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## A NEW DEFENCE OF ANSELMIAN THEISM

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*Anselmian theists, for whom God is the being than which no greater can be thought, usually infer that he is an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being. Critics have attacked these claims by numerous distinct arguments, such as the paradox of the stone, the argument from God's inability to sin, and the argument from evil. Anselmian theists have responded to these arguments by constructing an independent response to each. This way of defending Anselmian theism is uneconomical. I seek to establish a new defence which undercuts almost all the existing arguments against Anselmian theism at once. In developing this defence, I consider the possibility that the Anselmian God is not an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Anselmian theism, sometimes also called 'perfect being theology',<sup>1</sup> is arguably the most widely accepted form of monotheism. Its core thesis can be expressed as follows:

*The Anselmian Thesis.* God is the being than which no greater can be thought.

Most Anselmian theists hold that this thesis entails

*The OmniGod Thesis.* God is an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.

The idea is that if God is the being than which no greater can be thought, then he is not merely knowledgeable, powerful and benevolent, but also maximally knowledgeable, maximally powerful and maximally benevolent.<sup>2</sup> Critics of Anselmian theism have spent the better part of nine hundred years trying to undermine it by introducing numerous distinct arguments against the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.

<sup>1</sup> For defences of perfect-being theology, see, e.g., T.V. Morris, 'Perfect Being Theology', *Noûs*, 21 (1987), pp. 19–30; K.A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh UP, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> As is common practice, I use the pronoun 'he' to refer to God. This should not, however, be taken to imply that God has a gender.

Anselmian theists have attempted to provide responses to these arguments case by case. That is, they have examined each of the arguments independently and in every case they have maintained that the argument in question fails to refute the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being. This approach seems, however, to have complicated the debate on Anselmian theism further, causing endless disputes between opponents and proponents. If one's ultimate goal is to defend Anselmian theism, the approach is particularly uneconomical.

My aim in this paper is quite ambitious. I try to establish a radically new and more economical defence of Anselmian theism, a defence which undercuts existing arguments against Anselmian theism *all at once*. The paper has the following structure. In §II, I identify key assumptions about, and offer clarifications of, both the Anselmian thesis and the omniGod thesis. In §III, I classify existing arguments against Anselmian theism into three types. In §IV, I focus on the case by case approach to Anselmian theism and explain its inefficiency. In §V, I introduce a new defence of Anselmian theism which undercuts all the arguments at once. In §VI, I explore the possibility that the Anselmian God is not an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being. In §VII, I discuss possible objections to my response. §VIII concludes.

## II. THE ANSELMIAN THESIS AND THE OMNIGOD THESIS

Before considering the arguments against Anselmian theism, I shall identify several key assumptions about both the Anselmian thesis and the omniGod thesis, and clarify some related issues.

First, the Anselmian thesis. This thesis is commonly attributed to Anselm's *Proslogion*. In that book, Anselm defines God as 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' or 'that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', and constructs on the basis of this definition the ontological argument for his existence. Interestingly, Anselm was not the first person to define God in these terms. Seneca, for example, states that God's magnitude is that than which nothing greater can be thought. To take another example, Augustine says that God is something *quo esse aut cogitari melius nihil possit* ('than which nothing better is able to be or be thought').<sup>3</sup> I call the version of monotheism which I defend in this paper 'Anselmian theism' because it is based on the Anselmian thesis, the core of Anselm's theological system. I do not, however, imply by the use of the term that Anselmian theism is entirely

<sup>3</sup> See B. Davies, 'Anselm and the Ontological Argument', in B. Davies and B. Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 157–78, at p. 159. For historical information on Anselmian theism, see also B. Leftow, 'Concepts of God', in E. Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Vol. iv, pp. 93–102.

compatible with everything that Anselm himself says. It might well be the case that, ultimately, the version of theism that I defend is not something that Anselm would endorse.

Secondly, what I call ‘the omniGod thesis’ specifies three of God’s attributes: omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence. The thesis does not imply that these are God’s only attributes or even that they are all of his main attributes. Indeed, most proponents of the omniGod thesis think that God has many other important attributes, such as independence, timelessness, incorporeality, immutability, omnipresence, and so on. In this paper I set aside these attributes for the sake of simplicity. Also, borrowing Peter Millican’s terminology, I refer to the attribute set that consists of omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence as ‘omniperfection’.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that most proponents of the omniGod thesis hold, in addition, that God is *necessarily* omniscient, *necessarily* omnipotent and *necessarily* omnibenevolent, because a being that is omnipotent by necessity is greater than a being that is omnipotent merely by accident.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I assume that God’s attributes are all necessary, even though I omit the word ‘necessary’ when I talk about them.

Following the majority of Anselmian theists, I assume in addition that the overall greatness of a being supervenes on the greatness of its knowledge, power and benevolence. This entails that the overall maximal greatness of God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, also supervenes on his knowledge, power and benevolence. This assumption is an essential link between the Anselmian thesis and the omniGod thesis.

### III. THREE TYPES OF ARGUMENT AGAINST ANSELMIAN THEISM

How can one construct an argument against Anselmian theism? The most effective way would be to analyse attributes which Anselmian theists ascribe to God and try to show that there cannot exist a being that has all of them. Thus Anthony Kenny writes ‘anyone who is interested in the question of the existence of God has to study first of all the divine attributes; for to say that God exists is to say that there is something that has the divine attributes’.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> P. Millican, ‘The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm’s Argument’, *Mind*, 113 (2004), pp. 437–76.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen T. Davis is among a small number of philosophers who reject the necessity of God’s attributes: see S.T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). Nelson Pike also contends that perhaps God is omnipotent in the actual world but not in all possible worlds: see N. Pike, ‘Omnipotence and God’s Ability to Sin’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969), pp. 208–16.

