that responsibility for an action does not require the ability to do otherwise than perform that action, whereas responsibility for an omission does require the ability to perform the omitted action (e.g. Fischer and Ravizza 1991, Sartorio 2005, and Fischer 2017). If the asymmetry thesis is accepted, then moral responsibility for omissions does require the ability to perform the omitted action, so the retreat to semi-compatibilism will not save God's moral responsibility for refraining from doing evil. Semi-compatibilism with an asymmetry thesis allows that God is morally praiseworthy for doing good but not for not doing evil; whether this is theologically acceptable I leave to others to decide.

¹³⁶ Rubio (2018: 2989).

some world, there is another option of actualizing some better world. We will now prove by an induction over the set of options that it is impossible for God to choose any option.

For the inductive step, we show that given that it is impermissible for God to choose some arbitrary option O_a , it is also impermissible for God to choose its immediate successor O_{a+1} . We assume a principle called ‘Worse Than Impermissible is Impermissible’ (**WTII**):

WTII: If O_e is impermissible, then any option as bad as or worse than O_e is impermissible.

Now if O_a is impermissible, then anything worse than O_a is impermissible (by **WTII**). Since God is necessarily morally/rationally perfect, it is impossible that God chooses O_a or any option worse than O_a . Rubio concludes from this that O_a and every option worse than O_a are unavailable to God.¹³⁷ This means that the immediate successor of O_a , O_{a+1} , is the worst of the options available to God. By the assumption that there is no best option available to God, there are available options that are better than O_{a+1} . But now grant the following principle, which Rubio (2018: 2993-2994) labels ‘**NO WORST**’:

NO WORST: It is rationally/morally impermissible to choose the very worst available option, unless there is no better option available

Given **NO WORST**, O_{a+1} is impermissible as well, since it is the worst available option and there are better options available.

Given **WTII** and the inductive step, it follows that if any of God’s options are impermissible, then they all are: **WTII** rules out the options below (and equal to) any impermissible option and the inductive step rules out the options above any impermissible option. But we can assume that there is some option O_e that would be rationally/morally impermissible for God to choose – some world would be too bad for God to morally/rationally choose to actualize it. So all the options are morally/rationally impermissible. Since God is morally/rationally perfect, it is impossible that God chooses any option.

While Rubio runs the paradox on the assumption that there is no best world, unpalatable, though perhaps not paradoxical, conclusions can also be obtained without this assumption. If there is a best possible world or worlds, then the above argument can be run to show that no

¹³⁷ “Every strategy that it [O_e] dominates has been found to be impossible, and therefore unavailable,” Rubio (2018: 2996).

worlds other than these are possible. This means that our world is among the best possible, but it also means that it is impossible that things be any worse. It also means that God must create the best.¹³⁸ And if there is a uniquely best possible world, then there is only one possible world – total modal collapse.

The following tables, based on those in Rubio (2018: 2997-2998), provide a graphical illustration of the Paradox of Creation:

Table 1: the divine creation problem

↑
O_{a+2}
O_{a+1}
O_a
O_{a-1}
O_{a-2}
↓

Table 2: some option is impermissible

↑
O_{a+2}
O_{a+1}
O_a
O_{a-1}
O_{a-2}
↓

Table 3: **WTII**

↑
O_{a+2}
O_{a+1}
O_a
O_{a-1}
O_{a-2}
↓

Table 4: remaining available options

↑
O_{a+2}
O_{a+1}

Table 5: **NO WORST**

↑
O_{a+2}
O_{a+1}

Table 6: remaining available options

↑
O_{a+2}

¹³⁸ Contra Adams (1972), among others.

3.4.1 Solving the Paradox of Creation by Denying **Poss-Ability**

For the remainder of section 3.4, I argue that denying that God satisfies **Poss-Ability** provides a comparatively attractive way of solving the Paradox of Creation.

Formally, the puzzle is solved by denying that options that it is impossible that God chooses are thereby unavailable to God. This blocks the inductive step of the argument. Grant that some option O_a and everything worse than O_a is impermissible, and therefore impossible for God to choose. It does not follow that these options are unavailable to God. So it does not follow that O_{a+1} is the worst available option. So **NO WORST** does not rule O_{a+1} impermissible. There may be many worlds that God is able to actualize which are nevertheless so bad that God would not possibly actualize them.

Denying **Poss-Ability** to solve the Paradox of Creation is a comparatively attractive solution because it enables accepting all of the plausible norms that generate the paradox without any of the theological costs of other solutions.

The norms required to generate the paradox are modest – just **WTII** and **NO WORST**. **WTII** seems unimpeachable to me. But one could conceivably deny **NO WORST**, despite its intuitive plausibility. To further motivate **NO WORST**, I'll summarize the argument that Rubio makes in favor of it.¹³⁹ In brief, the argument is that the worst available option has a unique kind of badness associated with it. Intrinsically, it has the least going for it of any available option. And comparatively speaking, it has nothing going for it. At least the second worst available option has this going for it: it's better than the worst option!

Since the norms that generate the Paradox of Creation are highly plausible, it would be very nice to be able to escape the paradox without giving them up. Let me give a simple toy model of the divine creation problem which shows how denying **Poss-Ability** allows us to uphold these norms. Suppose that there is some threshold that determines which worlds are permissible for God to actualize. Perhaps, for example, it would be permissible for God to actualize any world which is good overall and in which there is a justifying reason for every evil that occurs. The worst world which meets that criteria, W_C , is permissible, but any world worse than W_C is impermissible. Our model therefore satisfies **WTII**. It is not possible that God actualizes any world worse than W_C ; nonetheless, God is able to actualize them. Therefore, none

¹³⁹ Rubio (2018: 3001).

of the permissible worlds, the ones at least as good as W_C , are the worst of the available ones. So **NO WORST** is true in our model as well.

The following principle, however, is violated by our model (in particular by the permissibility of W_C):

It is rationally/morally impermissible to choose the very worst *possible* option, unless there is no better option available.

In fact, given this revised version of **NO WORST**, the impossibility of all worlds follows easily from **WTII** and the assumption that some world is impermissible, without relying on **Poss-Ability**.¹⁴⁰ So we do have to deny the revised version of **NO WORST**. How big of a cost is that?

The revised principle is very plausible because availability normally does not outstrip possibility. But in the extraordinary case where availability does outstrip possibility, the revised principle loses its original appeal. If there are available options worse than W_C that S is able to choose, then the fact that W_C is the worst of the *possible* options does not imply that it is irrational/immoral to choose W_C .¹⁴¹ W_C has a lot going for it compared to many of the other options God is able to choose. If our example criterion for permissibility above is true, then W_C would be good overall and there would be a justifying reason for every evil that occurs in W_C . So W_C 's being the worst of the possible options just means that it is the worst of the permissible options, not the worst option *tout court*.¹⁴² So if we deny **Poss-Ability**, we should deny the revised principle anyway.

Denying **Poss-Ability** therefore escapes the Paradox of Creation and upholds the plausible norms that generate the paradox. The other potential solutions are all theologically problematic. For example, one could escape the paradox by denying both that God is necessarily

¹⁴⁰ Suppose W_e is impermissible. By **WTII**, anything at least as bad as W_e is impermissible, and therefore impossible. So the immediate successor to W_e , W_{e+1} , is the worst of the possible options. So by the revised principle, W_{e+1} is impermissible, and therefore impossible. And so on, upwards for the rest.

¹⁴¹ Except for the fact that this implies that there are better available options than O. But theists cannot accept the principle that it is impermissible to choose an option when there is a better one available, for this quickly engenders the conclusions of the Paradox of Creation.

¹⁴² The idea in the background is something like that the "natural" set of options from which we perform normative evaluation is the set of options that the agent is able to choose or bring about. Any option is the worst option relative to some restricted subset, but these subsets are not relevant for normative evaluation.

perfectly good and that God is necessarily rationally perfect.¹⁴³ But this means giving up two central divine attributes, and accepting a tension with perfect being theology. All else equal, denying **Poss-Ability** is more attractive.

In the next subsection, I'll examine the theologically revisionary proposal that Rubio opts for, and argue that it is also unattractive.

3.4.2 *Lawless Gods*

Rubio's way out of the paradox of creation is to claim that "no norms (of morality or of rationality) apply to gods".¹⁴⁴ Therefore "no norms govern the choice of world to create".¹⁴⁵ The paradox is thus blocked at the assumption that some world is impermissible for God to actualize. Rubio concludes that "no world would be irrational or immoral for God to create. Even arbitrarily bad ones."¹⁴⁶

As I said at the end of section 1.3, these kinds of views are non-starters for me – I find them obviously incorrect and morally repugnant. There, I also tried to rebut various arguments for such views. Here, I will provide another quick reason for rejecting these views and argue that Rubio's position in particular is inconsistently motivated.

It is not clear that these kinds of views really preserve God's perfect goodness and rationality. A god exempt from normative constraints would be perfectly good and rational in the same way that a rock is – simply exempt. Neither could do anything immoral or irrational, but it is not clear that this amounts to the kind of positive perfection that theists have in mind.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Note that it is necessary to give up both traits in order to avoid the conclusion that God cannot actualize any world. **NO WORST** and **WTII** express plausible norms for both morality and rationality, given that options are ranked by whatever is relevant for moral value and choice-worthiness respectively (e.g. some sort of deontic features for the former, and expected-utility for the latter). Therefore, Rubio's reasoning threatens to show that every world is both rationally and morally forbidden to actualize. Allowing the possibility of God acting irrationally alone, for instance, would not avoid the conclusion so long as it is not possible for God to act immorally.

¹⁴⁴ Rubio (2018: 2987).

¹⁴⁵ Rubio (2018: 3003).

¹⁴⁶ Rubio (2018: 2988).

¹⁴⁷ Goldschmidt and Lebens (2020: 516) agree. However, they attempt to resolve the paradox of creation by denying that God creates the world after all; they opt for 'Radical Hassidic Idealism', on which the world is an idea in the mind of God. It is not clear to me that this really resolves the paradox. Despite its name, the Paradox of Creation doesn't assume that God actually creates anything external to God. Simply by imagining things, for example, God actualizes some world or another. So long as God faces some sort of decision about what to do, and therefore what world to actualize, one can run Rubio's argument.

In addition, it seems to me that Rubio's position is inconsistently motivated. Rubio argues in favor of **NO WORST**. But if no norms apply to God, then **NO WORST** is false, or at least does not apply to God. One could allow that **NO WORST** is true for everyone except God, but Rubio's argument for **NO WORST** seems just as good for God as for everyone else. And if we exempt God from **NO WORST**, we already escape the paradox. It is not clear why we would need to go further and exempt God from all normative constraints. Perhaps it could be claimed that **NO WORST** does apply to God, but it never rules any of God's options impermissible, since God never faces a decision with a worst option. But if some moral or rational norms do apply to God, then it seems implausible that morality and rationality do not rule out any world for actualization.¹⁴⁸

To summarize, denying **Poss-Ability** solves the Paradox of Divine Creation by allowing that worlds that God would not possibly actualize are still available as options for God when God chooses what world to actualize. This is the most theologically and normatively attractive solution available to the theist.

3.5 The Arguments for Poss-Ability

In the previous three sections I argued that theists can escape three serious problems by denying **Poss-Ability**. This would not amount to much, however, if there were compelling reasons to affirm **Poss-Ability**. In this section, however, I will argue that, at least for theists, there are no compelling arguments in favor of **Poss-Ability**.

3.5.1 *The Intensionality Argument*

The only arguments for **Poss-Ability** in the literature that I am aware of are reported in Nguyen (2020). Some of these narrowly target Spencer's (2017) proposed counterexamples to

¹⁴⁸ It is also worth noting that Rubio's position is much stronger than even Murphy's view, contra Murphy (2019: sec 6). Murphy's argument that God is not subject to the ordinary norms of morality explicitly relies on the view that God is perfectly rational. Provided that the norms Rubio relies on are norms of rationality as well, Murphy's view doesn't escape the argument, since it doesn't exempt God from rational norms.

Poss-Ability.¹⁴⁹ These need not concern us here. Others, however, can be generalized. The first of these is The Intensionality Argument.¹⁵⁰

The Intensionality Argument proceeds from the premise that abilities do not admit of hyperintensional differences. That is, the following principle holds:

Intensionality: For any agent S and actions Φ and Ψ , if both:

- (i) Necessarily, S Φ 's if and only if S Ψ 's; and
- (ii) S is able to Φ ; then
- (iii) S is able to Ψ .

If it is impossible that S Φ 's, then S Φ 's if and only if S proves that 2 is odd, squares the circle, etc. So suppose S is able to Φ . By **Intensionality**, S is able to prove that 2 is odd, square the circle, etc. But no one is able to do those things. Therefore no one is able to Φ , whenever it is impossible that they Φ .

My basic reaction to this argument is that it begs the question. The attraction of **Intensionality**, it seems to me, is parasitic upon the attraction of **Poss-Ability**, rather than vice-versa. Why is **Intensionality** intuitively plausible? Because a violation of **Intensionality** would require someone to be able to do something impossible, namely Φ without Ψ -ing when necessarily, they Φ if and only if they Ψ . And it is intuitively plausible that no one is able to do the impossible. If this diagnosis is correct, then the appeal to **Intensionality** does not bolster the case for **Poss-Ability**. Further, the line of reasoning above shows that not only does **Intensionality** entail **Poss-Ability**, but **Poss-Ability** also entails **Intensionality**.¹⁵¹ They are equally strong. We have no effective argument for **Poss-Ability**.

But for those who still feel the pull of **Intensionality**, there are some other things to be said. Several important agentic modalities demonstrably are hyperintensional. Consider the modal 'S brings it about that'. It may be true that S brings it about that P even though it is false that S brings it about that Q, even when necessarily, P if and only if Q. This morning I brought it

¹⁴⁹ For other arguments that target only Spencer's counterexamples, see Gordon (2021).

¹⁵⁰ Nguyen (2020: 588).

¹⁵¹ Suppose, for proof by contradiction, that **Intensionality** is false, so that for some S, Φ , Ψ , necessarily, S Φ 's if and only if S Ψ 's, S is able to Φ , and S is unable to Ψ . If S is able to Φ and unable to Ψ , then S is able to Φ without Ψ -ing. But it is impossible that S does this. This contradicts **Poss-Ability**. So if **Poss-Ability** is true, then so is **Intensionality**.

about that I ate breakfast. I did not bring it about that I ate breakfast and $2+2=4$, for this would entail that I brought it about that $2+2=4$, and I have no agency over arithmetic truths.¹⁵² But these states of affairs are intensionally equivalent, since P is intensionally equivalent to P & Q whenever Q is a necessary truth. Therefore agentic notions like *bringing it about that*, *making it the case that*, and *causing it to be true that* are hyperintensional. Strikingly, this also shows that the modal ‘S is able to bring it about that’ is hyperintensional. I am able to bring it about that I eat breakfast. I am not able to bring it about that I eat breakfast and $2+2=4$. Although these cases are not direct counterexamples to **Intensionality**, since a number of closely related agentic notions are hyperintensional, it should not be surprising if ‘S is able to’ is hyperintensional as well.

Abilities are also intimately connected to other notions outside of the agentic modalities that arguably involve hyperintensionality. For example, many agree that there is some important connection between abilities and counterfactuals about what agents would do in certain circumstances. But in the next section I will argue that theists should hold that some of these counterfactuals are non-trivially true counterpossibles.¹⁵³ If there are non-trivially true counterpossibles, then two counterfactuals can differ in truth value given only a substitution of intensionally equivalent antecedents. In that case, counterfactuals that are closely connected to ability ascriptions involve hyperintensionality.

Given the lack of non-question-begging reasons to think that abilities are not hyperintensional, and the reasons that suggest that they are hyperintensional, I conclude that The Intensionality Argument is far from compelling.

3.5.2 *The Counterfactual Argument*

The next argument for **Poss-Ability** relies on a counterfactual principle that states a necessary condition on abilities:¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Elgesem (1997: 30) denies that ‘S brings it about that P & Q’ entails ‘S brings it about that P’ for this reason. But the problem is bad enough without this inference. I do not bring about the conjunctive state of affairs *I eat breakfast and $2+2=4$* , whether or not this entails that I bring it about that $2+2=4$.

¹⁵³ A counterpossible is a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent.

¹⁵⁴ Nguyen (2020: 587-588).

Would Fail: For any agent S and action A, if S would fail to A no matter what S tried, then S is not able to A.¹⁵⁵

On the orthodox Stalnaker-Lewis semantics for counterfactuals¹⁵⁶, ‘if S were to try to Φ , then S would fail to A’ is true just in case either (i) there is no possible world where S tries to Φ ; or (ii) at the closest possible worlds where S tries to Φ , S fails to A. Suppose it is impossible that S A’s. Now take any arbitrary action Φ . Either there are some worlds where S tries to Φ or there are none. If there are none, then ‘if S were to try to Φ , then S would fail to A’ is true by (i). So suppose there are some worlds where S tries to Φ . At the closest of these, S fails to A, since there are no possible worlds where S succeeds in A-ing. So ‘if S were to try to Φ , then S would fail to A’ is true by (ii). Since Φ is arbitrary, no matter what S tried, S would fail to A. Therefore by **Would Fail**, S is not able to A. So no one is able to do the impossible.