<sup>6</sup> A.J.P. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 5.

The Anselmian thesis is not, however, very informative; it says only that God is the being than which no greater can be thought. It does not specify exactly which attributes the greatness of God subsumes. Hence opponents of Anselmian theism typically focus on the more informative omniGod thesis.

There are literally dozens of existing arguments against Anselmian theism, and numerous works have been published on each of them. Yet it can be recognized that all of these arguments target God's attributes, and they all fall into one of the following three types.

*Type A: Arguments which purport to show the incoherence of the divine attributes*

Arguments of the first type purport to show that at least one of the divine attributes specified in the omniGod thesis is internally incoherent. From the internal incoherence of at least one of the divine attributes, the opponents of the omniGod thesis deduce that there cannot exist an omnipotent God. Given that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis and that there cannot exist an omnipotent God, the arguments conclude that Anselmian theism is false.

The paradox of the stone is a classic example of this kind.<sup>7</sup> It goes as follows. Either God can create a stone that he cannot lift or he cannot create a stone that he cannot lift. If he can create a stone that he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent. If he cannot create a stone that he cannot lift, again he is not omnipotent. Hence the concept of omnipotence is internally incoherent; no one, not even God, can be omnipotent. If there is no being that is omnipotent, then the omniGod thesis is false, and accordingly Anselmian theism is false.

To take another example, Patrick Grim purports to prove the incoherence of omniscience by showing that there is no set of all truths.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of the paradox of the stone, see H.G. Frankfurt, 'The Logic of Omnipotence', *Philosophical Review*, 73 (1964), pp. 262–3; G.I. Mavrodes, 'Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence', *Philosophical Review*, 72 (1963), pp. 221–3; C.W. Savage, 'The Paradox of the Stone', *Philosophical Review*, 76 (1967), pp. 74–9; J.H. Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and against Beliefs in God* (Cambridge UP, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> P. Grim, 'There Is No Set of All Truths', *Analysis*, 44 (1984), pp. 206–8; 'On Sets and Scenarios: a Reply to Menzel', *Analysis*, 46 (1986), pp. 186–91; 'On Omniscience and a "Set of All Truths": a Reply to Bringsjord', *Analysis*, 50 (1990), pp. 271–6; *The Incomplete Universe: Totality, Knowledge and Truth* (MIT Press, 1991); 'The Being That Knew Too Much', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47 (2000), pp. 141–54; 'Impossibility Arguments', in M. Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 199–214. For discussions of Grim's argument, see J.E. Abbruzzese, 'The Coherence of Omniscience: a Defence', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 41 (1997), pp. 25–34; J. Beall, 'A Neglected Response to the Grim Result', *Analysis*, 60 (2000), pp. 38–41; R. Cartwright, 'Speaking of Everything', *Noûs*, 28 (1994), pp. 1–20; G. Mar, 'Why "Cantorian" Arguments against the Existence of God Do Not Work', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 33 (1993), pp. 429–42; A. Plantinga and P. Grim, 'Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: an Exchange', *Philosophical Studies*, 71 (1993), pp. 267–306.

Suppose, for the sake of *reductio*, that there is a set  $T$  of all truths;  $P(T)$  is its powerset. There exists then a unique truth corresponding to each element  $s_i$  of  $P(T)$ . For example, to each  $s_i$  there corresponds a unique truth ' $s_i \in P(T)$ '. This means that there are at least as many elements of  $T$  as there are elements of  $P(T)$ . This contradicts Cantor's theorem, according to which the powerset of any set contains more elements than the set itself. Hence, Grim says, there is no set of all truths. Given that omniscience is supposed to subsume all truths, he concludes that the concept of omniscience is internally incoherent. If this is true, then the omniGod thesis is false, and accordingly Anselmian theism is false.

*Type B: Arguments which purport to show inconsistency between the divine attributes*

Suppose theists can refute all arguments of the first type and manage to demonstrate that omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence are all internally coherent. Does that mean Anselmian theism is thereby secured? The answer is 'No'. Arguments of the second type attempt to show that even if each of God's attributes is internally coherent, at least some of them are mutually inconsistent. If some of God's attributes are mutually inconsistent, then again the omniGod thesis is false and Anselmian theism is false.

Probably the best known argument of this type is the so-called argument from God's inability to sin, which purports to show that omnipotence and omnibenevolence are mutually inconsistent. Suppose God is omnibenevolent. He should then be unable to perform morally wrong or sinful actions, such as killing hundreds of innocent children. Still, if God is omnipotent, he must be able to perform such an action; after all, even we can do so in principle. Therefore God cannot be omnipotent and omnibenevolent at the same time, and accordingly the omniGod thesis is false.<sup>9</sup> Given that the omniGod thesis is false, again Anselmian theism is false.

To take another example, David Blumenfeld tries to show that omniscience and omnipotence are mutually inconsistent.<sup>10</sup> If God is omniscient, then he must understand fully what fear and frustration are. Blumenfeld says, however, that given a modest form of concept empiricism, an omnipotent God cannot understand fear and frustration fully, because, being

<sup>9</sup> For discussions of this argument, see T.J. Mawson, 'Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection are Compatible: a Reply to Morrision', *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002), pp. 215–23; W. Morrision, 'Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are they Compatible?', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), pp. 143–60, 'Omnipotence and the Anselmian God', *Philo*, 4 (2001), pp. 7–20, and 'Are Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection Compatible? Reply to Mawson', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), pp. 441–9; Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin'.

<sup>10</sup> D. Blumenfeld, 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes', *Philosophical Studies*, 34 (1978), pp. 91–103.

omnipotent, he cannot experience what it is like to suffer fear and frustration.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Blumenfeld concludes, the omniGod thesis is false, and Anselmian theism is also false.

*Type C: Arguments which purport to show the inconsistency between the set of the divine attributes and a contingent fact*

Suppose theists can refute all arguments of types A and B and manage to demonstrate that omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence are all internally coherent and mutually consistent. Does that mean that Anselmian theism is thereby secured? The answer is again 'No'. Arguments of the third type purport to show that even if God's attributes are internally coherent and mutually consistent, the set of these attributes is mutually inconsistent with a certain contingent fact. If this is true, then again the omniGod thesis is false and Anselmian theism is also false.

The most prominent example of such an argument, which also happens to be *the* most prominent argument against the existence of God, is the argument from evil.<sup>12</sup> It seems obvious that as a matter of contingent fact there is evil in the actual world. However, if God is omniperfect, there should be no evil. If God is omniscient, then he must know that there is evil in the actual world; if God is omnipotent, then he must be able to eliminate evil from the actual world; and if he is omnibenevolent, he must be willing

<sup>11</sup> For defences of similar arguments, see S. Bringsjord, 'Grim on Logic and Omniscience', *Analysis*, 49 (1989), pp. 186–9; M. Martin, 'A Disproof of the God of the Common Man', *Question*, 7 (1974), pp. 115–24, repr. in M. Martin and R. Monnier (eds), *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2003), pp. 232–41 (page references to reprinting); M. Martin, 'Conflicts Between the Divine Attributes', in his *Atheism: a Philosophical Justification* (Temple UP, 1990), repr. in Martin and Monnier (eds), *The Impossibility of God*, pp. 242–57 (page references to reprinting); M. Martin, 'Omniscience and Incoherency', in G. Holmstrom-Hintikka (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy and Modern Times* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 17–34; J. Lachs, 'Omniscience', *Dialogue*, 1 (1963), pp. 400–2; J. Lachs, 'Professor Prior on Omniscience', *Philosophy*, 37 (1963), pp. 361–4. For discussions of these arguments, see T. Alter, 'On Two Alleged Conflicts Between Divine Attributes', *Faith and Philosophy*, 19 (2002), pp. 47–57; M. Beaty and C. Taliaferro, 'God and Concept Empiricism', *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 6 (1990), pp. 97–105; Y. Nagasawa, 'Divine Omniscience and Experience: a Reply to Alter', *Ars Disputandi*, 3 (2003), <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000098/index.html>, and *God and Phenomenal Consciousness* (Cambridge UP, 2008); A.N. Prior, 'Rejoinder to Professor Lachs on Omniscience', *Philosophy*, 37 (1963), pp. 365–6.

<sup>12</sup> According to Daniel Hill, more than 3600 articles and books have been written on the problem of evil since 1960 alone. See D. Hill, 'What's New in Philosophy of Religion?', *Philosophy Now*, 21 (1998), pp. 30–3, at p. 32. For critical assessments of the argument from evil, see, e.g., M.M. Adams and R.M. Adams (eds), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford UP, 1990); J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); M.L. Peterson (ed.), *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings* (Notre Dame UP, 1992); A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). There are two versions of the argument from evil, the logical version and the evidential version. I set aside the evidential version because my focus here is on deductive arguments against Anselmian theism.

to eliminate evil from the actual world. Therefore, the argument concludes, given that there is evil in the actual world, an omnipotent God does not exist, and accordingly Anselmian theism is false.<sup>13</sup> The argument from evil is often regarded as a criticism of theism in general, but that is not correct. The argument is directed specifically against theists who believe in the existence of God as defined in the omniGod thesis (or theses which are sufficiently similar to it). J.L. Mackie, one of the best known proponents of the argument from evil, makes this point by saying ‘The problem of evil, in the sense in which I shall be using the phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good’.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Michael Martin, another opponent of Anselmian theism, writes ‘the problem of evil presumably does not show that God does not exist when “God” refers to some being that is either not omnipotent or not completely benevolent’.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. THE CASE BY CASE APPROACH TO ARGUMENTS AGAINST ANSELMIAN THEISM

As I noted earlier, over the last nine hundred years or so, Anselmian theists, including Anselm himself, have responded to arguments against their position case by case.<sup>16</sup> That is, they have tried to analyse each of the arguments independently and explain exactly how it fails. For example, in response to the paradox of the stone, some have tried to show that the paradox can be blocked by limiting the scope of our ordinary definition of omnipotence,<sup>17</sup> while others have tried to show that the paradox is based on a misleading interpretation of the second horn of the dilemma.<sup>18</sup> In response to Grim’s argument against omniscience, some have maintained that the argument does not work if we adopt an alternative set theory,<sup>19</sup> while others have

<sup>13</sup> Another argument of type C is what I call the ‘argument from inferiority’. According to this argument, the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God is inconsistent with the fact that the actual world is not the best possible world. For discussions of this argument see, e.g., R.M. Adams, ‘Must God Create the Best?’, *Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972), pp. 317–32; K.J. Kraay, ‘Creation, World-Actualization, and God’s Choice Among Possible Worlds’, *Philosophy Compass* (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> Mackie, ‘Evil and Omnipotence’, *Mind*, 64 (1955), pp. 200–12, at p. 200.

<sup>15</sup> Martin, ‘A Disproof of the God of the Common Man’, p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> For Anselm’s case by case approach see B. Leftow, ‘Anselm’s Perfect-Being Theology’, in Davies and Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, pp. 132–56, at pp. 150–3.

<sup>17</sup> Mavrodes, ‘Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence’.

<sup>18</sup> Savage, ‘The Paradox of the Stone’.