Theists should not respond to this argument by denying **Would Fail**. Instead, they should reject the orthodoxy which states that all counterpossibles are trivially true. Consider the counterpossible ‘if God were to try to do evil, God would fail’. Many theists would maintain that this counterpossible is false.¹⁵⁷ But then it is not true that God would fail to do evil no matter what God tried, since if God were to try to do evil, God would succeed. So God’s having the ability to do evil is compatible with **Would Fail**.

Here theists are in a unique position. In the case of ordinary agents, if it is within their power to try to Φ , it is possible that they try to Φ . Only because of God’s essential character is it impossible that God even tries to do evil. And if it is impossible for an ordinary agent to try to Φ , this is normally because they are limited in some sort of capacity. For instance, perhaps it is impossible for a beetle to even try to prove the Goldbach Conjecture, simply because nothing that a beetle is capable of doing could count as trying to prove the Goldbach Conjecture. If this is true however, it is due to the cognitive limitations essential to beetles. Thus if I consider the impossible scenario in which a beetle tries to prove the Goldbach Conjecture, it seems to me that

¹⁵⁵ See Wasserman (2017: 122) for this principle, adapted from Vihvelin (1996: 320).

¹⁵⁶ See Stalnaker (1968) and Lewis (1973). I gloss over some of the differences in their views below.

¹⁵⁷ Morris (1986: 168) and Zagzebski (1990) accept false counterpossibles precisely because of these kinds of cases, though Lampert (2019: 705-706) argues that these kinds of cases are not unique to theism. Note also that Freddoso (1986) uses false counterpossibles to defend certain aspects of Christology and Pruss and Pearce (2012) use non-trivial counterpossibles in developing their account of omnipotence.

it would fail. So I do not think that an appeal to false counterpossibles would work for ordinary agents.

Countenancing false counterpossibles takes us away from orthodoxy on counterfactuals, but not too far away. Given acceptance of impossible worlds (worlds that represent impossibilities) into one's semantics, the main apparatus of the Stalnaker-Lewis semantics can be retained.¹⁵⁸ Impossible worlds may also be heterodox, but increasingly they are less so. Impossible worlds have been called in to do much useful work in modeling non-classical, relevance, and epistemic logics, and in theorizing about representation and properties.¹⁵⁹ At any rate, the debate over counterpossibles is large and ever growing, and we have nothing more to contribute to it here. But accepting heterodoxy about counterpossibles does seem the best way for a theist to respond to the counterfactual argument.

Funkhouser (2006: 214-215) doubts that God would succeed in doing evil if, *per impossibile*, God were to try:

Why not think that God's moral nature is privileged in a robust sense, so that God would be unable to stab an innocent child even if, as is impossible, God so willed?

The error here is that in merely trying to do evil, God's perfect goodness would thereby be impugned. The would-be terrorist does not escape all moral fault simply because the bomb they planted failed to go off. Perhaps there is some moral luck, but trying and failing to do evil is still a moral failing. God's perfect goodness is therefore already compromised in any impossible world where God tries to do evil. Some impossible world where God succeeds is thereby closer than those where God fails. If God were to try to do evil, God would succeed. That is why the theist should reject the counterfactual argument for **Poss-Ability**.

3.5.3 *The Analysis of Ability Ascriptions*

Another argument that may be given for **Poss-Ability** is that it follows from both of the most prominent analyses of ability ascriptions.¹⁶⁰ According to counterfactual analyses, an ability ascription 'S is able to Φ ' is true just in case some counterfactual of the form 'if S were to Ψ ,

¹⁵⁸ See Nolan (1997) and Berto et al (2018).

¹⁵⁹ See Nolan (2013: sec. 2) for an overview of the uses of impossible worlds.

¹⁶⁰ Nguyen (2020: 586-587). See also Spencer (2017: 481-483), who is happy with this result.

then S would Φ ' is true. Different versions of the counterfactual analysis differ in filling out the antecedent. For example, Moore claimed that ' S is able to Φ ' is to be analyzed as 'if S were to choose to Φ , then S would Φ '.¹⁶¹

Suppose that it is impossible that S Φ 's. Then whatever the relevant antecedent is, 'if S were to Ψ , then S would Φ ' will be false if it is possible that S Ψ 's, since the closest worlds where S Ψ 's will not be ones where S Φ 's. However, if it is impossible that S Ψ 's, orthodoxy will have it that 'if S were to Ψ , then S would Φ ' is trivially true. This result is unacceptable for the counterfactual analysis, since it would require that ' S is able to Φ ' is true whenever it is impossible that S chooses to Φ , which is clearly wrong. Therefore we should take the counterfactual analysis to say that ' S is able to Φ ' is true just in case 'if S were to Ψ , then S would Φ ' is *non-trivially* true. In that case, if it is impossible that S Ψ 's, then by orthodoxy it is trivially true that 'if S were to Ψ , then S would Φ '. So in either case, if it is impossible that S Φ 's, then 'if S were to Ψ , then S would Φ ' is not non-trivially true, and so by the revised counterfactual analysis, ' S is able to Φ ' is false. It follows that if it is impossible that S Φ 's, then S is unable to Φ .

Based on the previous section, it should be obvious what I'm going to say about this. To deny **Poss-Ability** and still accept counterfactual analyses of ability ascriptions, the theist must reject orthodoxy about counterpossibles. The counterfactual 'if God were to choose to do evil, then God would do evil' is non-trivially true, since the counterfactual 'if God were to choose to do evil, then God would not do evil' is false. Given non-trivial counterpossibles, the denial of **Poss-Ability** is perfectly compatible with counterfactual analyses of ability ascriptions.

The other prominent analysis of ability ascriptions is the restricted possibility analysis. According to this analysis, ' S is able to Φ ' is true just in case S Φ 's in some accessible possible world, where the set of accessible worlds is determined by contextually relevant facts.¹⁶² Suppose that it is impossible that S Φ 's. Then no matter what the contextually relevant facts are, there is no accessible possible world where S 's. So S is not able to Φ .

Once again the denial of **Poss-Ability** can be reconciled with the standard analysis of ability ascriptions only at the cost of some unorthodox semantics. In particular, the worlds we use for the semantics of ability ascriptions must include some metaphysically impossible

¹⁶¹ Moore (2005: 110). For a modern version of the conditional analysis, see Mandelkern et al (2017).

¹⁶² E.g. Lewis (1976) and Kratzer (1977).

worlds.¹⁶³ In that case, we can say that ‘S is able to Φ ’ is true just in case there is some accessible possible or impossible world where S Φ ’s. Then, we can say that there are some contexts in which impossible worlds where God does evil are accessible.

Given the acceptance of either non-trivially true counterpossibles or impossible worlds the denial of **Poss-Ability** is compatible with the usual ways of analyzing ability ascriptions. To conclude this section, the arguments for **Poss-Ability** do show that there is a cost associated with denying **Poss-Ability**, namely accepting some unorthodox views about the semantics of counterfactuals and ability ascriptions. However, no argument gives a compelling reason for theists to accept **Poss-Ability**.

3.6 Conclusion of Chapter 3

The God of classical theism would be a rather extraordinary agent. I have argued here that there is reason to believe that such an agent would be able to do the impossible. The riches obtained by accepting this claim are an elegant and uniform solution to three serious problems that otherwise seem quite costly to resolve: the Problem of Fit, the Puzzle of Divine Freedom, and the Paradox of Creation. The cost of accepting this view is accepting some unorthodox claims about the semantics of counterfactuals and ability ascriptions. To this unbeliever, the spoils seem worth the price.

¹⁶³ Spencer (2017: 486).

Chapter 4: Omnipotence and Dominance Principles

The previous chapter argued that theists should deny **Poss-Ability**, maintaining that with respect to certain tasks, such as bringing about catastrophic evils, God is able to do these even though it is metaphysically impossible that God does them. This chapter further reinforces that conclusion by developing some arguments against what I take to be the main rival of my proposal in section 3.2.

There I argued that denying **Poss-Ability** is the best way to reconcile God's omnipotence with God's other essential attributes. The main alternative proposal on the market claims that omnipotence is compatible with God's lacking abilities that run contrary to God's other essential attributes, because omnipotence never requires the ability to do the metaphysically impossible. I already gave some arguments for thinking that denying **Poss-Ability** is preferable to this view. In this chapter, however, I discuss two arguments that directly target the idea that God can be omnipotent despite lacking the abilities that are in tension with God's essential attributes.