<sup>19</sup> Mar, ‘Why “Cantorian” Arguments against the Existence of God Do Not Work’; Simmons, ‘On an Argument against Omniscience’.

claimed that the argument is self-defeating.<sup>20</sup> In response to the argument from God's inability to sin, some have tried to show that inability to perform morally wrong actions is not a limitation in power,<sup>21</sup> while others have claimed that the argument fails once the distinction between strong actualization and weak actualization is introduced.<sup>22</sup> In response to the argument for the inconsistency between omnipotence and omniscience, some have tried to show that the argument is based on a limited understanding of God's epistemic capability,<sup>23</sup> while others have maintained that the version of concept empiricism on which the argument relies is vulnerable to counter-examples.<sup>24</sup> In response to the argument from evil, some have tried to show that the argument fails if the libertarian conception of freedom and various other assumptions about possible worlds are accepted,<sup>25</sup> while others have claimed that the argument overlooks God's purpose in not preventing evil in the actual world.<sup>26</sup>

The most obvious weakness of the case by case approach is that it is not very efficient as a defence of Anselmian theism. The history of the debate on the cogency of Anselmian theism has been an endless exchange of arguments and counter-arguments between opponents and proponents of the position. A paradigm can be found in the debate on the coherence of omnipotence. When opponents of Anselmian theism introduce an argument against the coherence of omnipotence, proponents typically respond to it by introducing a revised definition of omnipotence which undercuts the argument. Opponents then construct a new argument which undermines even the revised definition, and proponents then respond to it by providing a further revision of the revised definition of omnipotence, and so forth. As the debate advances, the definition becomes more and more complex, and both proponents and opponents of Anselmian theism move away from the original aim of the debate, namely, to evaluate the cogency of Anselmian theism. Looking at this situation, Wes Morriston<sup>27</sup> remarks

In recent years, definitions of omnipotence have become more and more complicated. Indeed, they frequently employ so much technical apparatus and contain so many

<sup>20</sup> Abbruzzese, 'The Coherence of Omniscience: a Defence'; Plantinga in Plantinga and Grim, 'Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange'.

<sup>21</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, in M.J. Charlesworth, *St Anselm's Proslogion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 101–55.

<sup>22</sup> T.P. Flint and A.J. Freddoso, 'Maximal Power', in A.J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame UP, 1983), pp. 81–113.

<sup>23</sup> Alter, 'On Two Alleged Conflicts Between Divine Attributes'.

<sup>24</sup> Nagasawa, *God and Phenomenal Consciousness*.

<sup>25</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*.

<sup>26</sup> J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>27</sup> Morriston, 'Omnipotence and the Power to Choose: a Reply to Wiclenberg', *Faith and Philosophy*, 19 (2002), pp. 358–67, at p. 358.



subordinate clauses and qualifications, that it is natural to wonder whether they have much to do with what an ordinary person might mean by saying that God is all-powerful.

I do not claim that the case by case approach is *always* unhelpful. In some cases, especially when an argument is obviously fallacious, it is effective to provide a specific objection to eliminate the argument right away. However, if one's ultimate goal is to defend Anselmian theism, the approach is not economical. Instead of settling the debate, the approach only invites further claims and ideas which are often contentious independently of whether Anselmian theism is itself cogent.

In what follows, I try to develop a radically new and more economical response to Anselmian theism, one that aims to eliminate the force of the arguments against it *all at once*. In the course of developing the new response, I consider the possibility of an Anselmian God who is not omniperfect.

## V. THE MAXIMALGOD THESIS

In the previous section, I extracted the basic structures of several arguments against Anselmian theism and classified them into three basic types. In order to establish a new response that undercuts all of these arguments at once, it would be helpful to extract an even more general structure which is common to these arguments. I submit that all the arguments of the three types have in common the following structure:

1. If Anselmian theism is true, then the Anselmian thesis is true
2. If the Anselmian thesis is true, then the omniGod thesis is true
3. If the omniGod thesis is true, then God is an omniperfect being
4. There cannot be an omniperfect being
5. Therefore the omniGod thesis is false
6. Therefore the Anselmian thesis is false
7. Therefore Anselmian theism is false.

The argument is formally valid and the first three premises appear innocuous. (1) expresses merely the commitment of Anselmian theism to the Anselmian thesis. (2) asserts the common assumption that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis. (3) imparts the content of the omniGod thesis. Thus (4) appears to be the only contentious premise in this formulation.

I have shown that different arguments try to establish (4) in different ways. Arguments of type A try to establish (4) by showing that at least one member of the attribute set comprising omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence is internally incoherent. Arguments of type B try to

establish (4) by showing that some of these attributes are mutually inconsistent. Arguments of type C try to establish (4) by showing that the attribute set is inconsistent with a contingent fact. I have also remarked that Anselmian theists have tried to defend their position by showing that each one of these arguments fails to establish (4). This means that both proponents and opponents in these disputes have concentrated their efforts solely on the cogency of (4). What I think is more interesting is, however, whether the arguments against Anselmian theism really go through if (4) is true. I contend that this is far from obvious, for there is no reason to accept (2).

As I have noted, (2) is based on the idea that the Anselmian thesis entails the *omniGod* thesis. This idea is widely accepted among philosophers of religion. For instance, Daniel J. Hill defends the view that ‘possession of [the property of being maximally great] implies possession of the traditional attributes of a divine being: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, perfect goodness, eternity, maximal beauty, as well as possession of some properties that divine beings share with many other beings’.<sup>28</sup> To take another example, Thomas V. Morris writes ‘Standardly employed, perfect being theology issues in a conception of God as a necessary existent being who has such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, eternity, and aseity as essential properties’, and ‘it is a commitment of many Anselmians that the divine perfections are all necessarily co-exemplified’.<sup>29</sup>

The claim that the Anselmian thesis entails the *omniGod* thesis is, however, ungrounded. First, as far as I know, there is no compelling philosophical argument to support the entailment. Both proponents and opponents of Anselmian theism have generally taken it for granted without troubling to argue for it. Secondly, the entailment lacks support from the religious canon. The Bible talks about the significant extent of God’s knowledge, power and benevolence, but it says nowhere that God is omniperfect.