4.1 The Scope of Omnipotence

There is an important question about the demandingness of the concept of *omnipotence*, as it figures in the classical theistic religions: What abilities must an agent possess to qualify as omnipotent? An answer to this question would not only tell us much about the kind of being posited by classical theism, but would also have important implications for several issues in contemporary philosophy of religion.

For example, the traditional paradox of the stone threatens to show that the concept of omnipotence is so demanding as to be internally contradictory.¹⁶⁴ The paradox says that an omnipotent agent must possess an ability that itself rules out omnipotence, such as the ability to make a stone that the omnipotent agent cannot lift. At least partly in response to this sort of puzzle, it is now widely held that omnipotence does not require the ability to do just anything at all.¹⁶⁵ The inability to bring it about that $2+2=5$ does not seem to preclude omnipotence. Similarly, perhaps, for the ability to make a stone that an omnipotent agent cannot lift.

¹⁶⁴ See Beall and Cotnoir (2017: 681) for a representative formulation.

¹⁶⁵ Beall and Cotnoir (2017: 681) characterize this as "the standard response" to the paradox of the stone.

But another issue concerns whether omnipotence is too demanding to fit with other attributes that have traditionally characterized God. This is exactly the Problem of Fit described in section 3.2. A popular response to the Problem of Fit builds on the standard response to the paradox of the stone. Not only does omnipotence not require the ability to do just anything at all, but it never requires the ability to do the metaphysically impossible.¹⁶⁶ Since it is impossible for God to act immorally, irrationally, or have false beliefs, God can be omnipotent despite lacking the ability to do these things, as omnipotence does not require being able to do the impossible. I will label this popular response ‘**The Metaphysical Impossibility Response**’ (**MIR**). It consists of three schematic claims that stand in the following logical relationship:

The Metaphysical Impossibility Response (MIR):

- (1) Omnipotence does not require the ability to do the metaphysically impossible.
- (2) It is metaphysically impossible that God Φ 's.

Therefore it is consistent that:

- (3) God is both omnipotent and unable to Φ .

This chapter examines two arguments against **MIR**. Both of these arguments already exist in embryonic form, but in this paper I hope to improve on existing formulations and discuss new problems for these arguments and how they might be solved. Although my focus is specifically on the question about the required scope of God's omnipotence, several lessons can be generalized about what omnipotence demands in general.

First, however, a quick word about analyses of omnipotence. Recent philosophical discussion about omnipotence has been dominated by proposed analyses of omnipotence and critical discussion thereof.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, these analyses are often put forward in explicit service of vindicating the coherence of omnipotence with itself and other divine attributes. Such analyses purport to give a fully general account of the scope of omnipotence. One could survey these analyses in an attempt to show that those that vindicate **MIR** fail to be adequate analyses of

¹⁶⁶ Flint and Freddoso (1983), Feldman (1986), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1988), Wierenga (1989), Pearce and Pruss (2012), and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2020).

¹⁶⁷ See footnote 166 above for some of the relevant literature.

omnipotence, as Hill (2014) recently does.¹⁶⁸ But this paper does not adopt this methodology. Instead, I aim to abstract away from some of these details about the analysis of omnipotence, by examining general arguments for the claim that God’s having omnipotence would require the ability to act immorally, etc. If these arguments succeed, then they show that there is something wrong with any analysis of omnipotence that entails that God is omnipotent even though God is unable to act immorally, etc.

4.2 The Über-God Argument

At the center of the concept of omnipotence is the idea of maximal power. Oppy (2005: 78-82) develops an argument from this conception of omnipotence to the claim that God (as orthodoxly conceived) is not omnipotent. The theoretical core of the argument is expressed in the following passage:

If you can do everything that I can do, and more besides, then it seems to me to be evidently true that you are more powerful than I. But it is simply an analytical truth that nothing can be more powerful than an omnipotent being.

Let’s separate the two principles indicated above:

Maximality: $\Box \forall x((\Diamond \exists y(y \text{ is more powerful than } x)) \rightarrow x \text{ is not omnipotent})$

Dominance: $\Box \forall x \forall y(\text{If } y\text{'s abilities are a proper subset of } x\text{'s, then } x \text{ is more powerful than } y)$

Both of these principles are extremely attractive. **Maximality** follows from the conception of omnipotence as maximal power. As for **Dominance**, it is hard to imagine better grounds for having superior power to another than being able to do all that they can and more.

¹⁶⁸ Not that this is all Hill does. I think that one of Hill’s arguments against a specific kind of analysis of omnipotence can be generalized, and I attempt to do this later. For the record, I also agree with Hill’s (2014: 105) conclusion that these analyses require too little of omnipotence and that “merely showing that a state of affairs is metaphysically impossible is not enough to show that it is not in the purview of omnipotence.”

Now consider God. At least according to the metaphysical impossibility response, God is a being with certain essential limitations in ability. God cannot act immorally, irrationally, or believe falsely, by virtue of the essential divine attributes. Now we may imagine an agent just like God with respect to abilities, but who is not necessarily omniscient or rationally and morally perfect. Call this being ‘Über-God’. Über-God may now have some abilities that God lacks, particularly abilities to act immorally, irrationally, and believe falsely. It appears that Über-God now dominates God with respect to abilities. Our Über-God thought experiment, together with the above principles, lead to the following argument:

The Über-God Argument

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| (1) God is omnipotent and is unable to act immorally, irrationally, and believe falsely. | (MIR) |
| (2) God’s abilities are a proper subset of Über-God’s abilities. | (1, Def of ‘Über-God’) |
| (3) Über-God is more powerful than God. | (2, Dominance) |
| (4) God is not omnipotent. | (3, Maximality) |
| (5) God is omnipotent and God is not omnipotent. | (1, 4) |
| (6) MIR is false. | (1, 5, Reductio) |

The Über-God Argument threatens to show that God cannot be both omnipotent and yet lack the ability to act immorally, irrationally, and believe falsely. While The Über-God Argument is specifically about God, the form of the argument applies quite broadly. What it appears to demonstrate is that any agent for whom we can imagine another agent that dominates it in abilities, that agent is not omnipotent.¹⁶⁹

In what follows, I discuss some under-examined issues that The Über-God Argument faces. I begin with a discussion of **Dominance**.

¹⁶⁹ Is it enough that we can imagine such an agent, or must such an agent be possible in some more robust sense? I return to this important issue in section 4.2.3.

4.2.1 Specifying Dominance

I introduced Über-God as having all of God's abilities and some more. But on closer inspection, this appears impossible. For each agent, there are many abilities such that it is logically necessary that only that agent has them. For any agent A, only A can write A's autobiography, and only A can make it the case that A Φ 's without being made by anyone else to Φ . So Über-God cannot have *all* of God's abilities and more, speaking unrestrictedly.

There are now two challenges for The Über-God Argument. First, we must specify some particular set of abilities with respect to which Über-God dominates God. And second, dominance with respect to this set of abilities must be sufficient for being more powerful overall. In other words, once we give up the claim that God's abilities are a proper subset of Über-God's abilities speaking unrestrictedly, we must employ a strengthened dominance principle in order to render The Über-God Argument valid.

We might begin by noting that the problem cases I pointed to earlier involve ineliminable reference to specific particulars. Other examples of these kinds of abilities include the ability to ride that particular bike, or the ability to cross the Delaware River. These abilities are to be contrasted with abilities that can be ascribed without ineliminable reference to specific particulars, such as the ability to ride a bike and the ability to cross a river wider than 30 ft. Call the former kinds of abilities 'non-qualitative abilities' and the latter 'qualitative abilities'.¹⁷⁰ Even though God has some non-qualitative abilities that Über-God lacks, perhaps Über-God dominates God with respect to qualitative abilities.

Unfortunately, this restricted qualitative dominance thesis is still not quite correct. The reason is that God has various qualitative properties that Über-God lacks. This allows us to construct, admittedly rather contrived, qualitative abilities that God has that Über-God lacks. For example, God has the ability to lift a stone while being necessarily omniscient, but Über-God does not. We must therefore search for an even more refined set of abilities such that Über-God dominates God with respect to that set, and which is still sufficient for being more powerful.

Here we might appeal to the distinction between basic and non-basic actions.¹⁷¹ Non-basic actions are those one does by doing something else; e.g. turning on the light, which

¹⁷⁰ For more on the distinction between the qualitative and the non-qualitative, see Adams (1979: 6-9) and Dorr (2019: sec. 4.3).

¹⁷¹ See Amaya (2017) for a summary of recent work on basic actions.

one does by flicking the switch. Basic actions are not non-basic; e.g. perhaps moving my finger. Now port this basic/non-basic distinction to abilities – basic abilities are abilities to perform basic actions, non-basic abilities are abilities to perform non-basic actions. It is plausible that the ability to lift a stone while being necessarily omniscient is non-basic, since one performs this action by doing something else, namely lifting a stone.

Our new proposal is that Über-God dominates God with respect to basic, qualitative abilities. Über-God has the ability to choose to play a devious trick for fun, whereas God, being essentially morally perfect, lacks this ability. Moreover, it is plausible that choosing to play a devious trick for fun is a basic ability – one does not do it by doing something else.

Unfortunately, even if this new dominance thesis is correct, it is of no help. The problem is that dominance with respect to basic, qualitative abilities is not sufficient for being more powerful overall. Imagine two embodied agents, Tip and Tap, whose basic abilities consist only of motor skills, like moving their limbs in particular ways. Moreover, Tip and Tap have all the same motor skills, with one small exception – Tap can wiggle their toe in a particular way that Tip can't. Both Tip and Tap are trapped in rooms that are qualitatively similar, but whereas Tap's room is bare, Tip's room has a variety of switches that Tip can push to turn on the lights, turn on air conditioning or heat, and many other effects. None of these are basic actions, since Tip does them only by moving their finger in a certain way. But Tap shares this basic ability, being able to move their finger in that way, even though Tap is unable to turn on the lights or even flick a switch. It appears that Tap dominates Tip with respect to basic, qualitative abilities since they both can move their bodies around in all the same ways, except Tap can wiggle their toe in a particular way that Tip can't. But Tip seems far more powerful overall, since Tip has considerable control over their environment in a way that Tap does not.

What this seems to indicate is that basic, qualitative abilities are not sensitive to external circumstances, preventing them from being sufficient indicators of overall power. The appeal to basic abilities will therefore not work in formulating The Über-God Argument.

The intuitive impression remains that Über-God does dominate God in some important sense, and that this shows that Über-God is more powerful than God. That God has certain abilities like the ability to lift a stone while being necessarily omniscient is intuitively irrelevant. However, we have not been able to locate the relevant dominance thesis. There is therefore the following unresolved challenge for The Über-God Argument:

Specifying Dominance: The Über-God Argument requires that there is some set of abilities S such that (a) Über-God dominates God with respect to S; and (b) dominance with respect to S is sufficient for being more powerful overall.

4.2.2 *Dimensions of Ability*

Suppose that we successfully narrow in on the desired set of abilities S described above. There are still a few complications for formulating a true dominance principle in terms of S. We have been assuming that dominance with respect to merely the range of one's abilities is sufficient for being more powerful, but this assumption is a simplification, as there are several dimensions along which our abilities can be assessed. Our *range* of abilities is merely one of these dimensions, so dominance with respect to that dimension isn't always enough.

Our abilities also differ in their *reliability*. Having an ability does not require surefire success. That a golfer missed a putt once does not entail that they were not able to make the putt.¹⁷² In fact, according to one prominent theory of abilities, S's having the ability to Φ merely requires that it be possible that S Φ 's (holding fixed some contextually salient facts). At the other end of the spectrum, the most reliable kind of ability would be something like what Pearce and Pruss (2012: 407) call 'perfect efficacy of will':

X has perfect efficacy of will if and only if for all P, necessarily if X were to try to bring it about that P, then X would intentionally bring it about that P.

Having perfect efficacy of will guarantees that all of one's abilities (or at least all of one's abilities to act intentionally) are surefire.

The fact that A has a strictly greater range of abilities than B does not entail that A is more powerful than B if B's abilities are more reliable than A's. For example, suppose that A can throw four kinds of pitches – two-seam fastball, slider, change-up, and curveball, whereas B can throw just three of these – B has no slider. But suppose B's pitches are far more reliable than A's, so that B succeeds in throwing these three pitches nearly every time B tries, whereas A succeeds

¹⁷² Austin (1956: note 10).

in throwing their four pitches only about half of the time. A dominates B with respect to the range of pitches they can throw, but this does not show that A is more powerful as a pitcher than B, since B's pitches are better along another dimension.

Another dimension along which abilities are assessed is their *robustness*. By this I mean the range of relevant facts that can be held fixed when truly ascribing that ability. To illuminate this notion, consider the sense in which Lewis says he can truly be ascribed the ability to speak Finnish.¹⁷³ This sense can be invoked by comparison with an ape – ‘an ape can't speak Finnish, but I can’ sounds true. Lewis identifies this sense with the fact that his speaking Finnish is compossible with facts about his larynx and nervous system (whereas an ape's speaking Finnish is not compossible with corresponding facts about the ape larynx and nervous system). However, this sense is clearly less robust than the sense in which Noora, a native Finnish speaker, is able to speak Finnish. We can truly say that Noora is able to speak Finnish even holding fixed facts about her training and upbringing, something that we cannot do with respect to Lewis; Lewis's speaking Finnish is not compossible with his lack of training.¹⁷⁴ In this sense, an ability is more robust to the extent that truly ascribing it does not require failing to attend to various facts about the agent's actual circumstances. While the notion of robustness can be usefully explicated on Lewis's compossibility framework, any adequate theory of ability ascriptions will also be able to elucidate this distinction. For example, on broadly counterfactual analyses, we can understand robustness in terms of how distant a world we must consider in evaluating a true ability ascription. A less robust ability requires more counterfactual suppositions about an agent's actual circumstances when being ascribed. We must consider more distant counterfactual circumstances if there is any true sense in which Lewis can speak Finnish. These would be worlds where the facts about Lewis's larynx and nervous system are the same, though facts about his training differ. By contrast, there is less distance needed to evaluate the counterfactual that makes true the claim that Noora can speak Finnish.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Lewis (1976: 150).

¹⁷⁴ Lewis (1976: 150).

¹⁷⁵ Why have I characterized robustness linguistically rather than talking about the nature of the abilities themselves? Simply, I don't know of any theoretically neutral way of characterizing robustness in terms of abilities themselves. At first I thought that the notion tracked the modal fragility of the possession of an ability itself. Consider a pitcher who has the ability to throw a curve, but this ability is not robust with respect to strong winds. (An ability to Φ is robust with respect to condition C just in case ‘S is able to Φ ’ is true even holding fixed the fact that C obtains when evaluating the ability ascription.) Some may think that this pitcher would lose the ability to throw a curve if there were strong winds, suggesting that robustness in my sense tracks the modal robustness or fragility of possession of an ability. But, at least

Having introduced the dimension of robustness, consider another pitching example. Pitchers A and B might both be able to throw a change-up, but B's ability to do so might be more robust. B might be able to do so even holding fixed strong winds or low temperatures or the fact that it is the bottom of the 9th inning with bases loaded, whereas truly ascribing this ability to A requires abstracting away from these conditions. Again, if A merely dominates B with respect to the range of pitches A can throw but not with respect to the robustness of those abilities, A is not thereby a more powerful pitcher than B.

A final dimension that I will mention is *quality*. Two people may have the ability to Φ , but the quality of their performances may differ considerably. What determines quality may vary considerably depending on the nature of the ability in question. In the case of the ability to throw a curveball, some of the relevant factors may be the speed at which it can be thrown, the amount of movement on the pitch, and the degree of control that the pitcher has over it. It is obvious that dominance with respect to the range of pitches that one can throw does not indicate being a more powerful pitcher if the quality of the pitches is allowed to differ.

I have proposed that there are at least four dimensions along which our abilities may be assessed – *range*, *reliability*, *robustness*, and *quality*. Each of these dimensions matters in assessing how abilities contribute to power. There may be more, but that will not matter for our purposes.

There is an interesting question about whether some of these dimensions are more fundamental than others. Some might propose to reduce all of them to just the range of abilities. Perhaps all of these dimensions can be accounted for by just being more fine-grained in attributing abilities. Consider, for example, the ability to throw a curveball. Maybe *quality* is captured by nothing more than having the ability to throw a X-mph curveball that breaks Y-ft in direction D. Robustness can be described as the ability to throw a curveball in circumstances C. And reliability is the ability to throw a curveball X% of the time.

While this question is important, I intend to remain neutral on it in what follows. Even if some dimensions of ability are more conspicuously described as constructions based on others, all should recognize some phenomena corresponding to each of the dimensions I have mentioned.

for compatibilists, this cannot be generally true. Lewis's example above gives an example – Lewis claims that there is a sense in which he possesses the ability to speak Finnish, even though some conditions obtain with respect to which his ability is not robust.

I propose to amend **Dominance** in the following way:

Dominance_{dimensions}: $\square \forall x \forall y$ (If x 's S -set of abilities dominates y 's S -set with respect to at least one dimension of ability and is at least equal with respect to every other dimension, then x is more powerful than y .)

This principle assumes that there is some way of satisfying the Specifying Dominance challenge which will allow us to center in on some restricted type of abilities, S , with respect to which we can accurately compare arbitrary agents. Given that, it then says that if A is better than B along one dimension and at least equal in all others with respect to S , then A is more powerful than B .