My new response to the arguments against Anselmian theism is to replace the *omniGod* thesis with the following thesis:

*The MaximalGod Thesis.* God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.

The *maximalGod* thesis is that while God is certainly very knowledgeable, very powerful and very benevolent, he might or might not be omniperfect. Given the *maximalGod* thesis, we can say that the arguments against Anselmian theism I have mentioned all fail at premise (2) because the Anselmian thesis entails only the *maximalGod* thesis, which is more modest

<sup>28</sup> Hill, *Divinity and Maximal Greatness* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 246.

<sup>29</sup> Morris, ‘Perfect Being Theology’, p. 25, and *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Cornell UP, 1986), p. 83.

than the omniGod thesis. Although the maximalGod thesis is consistent with the omniGod thesis, it does not imply that God is unquestionably an omnipresent being. Given that there is no argument for the claim that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis rather than the maximalGod thesis, Anselmian theists can conclude that the arguments against their position are flawed. If the arguments show anything at all, they show merely that the Anselmian God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, is not an omnipresent being, which is, given the maximalGod thesis, consistent with Anselmian theism. This new response is applicable to all the arguments against Anselmian theism I have mentioned.

At this point, opponents of Anselmian theism might say that Anselmian theists are not justified in replacing the omniGod thesis with the maximalGod thesis, because it is analytically true that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis. That is, the being than which no greater can be thought *is*, by definition, an omnipresent being. In what follows, I argue that this is far from obvious, because there are many epistemically possible scenarios in which, while the Anselmian thesis and the maximalGod thesis are true, the omniGod thesis is false. Proponents of the arguments against Anselmian theism must eliminate these scenarios in order to defend their arguments.

## VI. AN ANSELMIAN NON-OMNIGOD

By the phrase ‘epistemically possible scenarios’ I mean scenarios such that it is not immediately obvious that they are metaphysically impossible, even though they might in fact be contingently or even necessarily metaphysically impossible. I use the phrase ‘epistemically possible’ instead of ‘conceivable’ here because some philosophers claim that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility.<sup>30</sup> I also use the word ‘scenario’ instead of ‘world’, because claims about a specific scenario could have implications which bear on more than one world.

For example, the claim ‘an arbitrary angle can be divided into three equal angles using only a compass and an unmarked straightedge’ is necessarily false, but it is still epistemically possible at least for many of us; mathematicians debated the cogency of this claim for more than 2000 years until 1837, when Pierre Laurent Wantzel proved the falsity of the claim. Therefore there are epistemically possible scenarios in which an arbitrary angle can be divided into three equal angles using only a compass and ruler.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., D.J. Chalmers, *Conscious Mind: in Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford UP, 1996).

There are various epistemically possible scenarios in which the Anselmian thesis is true. In the first set of such scenarios, God is (i) omnipotent; (ii) greater than the second greatest possible being,  $X$ , with respect to at least one of knowledge, power and benevolence; (iii) at least as great as  $X$  with respect to the remaining attributes; (iv) greater than  $X$  overall. One of the scenarios in this set,  $S_1$ , is illustrated in Figure 1. Proponents of the arguments against Anselmian theism assume that Anselmian theists are committed to the idea that a scenario similar to  $S_1$  is not only epistemically possible but also actual.

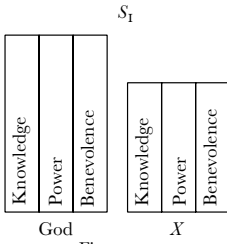


Figure 1

Yet scenarios like  $S_1$  are not the only epistemically possible scenarios in which the Anselmian thesis is true. In another set of scenarios, God is (i) slightly less than omnipotent; (ii) greater than  $X$  with respect to at least one of knowledge, power and benevolence; (iii) at least as great as  $X$  with respect to the remaining attributes; (iv) greater than  $X$  overall. In one of the scenarios in this set,  $S_2$ , God is very knowledgeable but not quite omniscient because there is one true proposition which it is metaphysically impossible for him to know. (I focus on God's knowledge only as an example; my claims apply equally to his power and benevolence.) Still,  $X$  is even less knowledgeable than God because there are two propositions which it is impossible for  $X$  to know. Here I assume what I call the 'quantitative account of knowledgeable-ness', according to which the more propositions one knows the more knowledgeable one is. Some might disagree with this account and advance the qualitative account instead. According to the qualitative account, for example, a being who knows only one proposition  $p$  could be more knowledgeable than another being who knows two propositions  $q$  and  $r$  if  $p$  is, in a relevant sense, more important than the sum of  $q$  and  $r$ . I set aside the qualitative account here. It should be noted, however, that my defence of Anselmian theism can be formulated in accordance with the qualitative account as well.