Notice that this principle is neutral with respect to how many dimensions there really are. It allows us to avoid the kinds of counterexamples we canvassed above. For example, if pitcher A throws more pitches than B but throws all of them with lower quality and reliability, **Dominance**_{dimensions} will not give the false result that A is a more powerful pitcher than B . While A dominates B with respect to the range of relevant abilities, A falls far short with respect to other dimensions.

Our question now is how to conceive of Über-God, given these distinctions we have made. We originally claimed that Über-God dominates God with respect to range of abilities, since Über-God has abilities that God lacks, like the ability to do evil. But it is not obvious that these abilities will be of the kind that will be required for the The Über-God Argument, or in other words that they will be part of God's S -set of abilities. For example, we examined the suggestion that the S -set is the set of all basic, qualitative abilities. If this were the S -set, then the ability to do evil or act irrationally would not be part of the S -set, since these abilities are not basic. One does evil by doing something else, some more basic action that is evil, like killing an innocent. But this is still not basic. Eventually one gets back to something like moving one's finger (for example, to thereby pull a trigger on a gun aimed at an innocent) or perhaps trying to move one's finger. Assuming God is not embodied, God's basic actions would have to be more like tryings or willings. So perhaps the basic ability Über-God has that God lacks is the ability to try to pull that trigger.

But now there is a potential problem. It may be argued that God does have the ability to try to pull that trigger. There may be worlds where God does pull that trigger. These worlds must

be worlds where pulling that trigger is not an evil act (e.g. the gun is not aimed at anyone). But this possibility, so goes the objection, is sufficient for God's being able to pull that trigger.

We may concede that God has the ability to pull that trigger. The important moral I wanted to draw from this line is that some of Über-God's abilities are more robust than God's. Even if God has the ability to pull that trigger, this ability is less robust than the corresponding ability of Über-God's. For it remains true that Über-God is able to pull that trigger even when you hold fixed all of the past and present facts that make it wrong to pull that trigger. By contrast, according to the metaphysical impossibility response, it cannot be true that God is able to pull that trigger if you hold these facts fixed when evaluating the ability ascription.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, even if there is a sense in which God is able to (try) to pull that trigger, this sense is less robust than the sense in which Über-God is able to (try) to pull that trigger.

My point here has not been to further explore the idea that the S-set should be the set of basic abilities, as we saw in section 2.1 that this idea will not work. Rather, it has been to point out that some of Über-God's abilities are more robust than God's corresponding abilities. This gives us more flexibility when attempting to meet the challenge of Specifying Dominance. By **Dominance**_{dimensions}, it suffices that the S-set is such that Über-God dominates God with respect to at least one dimension of those abilities, and they at least match along all other dimensions. We have identified two possible dimensions along which such dominance might occur: range and robustness.

The distinctions we have made in this section allow us to make Specifying Dominance more specific:

Specifying Dominance: The Über-God Argument requires that there is some set of abilities S such that (a) Über-God dominates God along at least one dimension and at least matches God along all other dimensions with respect to S; and (b) **Dominance**_{dimensions} is true when formulated in terms of S.

In this section, I argued that it is not just the *range* of one's abilities that contributes to overall power, but also the *reliability*, *robustness*, and *quality* of one's abilities. Elucidating these

¹⁷⁶ On the compossibility analysis, there is no possible world where these facts hold and God pulls that trigger. On the counterfactual analysis, one must go to a world in which these facts do not hold to find a world where God tries and succeeds in pulling that trigger.

notions leads to useful theorizing about abilities. It also allows us to become clearer about just what the Specifying Dominance challenge requires. Moreover, doing so showed that Über-God has a range of abilities that are more robust than God's corresponding abilities. This allows for more options in meeting the Specifying Dominance challenge. Finally, it allowed for an improvement to the dominance principle that avoids a wide range of counterexamples.

4.2.3 Modality and Maximality

In the last two sections we precisified and explored the challenges required to formulate a dominance principle about abilities that would sustain The Über-God Argument. The desired dominance principle would entail that our hypothetical Über-God is more powerful than plain old God. Yet there remains a potential objection to The Über-God Argument which raises issues about the modal status of **Maximality**.

Theists may regard Über-God as a metaphysical impossibility, and insist that this somehow blocks The Über-God Argument. This response has been proffered by several theists in response to arguments similar to the one I have formulated.¹⁷⁷ In this section, I reconstruct the best version of this objection that I can and critically assess it.

By our reasoning from section 4.2.2, we know that Über-God must at least match God with respect to reliability of abilities for The Über-God argument to succeed. Now theists can claim that God has the highest degree of reliability, namely what Pruss and Pearce (2012: 407) labeled 'perfect efficacy of will'. But there is an argument for the claim that there cannot be two beings with perfect efficacy of will, which I adopt from Baillie and Hagen (2008):

- (10) If there were two agents A and B with perfect efficacy of will, then it would be possible for A and B to have a conflict of will.
- (11) If A and B have a conflict of will, then either A wills that P but P is false or B wills that not-P but not-P is false.
- (12) So either the counterfactual 'if A were to will that P, then A would intentionally bring it about that P' would be false or 'if B were to will that not-P, then B would intentionally bring it about that not-P' would be false.
- (13) So either A or B would not have perfect efficacy of will.

¹⁷⁷ For example, Lembke (2012) and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2020: section 5).

(14) Therefore there cannot be two agents with perfect efficacy of will.

Having argued for the impossibility of two agents with perfect efficacy of will, the theist then claims that God exists with metaphysical necessity, and that therefore the existence of any other agent with perfect efficacy of will is metaphysically impossible. Since Über-God would have to at least match God with respect to reliability, Über-God is therefore metaphysically impossible. The objector finishes by claiming that omnipotence is only ruled out only if there is a metaphysically possible agent that is more powerful overall, and so The Über-God Argument fails.

I do not find this objection persuasive, but examining it will shed some light on **Maximality**, so it is worth discussing. I will first argue, non-concessively, that the argument for the metaphysical impossibility of Über-God does not work. This is important, since many have held that there cannot be two omnipotent agents on the basis of this kind of argument. Second, I will argue, more concessively, that even if Über-God is metaphysically impossible, The Über-God Argument is still promising given a strengthened version of **Maximality**.

On the first point, I dispute (10), which claims that two agents with perfect efficacy of will must lead to the possibility of conflicts of will, in which one wills that P and the other wills that not-P. Two agents with perfect efficacy of will could harmonize, so that their wills never conflict. It is not even implausible that God and Über-God would never have conflicts of will, despite that Über-God is not necessarily perfectly good. For suppose that Über-God was not perfect, but was essentially very good. If Über-God only made a few minor mistakes here and there, there is no reason to suppose God would possibly try to prevent Über-God's willings. God allows many creatures leeway to make even very significant moral mistakes. Thus, it is perfectly possible for there to be both a necessary God and an Über-God which never have any possible clashes of will.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Baillie and Hagen (2008: 28) argue that necessarily harmonized wills preclude omnipotence. But this does not affect my argument, since I have not claimed that either God or Über-God are omnipotent. Moreover, their argument is fallacious. They imagine two agents Barney and Fred with necessarily harmonized wills:

That this small stone moves from I at t is a possible state of affairs. [...]But if Fred and Barney's wills were essentially in agreement, the mere fact of Barney's willing that the stone remain at I at t would prevent Fred from having the power to move it.

But suppose that for some reason Über-God was metaphysically impossible. Would this overturn The Über-God Argument? That depends. **Maximality** is formulated with a possibility modal ‘ \diamond ’. Suppose we take this modal to express metaphysical possibility. In that case, what **Maximality** says is that, necessarily, an agent fails to be omnipotent if, in some metaphysically possible world, there is another agent that is more powerful. So construed, The Über-God Argument does require that Über-God is metaphysically possible.

But suppose we instead took ‘ \diamond ’ to express conceptual possibility. **Maximality** is, after all, plausibly a conceptual truth about the very concept of omnipotence.¹⁷⁹ If it is even conceptually possible that an agent is less powerful than another, that agent is not omnipotent, no matter what restrictions are placed on what is metaphysically possible by the necessary existence of God. By analogy, suppose that necessitarianism were true, so that this was the only metaphysically possible world. Further, suppose that humans are the most powerful agents that actually exist. Still, the mere conceptual possibility of agents far more powerful than humans is sufficient to show that no human is omnipotent, even if those agents are somehow not metaphysically possible.¹⁸⁰

What **Maximality** would then say is that, necessarily, if there is some merely conceptually possible world where Über-God is more powerful than God, then God is not omnipotent. The objector must now claim that Über-God is not even conceptually possible. Some theists may be inclined to believe this, perhaps on the basis of some sort of ontological argument to show that God’s existence is conceptually necessary, together with the above argument showing that the conceptual necessity of one perfectly efficacious agent would rule out the conceptual possibility of any others. But I tend to think it would be a hard line to sustain.¹⁸¹

All that follows from the fact that Barney wills that the stone remains in place (assuming Barney has a necessarily efficacious will) is that Fred will not move the stone. It is an example of the fatalist fallacy to conclude that therefore Fred cannot move the stone. It is compatible with the fact that Barney wills that the stone remain in place that if Fred were to will that the stone move, then Fred would bring it about that the stone moves (if Fred were to so will, then Barney would too). So Fred may still have a necessarily efficacious will.

¹⁷⁹ Oppy (2005: 78) calls the dominance principle “analytic”.

¹⁸⁰ This point is somewhat analogous to the critique of perfect being theology in Speaks (2018: 117-124). Speaks argues that the idea that God is the greatest possible being does not capture our conception of God unless conjoined with certain claims about the extent of what is possible. For if the greatest human somehow turned out to be the greatest possible being, it would turn out that God does not exist (rather than that the greatest human is God).

¹⁸¹ Alternatively, the objection might be that while Über-God’s existence is conceptually possible, there’s no conceptually possible world where God and Über-God co-exist, and so no conceptually possible

Lembke (2012: 432) argues that the conceptual version of the maximality principle is not true. Implicitly, by assuming that Über-God might be conceptually possible despite being metaphysically impossible, I have been assuming that conceivability might outstrip metaphysical possibility. On that sort of view, it seems plausible that certain mathematical truths are metaphysically but not conceptually necessary. Perhaps geometrical truths are synthetic a priori, a la Kant. Or certain mathematical axioms or independent hypotheses such as the Continuum Hypothesis could be metaphysically necessary, despite their negation being conceivable. If that's right, then it is also conceivable for someone to prove these mathematical truths. So it is conceivable that there is an Über-Duber-God that is just like Über-God but is also able to prove the Continuum Hypothesis. It follows that it is conceptually possible that there is an agent that is more powerful than Über-God, namely Über-Duber-God. According to the conceptual maximality principle, this should entail that Über-God is not omnipotent. But this entailment seems wrong, and furnishes a counterexample to the conceptual maximality principle.

I suggest that Über-God is conceivable in a stronger sense than the truth of the Continuum Hypothesis is conceivable. The Continuum Hypothesis is conceivable only in the sense of “negative conceivability”¹⁸². In other words, one cannot detect a contradiction in the proposition that the Continuum Hypothesis is true, or that there is an agent that proves the Continuum Hypothesis. On the other hand, Über-God is not only negatively conceivable, but also “positively conceivable”¹⁸³ – one can clearly and distinctly imagine the existence of Über-God. What the counterexample shows is that mere negative conceivability of something more powerful does not rule out omnipotence. But I still hold that the positive conceivability of something more powerful does.

This section assessed an objection to The Über-God Argument based on the alleged metaphysical impossibility of Über-God. My response was two-fold. First, I challenged the argument for the metaphysical impossibility of Über-God. Second, I argued that even if Über-God were metaphysically impossible, the Über-God Argument could still succeed as long

world where Über-God is more powerful than God. But I believe that cross-world comparisons of power are meaningful (as in the above thought experiment involving necessitarianism). So what the objector shows is that the maximality principle should allow for such comparisons. To be maximally explicit, we should specify that the quantifiers needn't range over only things in the same possible worlds.

¹⁸² Chalmers (2010: 143-144).

¹⁸³ Chalmers (2010: 143-144).

as Über-God is positively conceivable. This is because we can understand the possibility modal in **Maximality** as expressing positive conceptual possibility.¹⁸⁴

4.2.4 *Abilities and Liabilities*

There is one final important objection to the dominance principle. This objection is the claim that the possession of some abilities does not contribute to power but rather decreases it. Therefore, merely being dominated with respect to the range of one's abilities does not entail being less powerful, as the extra abilities could be ones that do not contribute to overall power.

Some proposed examples of abilities that do not contribute to power are the ability to find something difficult to do¹⁸⁵, the ability to be killed¹⁸⁶, and (most relevantly) the ability to do evil¹⁸⁷. I will call alleged examples of abilities that detract from overall power 'weakening abilities'. My response to the challenge of weakening abilities is two-fold. Some weakening abilities, I argue, are not abilities in the relevant sense of 'ability' used in the dominance principle. The rest of the weakening abilities, I argue, tend to decrease power only because they normally come along with a lack of other abilities. Because of this feature, they cannot constitute counterexamples to the dominance principle.

Take the following weakening abilities: the ability to be killed and the ability to involuntarily become completely impotent¹⁸⁸. Notice that these refer not to actions – things that are actively done by the agent – but rather to things that simply happen passively to the agent. The English expression 'able to' is not sensitive to this active/passive distinction. In other words, 'able to' can be used both to express *abilities*, i.e. capacities for actively performing actions, and *liabilities*, i.e. capacities for passively being affected by events. When I use 'abilities' in the context of **Dominance**_{dimensions}, I intend only to refer to abilities in this active sense. Therefore, examples of this kind, which involve liabilities rather than abilities, are not potential counterexamples to our dominance principle.

The rest of the weakening abilities, I maintain, do intrinsically contribute to overall power, but tend to be associated with a lack of power because they tend to come along with a

¹⁸⁴ P is positively conceptually possible iff it is positively conceivable that P.

¹⁸⁵ Leftow (2009: 189).

¹⁸⁶ Lembke (2012: 434).

¹⁸⁷ Lembke (2012: 435-437) and Pruss and Pearce (2012: 411-412), among others.

¹⁸⁸ Lembke (2012: 433).

lack of other abilities. The ability to find something difficult to do normally comes along with an inability to find that thing easy to do. Similarly, some argue that the ability to do evil does not contribute to power because those with the ability to do evil are unable to ensure that they do not exercise this ability.¹⁸⁹ Notice that in order to constitute a counterexample to **Dominance**_{dimensions}, we need two agents A and B, such that A has strictly more abilities than B (and at least equals B along all other dimensions of ability), but is not more powerful than B. There are two ways that these weakening abilities might be used to try to construct such a counterexample.

First, we could give A the extra weakening ability without giving A the associated lack of ability. But then it seems to me that A really is more powerful than B. An agent with the ability to do something with difficulty and with ease is more powerful than the agent only able to do it with ease, all else equal.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, an agent able to do evil and with perfect control over the exercise of this ability is more powerful than the agent who is unable to fall into sin only because of a lack of the ability to sin entirely, all else equal.

Second, we could give A the weakening ability and the associated lack of ability, but then we must also give B the associated lack of ability, so that A actually dominates B with respect to range of abilities. But then again it seems that A is more powerful than B. An agent able to do something with difficulty and unable to do it with ease is more powerful, all else equal, than an agent unable to do it with difficulty or with ease. Better to be able to do something with difficulty than not to be able to do it at all.

I have argued that the proposed weakening abilities are either not weakening or not abilities, and therefore do not constitute counterexamples to our dominance principle. But perhaps the real issue is not that the ability to do evil is a counterexample to the dominance principle, but that this ability necessarily comes along with a lack of another ability. If that were correct, and the concept of Über-God would be incoherent. For Über-God is meant to have all of God's abilities and more, including the ability to do evil. But God is able to ensure that God remains sinless, whereas, some may argue, Über-God cannot have this ability and have the

¹⁸⁹ Lembke (2012: 436-437). Notably Anselm (*Proslogion*: ch. VII) makes a similar argument:

For, he who is capable of these things is capable of what is not for his good, and of what he ought not to do; and the more capable of them he is, the more power have adversity and perversity against him; and the less has he himself against these.

¹⁹⁰ Some may find this combination of abilities incoherent. In that case, we can simply skip to the second way of trying to construct a counterexample in this case.

ability to do evil. In response, there is nothing conceptually impossible about an agent that has the ability to do evil and also has perfect control over the exercise of the ability, lacking any inclination to exercise it.¹⁹¹

I conclude that these considerations do not pose any new, significant challenge to The Über-God Argument.

4.2.5 Prospects for The Über-God Argument

In section 4.2 we formulated The Über-God Argument, an argument that aims to show that God cannot be omnipotent and lack certain kinds of abilities, therefore taking aim at the heart of **MIR**. The argument goes that if God lacks the relevant abilities, God could be dominated with respect to the range of abilities by Über-God, and therefore could not be omnipotent. We then subjected The Über-God Argument to four serious objections:

- (1) That Über-God cannot have all of God's abilities and more, and that there is no relevant sense in which Über-God dominates God with respect to abilities.
- (2) That dominance with respect to range of abilities is not sufficient for being more powerful, since there are other dimensions of ability.
- (3) That Über-God is not possible and that this undermines the argument.
- (4) That dominance with respect to range of abilities is not sufficient for being more powerful, since some abilities detract from power.