In  $S_2$ , shown in Figure 2, while the Anselmian thesis is true, the omniGod thesis is *false*. There are two versions of  $S_2$ . In the first,  $S_{2A}$ , the true proposition which God cannot know is something which no being can possibly know. In the second,  $S_{2B}$ , the true proposition in question is something which some being  $X$  can know even though God cannot. However, in both  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  God is still more knowledgeable than  $X$  and every other being. (It seems coherent to say that God is more knowledgeable than  $X$  even if he does not know a certain proposition

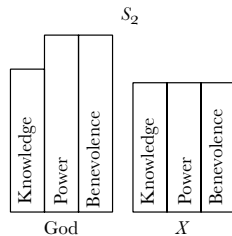


Figure 2

which  $X$  knows, because in general the statement that  $A$  is more knowledgeable than  $B$  does not entail that  $A$  knows *everything* that  $B$  knows. For example, the claim that Jessica is more knowledgeable than her child John does not exclude the possibility that John knows some proposition which Jessica does not know, e.g., that his teacher gave him two assignments today.) In  $S_{2B}$  any possible being who knows the proposition in question is less knowledgeable than God. Thus if God changed the scope of his knowledge so that he *can* know the proposition in question, then his overall knowledge would diminish and he would cease to be the most knowledgeable being and, accordingly, the being than which no greater can be thought. (Of course, most Anselmian theists would not think that God can change the scope of his knowledge because they believe that it is necessarily impossible for God to be ignorant.) Since these scenarios are epistemically possible, critics who defend premise (2) of the arguments against Anselmian theism must show them to be metaphysically impossible. Until then, Anselmian theists are justified in rejecting (2) by saying that God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, might not be an omnipotent being.

One might claim at this point that God in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  is not the being than which no greater can be thought, because it *is* possible to think of a greater being, namely, an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being whose knowledge extends further than the limit of God's knowledge as illustrated in Figure 2. This objection fails, however, to account for the relevant notion of possibility. What this objection really says is that God in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  is not the being than which no greater can be thought in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$ , because the size of his knowledge in these scenarios is not the largest possible *in another epistemically possible scenario*, for instance,  $S_1$  (rather than in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$ ). In  $S_1$  God's knowledge extends up to omniscience, because in  $S_1$  we are assuming that it is possible for a being to be omniscient. However, in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  we are assuming that no being can be omniscient. It is illegitimate to complain that God in  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$ , for whom it is stipulated that the extent of acquirable knowledge does not reach omniscience, is not maximally knowledgeable, by referring to  $S_1$ , for which it is stipulated that the extent of acquirable knowledge does reach omniscience, unless it is shown that  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  are metaphysically impossible.

Here is another interesting observation. In  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  it is metaphysically impossible for any being to be omnipotent. Hence to demand that God is to be an omnipotent being as well as the being than which no greater can be thought in these scenarios means to demand that God is to be non-existent. However, this goes against the spirit of Anselmian theism, because according to Anselm, existence is regarded as one of the most essential attributes of the being than which no greater can be thought.

The final set of epistemically possible scenarios is perhaps more radical than the second set. In scenarios in this set, God is (i) slightly less than omnipotent; (ii) less great than  $X$  with respect to at least one of knowledge, power and benevolence; (iii) at least as great as  $X$  with respect to the remaining attributes; (iv) greater than  $X$  overall. In one of the scenarios in this set,  $S_3$ , shown in Figure 3, God is less knowledgeable than  $X$ . Still, he is, overall, greater than  $X$  as well as every other possible being. God remains, in  $S_3$ , the being than which no greater can be thought because the limitation of his knowledge is compensated for by his other attributes. (It seems coherent to say that God is greater than  $X$  overall even if he is less knowledgeable than  $X$ , because in general the statement that  $A$  is greater than  $B$  overall does not entail that  $A$  is more knowledgeable than  $B$ . It could be the case, for example, that we are greater than Martians, who are slightly more knowledgeable than we are, because we are significantly more benevolent than they are.) In  $S_3$ , while again the Anselmian thesis is true, the omniGod thesis is *false*.

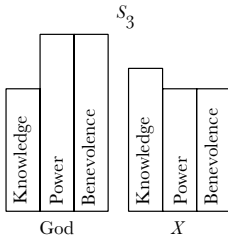


Figure 3

One might contend at this point that given that God is inferior to  $X$  in one respect, i.e., knowledge, he is not, in  $S_3$ , the being than which no greater can be thought. For according to this objection, the being than which no greater can be thought needs to be greater than any other possible being in overall quality as well as with respect to each of knowledge, power and benevolence. This response is not cogent. The Anselmian thesis talks only about God's overall greatness while saying nothing about individual attributes. In  $S_3$  God is greater than any other possible being even though he knows less than  $X$ . This means that in  $S_3$ , if God were to know the propositions which he currently does not know, then God would cease to be the being than which no greater can be thought. Given this observation, there is no reason to demand in  $S_3$  that God should be able to know these propositions.

I have considered four epistemically possible scenarios. In  $S_1$ , God is omnipotent and greater than any other possible being in overall quality, as well as with respect to each of knowledge, power and benevolence. In  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$ , God is not omnipotent but he is still greater than any other possible being in overall quality, as well as with respect to each of knowledge, power and benevolence. In  $S_3$ , God is not omnipotent and not as great as  $X$  with respect to knowledge, but he is still greater than any other possible being in overall quality.

Given the epistemic possibilities pertaining to scenarios such as  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$ , which are consistent with the Anselmian thesis but inconsistent with

the omniGod thesis, Anselmian theists can leave open the possibility that God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, is not an omnipotent being. They are therefore justified in endorsing the maximalGod thesis instead of the omniGod thesis, and in rejecting premise (2) of the general formulation of the arguments against Anselmian theism. Hence in order for critics to refute Anselmian theism it is not sufficient for them to show, as they normally do, that there cannot be an omnipotent being. They need to show further that Anselmian theists are committed to the idea that God is an omnipotent being, or, equivalently, that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis. In other words, they need to show that scenarios such as  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$  are metaphysically impossible. In order to show that  $S_3$  is metaphysically impossible, it needs to be shown at least that God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, has to be greater than any other possible being with respect to each of knowledge, power and benevolence. In order to show that  $S_{2A}$  and  $S_{2B}$  are metaphysically impossible, it needs to be shown not only that God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, has to be greater than any other possible being with respect to each of knowledge, power and benevolence, but also that he has to be omnipotent.