My assessment after reviewing these objections is that The Über-God Argument is still quite promising. The third and fourth objections can be refuted fairly persuasively. The second objection proved useful for refining the dominance principle, but did not prove to be an insurmountable obstacle. The first objection is the most basic, but also the most difficult and serious. We made several attempts to locate the relevant sense in which Über-God dominates God, and attempted to show that dominance in this sense is sufficient for being more powerful

¹⁹¹ Note that this does not require what I argued for in chapter 3, that God can have the ability to do evil despite being necessarily good. It only requires that someone can have the ability to do evil and the ability to never be tempted to sin. This is compatible with it being metaphysically possible that they sin.

overall. While we were not ultimately successful, some progress was made in working towards what the solution might look like. And I remain confident that it can be done, because there does seem to be an intuitive sense in which an agent can dominate another with respect to ability. To finish the task of defending The Über-God Argument, we must locate the relevant dominance thesis. Doing so promises not only to yield insights in this area of philosophy of religion, but also to be a rich source of insights about the nature of abilities and power.

4.3 The Unter-God Argument

The Über-God Argument is a deductive argument against the claim at the heart of **MIR**, that God can be both omnipotent and unable to do various things like sin or act irrationally. By contrast, The Unter-God Argument is best viewed as an explanatory challenge for **MIR**.¹⁹² The challenge begins by imagining an agent just like God with respect to abilities, but for whom it is metaphysically impossible to move red objects. Call this agent ‘Unter-God’. It seems clear that Unter-God is not omnipotent, on account of their inability to move red objects. However, the challenge points out that a generalized version of **MIR** would appear to rule out this conclusion:

The Generalized Metaphysical Impossibility Response (GEN-MIR):

- (1) Omnipotence does not require the ability to do the metaphysically impossible.
- (2) It is metaphysically impossible that $A \Phi$'s.

Therefore it is consistent that:

- (3) A is both omnipotent and unable to Φ .

If the line of reasoning schematized by **GEN-MIR** is sound in general, then it would also show that the inability to move red objects does not rule out Unter-God's claim to omnipotence. So it cannot be that this sort of reasoning is sound in general.

The proponent of **MIR** therefore seems to bear the burden of explaining why **MIR** should be accepted for the relevant instances of ‘ Φ ’ even though **GEN-MIR** should be rejected for various instances of ‘ A ’ and ‘ Φ ’. One instance of this challenge would be to explain why

¹⁹² This is my own reconstruction of the argument of Hill (2014: 101-105).

Unter-God's inability to move red objects rules out Unter-God's claim to omnipotence, even though God's inability to do evil does not rule out God's claim to omnipotence. The proponent of The Unter-God Argument claims that the proponent of **MIR** either cannot or does not discharge this explanatory burden, and that this is a cost of the view.

4.3.1 Attempts to Meet the Explanatory Burden

In this section we will briefly consider two attempts to discharge the explanatory burden represented by The Unter-God Argument. Such an explanation would consist of a plausible, principled, necessary and sufficient condition for when an inability rules out omnipotence, for any arbitrary inability, plus an argument that the relevant incapacities that apply to God do not meet this condition, and that the inability to move red objects does meet this condition.

One account that is plausible appeals to dominance considerations. Perhaps an inability A rules out being omnipotent just in case an agent without A could be dominated in ability. Unfortunately, this account will probably not be of much help to the proponent of **MIR**. The account gets the desired results only if Unter-God can be dominated by God, but God cannot be dominated by Über-God. Showing the former dominance claim would require solving the main problem with The Über-God Argument. Namely, it would require specifying the exact sense in which one agent can dominate another with respect to abilities, and showing that the corresponding dominance principle is true. Thus, it would involve rebutting The Unter-God Argument only by vindicating The Über-God Argument.

Another account with some plausibility is that an inability A is consistent with omnipotence just in case possession of omnipotence conceptually entails possession of A. In other words, being maximally powerful requires having all the abilities that are consistent with being maximally powerful. This account succeeds at explaining why Unter-God cannot be omnipotent – omnipotence does not conceptually entail the inability to move red objects, so an omnipotent being cannot possess this limitation. This account too, however, appears unfriendly to the proponent of **MIR**. To finish discharging the explanatory burden, the proponent of **MIR** must now argue that omnipotence conceptually entails the inability to do evil, act irrationally,

believe falsely, and all of the other inabilities they posit God has.¹⁹³ But the problem is that, if God has these inabilities, this seems to be due to God's necessarily being perfectly good, perfectly rational, omniscient, and so on. They do not seem to be due to God's omnipotence. But this is exactly what the proponent of **MIR** must claim.

One could attempt to sustain the claim that omnipotence conceptually entails all the relevant inabilities as follows. Pruss and Pearce (2012: 409-411) argue that omnipotence entails perfect freedom of will, and that perfect freedom of will entails both perfect rationality and omniscience. And if morality is somehow derived from rationality (a big 'if', to be sure), then perhaps perfect rationality and omniscience together entail perfect goodness. Now one can argue that each of these properties entails a corresponding inability – perfect rationality entails being unable to act irrationally, perfect goodness entails being unable to do evil, and so on. So all of the relevant inabilities are allegedly derived from omnipotence.

But there are at least two serious problems with this line of reasoning. First, the perfections in question do not entail the relevant inabilities. Being perfectly rational does not entail the inability to act irrationally, for example. Even if perfect rationality involves the disposition to choose a rational option in any possible situation, it does not follow that one is unable, in any situation, to choose a less than perfectly rational option. It may still be that if one were to try to choose an irrational option, one would succeed. If anything entails these inabilities it is not the mere possession of these perfections, but rather the *necessary* possession of these perfections. So, at best, necessary omnipotence entails the inabilities. But this does not show that these inabilities are compatible with omnipotence, according to the account we are considering. Instead, this account, plus the claim that necessary omnipotence entails these inabilities, entails that necessary omnipotence is impossible. The second problem is that even necessary perfect rationality, for example, does not entail the inability to act irrationally. I argued this point at length in chapter 3.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ In fact, this would resolve not just The Unter-God Argument but also The Über-God Argument, and vindicate the conclusion of **MIR**. For it would directly show not only that these inabilities are compatible with omnipotence, but that they are required by it. In my view this reflects just how tall of an order it is.

¹⁹⁴ There is also a third problem, which is that it is far from clear that perfect freedom of will entails perfect rationality. Pruss and Pearce (2012: 411) do not really argue for this claim, so much as assert it. Many or perhaps all theories of free will do not seem to support this entailment. For example, if perfect freedom was just always having the ability to do otherwise, then it would not at all seem to entail perfect rationality. However, there is no room for a sufficiently thorough examination of the relation between freedom and rationality here.

4.3.2 Prospects for The Unter-God Argument

The Unter-God argument is less ambitious than The Über-God Argument. It concludes only that there is a cost to accepting **MIR**. I have not argued that this cost is overwhelming or conclusive. The cost could also be discharged by meeting the explanatory challenge generated by The Unter-God Argument. I have not argued that the explanatory challenge cannot be met. All that I suggest is that the challenge seems quite difficult to meet, and that the attempts just examined do not work.

But because The Unter-God Argument is less ambitious than The Über-God Argument, it is also more tractable. There is a difficult theoretical obstacle still outstanding to complete The Über-God Argument, namely figuring out the proper dominance thesis and principle. No comparable obstacle stands in the way of The Unter-God Argument. This shows that accepting **MIR** to resolve the conflict between omnipotence and the necessity of other divine attributes comes with a cost. Whether a more definitive conclusion about **MIR** can be reached remains to be seen.

4.4 Conclusion of Chapter 4 and the Dissertation

In the final chapter, I developed and assessed two arguments against **MIR**, which I take to be the main competitor to denying **Poss-Ability** as a way of reconciling omnipotence with God's other essential attributes. The conclusions I came to are as follows: The Über-God Argument is promising, but there remains important theoretical work to be accomplished to complete the argument. The Unter-God Argument successfully shows that there is an explanatory cost in accepting **MIR**. While these two arguments are not conclusive by themselves, I take them, together with the arguments of chapter 3, to constitute a strong cumulative case that theists should deny **Poss-Ability**.

The headline conclusions of the dissertation can now be stated very briefly. On theism, catastrophic evils are impossible, and therefore **C&P** is false, but God is nevertheless able to bring about catastrophic evils, and therefore **Poss-Ability** is false as well.

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