I have not proved, of course, that  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$  are metaphysically possible. Thus I am not claiming here that if the Anselmian thesis is true, the omniGod thesis is false. My claim is a much more modest one: it might be the case that even if the Anselmian thesis is true, the omniGod thesis is false. With this modest claim in hand, Anselmian theists are justified in subsequently claiming that premise (2) requires supporting argument.

A few philosophers have expressed reservations about the omniGod thesis. They focus specifically, however, on the possibility of giving up God's omnipotence in response to the argument from God's inability to sin or the argument from evil, and do not consider the general problem of the relationship between the Anselmian thesis and the omniGod thesis.<sup>31</sup> My proposal is significantly different from theirs because, unlike them, I do not maintain that Anselmian theists should give up omnipotence or any other specific attribute. My proposal is the more modest one that they should be open to the possibility that God is not an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., J. Bishop, 'Evil and the Concept of God', *Philosophical Papers*, 22 (1993), pp. 1–15; P.T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge UP, 1977); Morrison, 'Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are they Compatible?', and 'Omnipotence and the Anselmian God'. Leftow might be the only exception. He considers without endorsing explicitly the idea that the being than which no greater can be thought might not be able to have all great-making properties. See Leftow, 'Anselm's Perfect-Being Theology'.

## VII. POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Before concluding the discussion, I shall consider various possible objections to my defence of Anselmian theism.

Objection 1: one might claim that I base my defence on the mistaken assumption that a comparison of greatness can be made between God and other possible beings even if God is not omniperfect. According to this objection, a comparison of greatness can be made only between an omniperfect being, on the one hand, and all other possible beings, on the other. In other words, a comparison of greatness among beings that are not omniperfect is impossible. Hence, the objection says, I am wrong in maintaining that there are epistemically possible scenarios in which God is not omniperfect, yet in which he is the being than which no greater can be thought.

Response: it is difficult to think that the comparison of greatness cannot be made among non-omniperfect beings, because we make such comparisons very commonly. It seems to make perfect sense to say, for example, that Bertrand Russell is more knowledgeable than a child or that Mother Teresa is more benevolent than Adolf Hitler, even though none of these people is omniperfect. As William Mann and Thomas V. Morris say, any divine attribute can be classified into at least two types, those that are ‘degreed’ and those that are not.<sup>32</sup> Most philosophers allow that knowledge, power and benevolence are degreed. If they are degreed, it is certainly possible to compare the greatness among different possible beings in terms of knowledge, power or benevolence. Moreover, given the assumption maintained throughout this paper that one’s degree of overall greatness supervenes on the extent of one’s knowledge, power and benevolence, it is also possible to compare the overall greatness of different possible beings. I do not mean, of course, that it is always *easy* to compare the greatness of different beings. It is difficult to compare, for example, the greatness of a being who can only perform three simple tasks and the greatness of a being who only knows ten true propositions.

Objection 2: one might claim that my talk of the second greatest possible being *X* in the above scenarios implies that my argument relies on the possibility of a hierarchy of the greatness of all possible beings in terms of a

<sup>32</sup> W. Mann, ‘Divine Attributes’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 12 (1975), pp. 151–9; Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, p. 84. Morris classifies the degreed attributes into further two types, those that have logical maxima and those that admit of infinite increase.



being's overall quality. However, this possibility is denied by Anselmian theists. Morris, for example, rejects what he calls the thesis of 'universal value-commensurability', according to which 'there is some single, all-encompassing, objective scale of value on which every being, actual and possible, can be ranked, with God at the top'.<sup>33</sup> He says that Anselmian theism requires only the weaker thesis that God is value-commensurable with every object.

Response: in order to demonstrate that *X* is the second greatest possible being we certainly need the thesis of universal value-commensurability or something sufficiently similar to it. Yet I mentioned *X*, as the second greatest possible being, merely for the purpose of making the above scenarios straightforward; these scenarios can indeed be established without making use of *X*. All that is needed is to show that there are epistemically possible scenarios such that (i) they have not been shown to be metaphysically impossible, and (ii) in these scenarios God is the being than which no greater can be thought despite the fact that he is not omniperfect. Such a scenario can be formulated without making use of *X*. Therefore my defence of Anselmian theism does not rely on the thesis of universal value-commensurability.

Objection 3: one might contend that my responses to objections 1 and 2 are unsatisfactory because they construe God's omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence as if they are finite. They are, one might say, actually infinite. That is why it makes sense to compare only an omniperfect being, i.e., an infinite being, on the one hand, and everything else, i.e., finite beings, on the other hand.

Response: this objection is incompatible with Anselmian theism for several reasons. Suppose that one's knowledge, power and benevolence extend infinitely without having intrinsic maxima. In this case, one's overall greatness, which I have supposed supervenes on the extent of one's knowledge, power and benevolence, also extends infinitely. This, however, entails that the Anselmian thesis is clearly false: it is not the case that there is a being than which no greater can be thought. For any being, there is always a being that is greater with respect to overall quality as well as each of knowledge, power and benevolence. Secondly, the idea that the overall greatness and individual attributes of something can be infinitely great contradicts Anselmian theists' common response to Gaunilo's 'greatest island parody' objection to the ontological argument. According to their response, the parody objection fails because while there are intrinsic

<sup>33</sup> Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, p. 83.

maxima for divine attributes, such as knowledge, power and benevolence, there are no intrinsic maxima for islands' attributes, such as the number of beautiful palm trees, pleasant beaches and exotic fruits.<sup>34</sup> If Anselmian theists admit that there are no intrinsic maxima for knowledge, power and benevolence, they must abandon their widely accepted response to Gaunilo's parody objection. (Another possible unwelcome consequence of the assumption that God's attributes are infinite is that it allows an actual infinite to exist. The *Kālam* cosmological argument for the existence of God, which such Anselmian theists as William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland endorse, is based on the very idea that there cannot be an actual infinite.<sup>35</sup>)

Objection 4: one might claim that my defence of Anselmian theism is unsatisfactory because it changes the extent of God's knowledge, power and benevolence in an *ad hoc* manner whenever it encounters a new argument against Anselmian theism.

Response: my defence does not change the extent of God's knowledge, power and benevolence. The Anselmian thesis says that God is the being than which no greater can be thought and the maximal God thesis says that he has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence. The contents of these theses remain the same, whatever the arguments that Anselmian theists face; hence the extent of God's attributes remains constant. Therefore there is no *ad hoc* reasoning behind my defence of Anselmian theism. The only thing that could change is our *understanding* of God's attributes, not his attributes themselves. In other words, the change is epistemic, not metaphysical.

Objection 5: one might argue that my response is not acceptable to Anselmian theists because if God is not omnipotent then he is not worthy of worship, whereas Anselmians do believe that God is worthy of worship. Robert Merrihew Adams, for example, explains a close connection between God's omnipotence and his worship-worthiness by saying that our worship of God involves the acknowledgement 'not just of God's benefits to us, but of [God's] supreme degree of intrinsic excellence'.<sup>36</sup> If God is not omnipotent, then he does not possess the supreme degree of intrinsic excellence, and hence does not seem to be worthy of worship.

Response: I shall call the view that God's worship-worthiness is derived from his possession of the maximal degree of intrinsic excellence 'the

<sup>34</sup> See Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*; W.L. Rowe, 'The Ontological Argument', in J. Feinberg (ed.), *Reason and Rationality*, 7th edn (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989), pp. 8–17.

<sup>35</sup> See W.L. Craig, *The Kālam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000); J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> R.M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 14.

maximal excellence account'. I have argued elsewhere that this account is untenable.<sup>37</sup> However, even if it *is* tenable, it is still unclear why the phrase 'maximal degree of intrinsic excellence' could mean only omniperfection. Suppose that  $X$  is nearly but not quite omniperfect. While  $X$  is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and nearly omniscient, there is one true proposition  $p$  which  $X$  does not know. If the maximal excellence account is right and the phrase 'maximal degree of intrinsic excellence' could mean only omniperfection, then whether or not  $X$  knows  $p$ , *however trivial the proposition is*, decides whether or not  $X$  is worthy of worship. As soon as  $X$  comes to know  $p$ ,  $X$  suddenly becomes worthy of worship. It seems difficult to justify such a claim. There is a further reason to reject this objection. In  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$  it is impossible for any being to be omniperfect. It seems then a mistake to say, in these scenarios, that the supreme degree of intrinsic excellence means omniperfection, because omniperfection is non-existent in these scenarios. (In order to undermine this point, proponents of the objection in question again need to show that  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$  are metaphysically impossible.)

Objection 6: one might argue that my response is untenable, because if  $S_{2A}$ ,  $S_{2B}$  and  $S_3$ , in which God is not omniperfect, are metaphysically possible, then there could be two possible beings that are jointly greater than God. However, it appears counter-intuitive to think that there could be something greater than God.

Response: it is peculiar to compare the greatness of one being against the greatness of two beings combined. If such a comparison were legitimate, it would be possible to refute Anselmian theism very quickly. Suppose, as Anselmian theists ordinarily think, that  $S_1$  is actual. That is, God is omniperfect and greater than any other possible being. We can then conceive of two beings, such that they are individually less great than God but jointly as great as God. The possibility of such a pair's existing refutes Anselmian theism because, as a version of monotheism, Anselmian theism is committed to the idea that God is the only being than which no greater can be thought. However, of course, no one thinks that this is a good refutation of Anselmian theism, because it is not legitimate to compare the greatness of one being with the greatness of two beings combined when our interest lies in making comparisons among individual beings.

<sup>37</sup> See T. Bayne and Y. Nagasawa, 'The Grounds of Worship', *Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), pp. 299–313, and 'Grounds of Worship Again: a Response to Crowe', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), pp. 475–80; B. Crowe, 'Reasons for Worship: a Response to Bayne and Nagasawa', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), pp. 465–74.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

I have shown that existing arguments against Anselmian theism are unsuccessful because they fail to provide support for premise (2), according to which the Anselmian thesis entails the *omniGod* thesis. Given that there are epistemically possible scenarios in which the Anselmian thesis is true but the *omniGod* thesis is false, Anselmian theists are justified in asserting only the more modest *maximalGod* thesis instead of the *omniGod* thesis. In order to thwart this response, proponents of the arguments against Anselmian theism must demonstrate that the Anselmian thesis does entail the *omniGod* thesis by showing that these epistemically possible scenarios are not metaphysically possible. Until then, Anselmian theists do not need to regard the arguments as serious threats to their position.

In the end, it is possible to replace the *omniGod* thesis with the *maximal-God* thesis because knowledge, power and benevolence, the attributes with which these theses are concerned, are all *degreed*. Opponents of Anselmian theism might therefore be tempted to construct a new argument which focuses on *undegreed* divine attributes, such as independence, incorporeality and simplicity. However, this is not an easy task, because the consensus among philosophers of religion regarding the natures of *non-degreed* attributes is narrower than about those of *degreed* attributes.

Anselmian theists cannot of course solve *all* potential problems concerning God's existence merely by replacing the *omniGod* thesis with the *maximalGod* thesis. For example, even if it is left open that God is not *omniprfect*, one might still wonder why there is evil in the actual world. However, formulating the argument from evil, and indeed any other argument against Anselmian theism, by referring to a *non-omniprfect* God is significantly more difficult than formulating such an argument by referring to an *omniprfect* God.<sup>38</sup>

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